Homegoing

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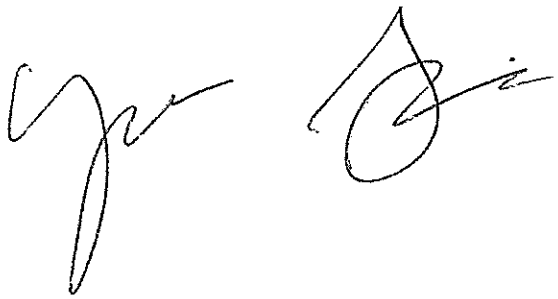
Yaa Gyasi



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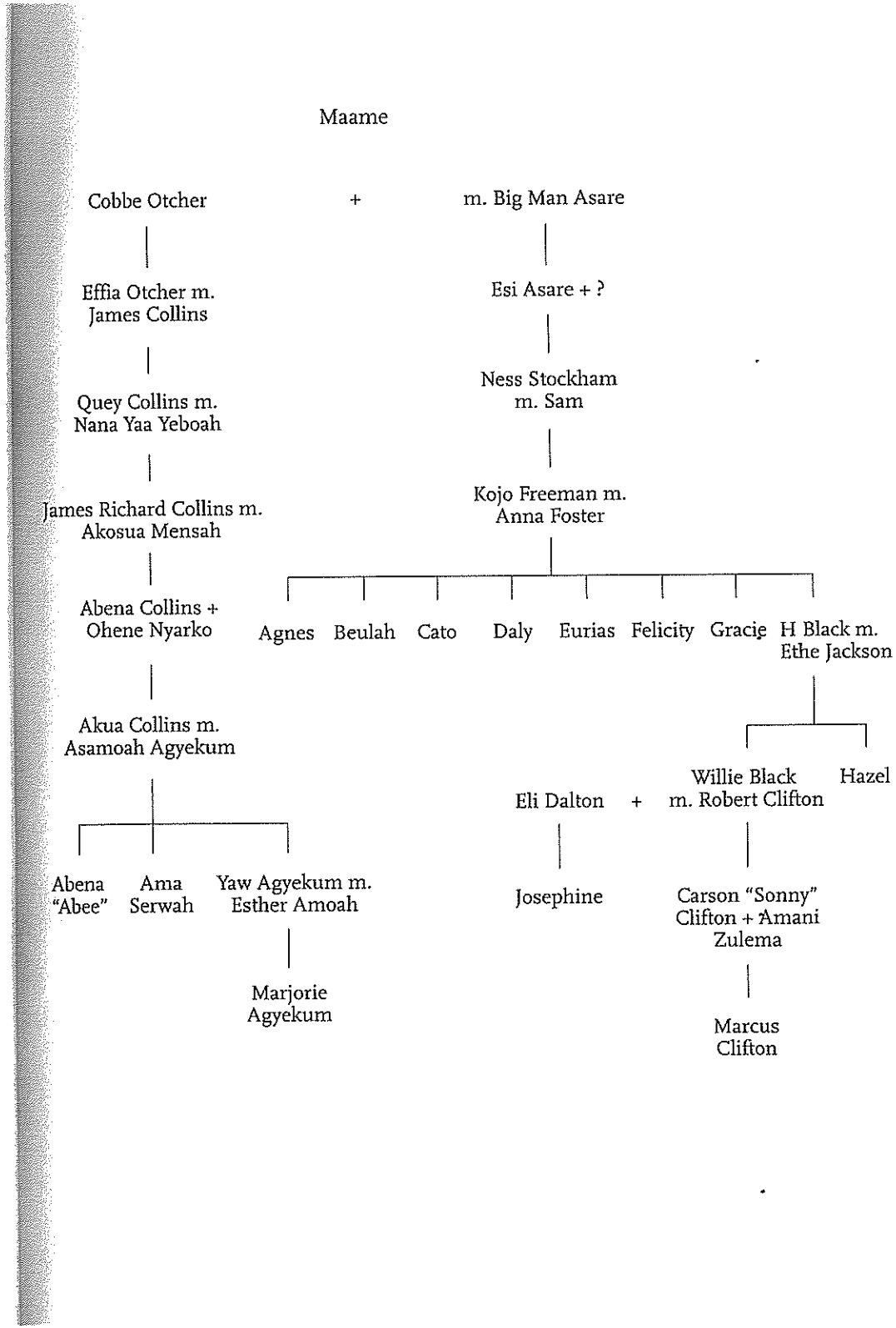
Abusua te sɛ kwaɛ: sɛ wo wɔ akyire a wo hunu sɛ ɛbom; sɛ wo bɛn ho a na wo hunu sɛ nnua no bia sisi ne baabi nko.

The family is like the forest: if you are outside it is dense; if you are inside you see that each tree has its own position.

—AKAN PROVERB


Maame
Cobbe Otcher
+
m. Big Man Asare
Effia Otcher m. James Collins
Esi Asare + ?
Quey Collins m. Nana Yaa Yeboah
Ness Stockham m. Sam
James Richard Collins m. Akosua Mensah
Kojo Freeman m. Anna Foster
Abena Collins + Ohene Nyarko
Agnes
Beulah
Cato
Daly
Eurias
Felicity
Gracie
H Black m. Ethe Jackson
Akua Collins m. Asamoah Agyekum
Willie Black m. Robert Clifton
Hazel
Eli Dalton
+
Abena "Abee"
Ama Serwah
Yaw Agyekum m. Esther Amoah
Josephine
Carson "Sonny" Clifton + Amani Zulema
Marjorie Agyekum
Marcus Clifton

Esi

THE SMELL WAS UNBEARABLE. In the corner, a woman was crying so hard that it seemed her bones would break from her convulsions. This was what they wanted. The baby had messed itself, and Afua, its mother, had no milk. She was naked, save the small scrap of fabric the traders had given her to wipe her nipples when they leaked, but they had miscalculated. No food for mother meant no food for baby. The baby would cry soon, but the sound would be absorbed by the mud walls, subsumed into the cries of the hundreds of women who surrounded it.

Esi had been in the women's dungeon of the Cape Coast Castle for two weeks. She spent her fifteenth birthday there. On her fourteenth birthday, she was in the heart of Asanteland, in her father's, Big Man's, compound. He was the best warrior in the village, so everyone had come to pay their respects to the daughter who grew more beautiful with each passing day. Kwasi Nnuro brought sixty yams. More yams than any other suitor had ever brought before. Esi would have married him in the summer, when the sun stretched long and high, when the palm trees could be tapped for wine, climbed by the spriest children, their arms holding the trunk in a hug as they shinnied to the top to pluck the fruits that waited there.

When she wanted to forget the Castle, she thought of these things, but she did not expect joy. Hell was a place of remembering, each beautiful moment passed through the mind's eye until it fell to the ground like a rotten mango, perfectly useless, uselessly perfect.

A soldier came into the dungeon and began to speak. He had to hold his nose to keep from vomiting. The women did not understand him. His voice didn't seem angry, but they had learned to back away at the sight of that uniform, that skin the color of coconut meat.

The soldier repeated himself, louder this time, as though volume would coax understanding. Irritated, he ventured further into the room. He stepped in feces and cursed. He plucked the baby from Afua's cradled arms, and Afua began to cry. He slapped her, and she stopped, a learned reflex.

Tansi sat next to Esi. The two had made the journey to the Castle together. Now that they weren't walking constantly, or speaking in hushed tones, Esi had time to get to know her journey friend. Tansi was a hardy and ugly woman, barely turned sixteen. She was thick, her body built on a solid foundation. Esi hoped, and dared not hope, that they would be allowed to stay together even longer.

"Where are they taking the baby?" Esi asked.

Tansi spit onto the clay floor and swirled the spittle with her finger, creating a salve. "They will kill it, I'm sure," she said. The baby was conceived before Afua's marriage ceremony. As punishment, the village chief had sold her to the traders. Afua had told Esi this when she first came into the dungeon, when she was still certain that a mistake had been made, that her parents would return for her.

Now, hearing Tansi speak, Afua resumed her crying, but it was as though no one heard. These tears were a matter of routine. They came for all of the women. They dropped until the clay below them turned to mud. At night, Esi dreamed that if they all cried in unison, the mud would turn to river and they could be washed away into the Atlantic.

"Tansi, tell me a story, please," Esi begged. But then they were interrupted again. The soldiers came in with the same mushy porridge that had been fed to them in the Fante village where Esi was held. Esi had learned to swallow it down without gagging. It was the only food they ever received, and their stomachs were empty more days than full. The porridge passed right through her, it seemed. The ground was littered with their waste, the unbearable smell.

"Ah! You're too old for stories, my sister," Tansi said once the soldiers left, but Esi knew she would give in soon. Tansi enjoyed the sound

of her own voice. She pulled Esi's head into her lap and began playing with her hair, pulling at the strands that had been caked with dust, so brittle that they could be broken, each one snapped like a twig.

"Do you know the story of the kente cloth?" Tansi asked. Esi had heard it numerous times before, twice from Tansi herself, but she shook her head. Asking if the story had been heard before was a part of the story itself.

Tansi began to tell her. "Two Asante men went out into the forest one day. They were weavers by trade, and they had gone out to hunt for meat. When they got to the forest to collect their traps, they were met by Anansi, the mischievous spider. He was spinning a magnificent web. They watched him, studied him, and soon realized that a spider's web is a unique and beautiful thing, and that a spider's technique is flawless. They went home and decided to weave cloth the way Anansi weaves his web. From that, kente was born."

"You are a fine storyteller," Esi said. Tansi laughed and smoothed the salve she had created onto her knees and elbows to soothe the cracked skin there. The last story she had told Esi was of how she had been captured by the northerners, plucked from her marriage bed while her husband was off fighting a war. She had been taken with a few other girls, but the rest had not survived.

By morning, Afua had died. Her skin was purple and blue, and Esi knew that she had held her breath until Nyame took her. They would all be punished for this. The soldiers came in, though Esi was no longer able to tell what time. The mud walls of the dungeon made all time equal. There was no sunlight. Darkness was day and night and everything in between. Sometimes there were so many bodies stacked into the women's dungeon that they all had to lie, stomach down, so that women could be stacked on top of them.

It was one of those days. Esi was kicked to the ground by one of the soldiers, his foot at the base of her neck so that she couldn't turn her head to breathe anything but the dust and detritus from the ground. The new women were brought in, and some were wailing so hard that the soldiers smacked them unconscious. They were piled on top of the other women, their bodies deadweight. When the smacked ones came

to, there were no more tears. Esi could feel the woman on top of her peeing. Urine traveled between both of their legs.

Esi learned to split her life into Before the Castle and Now. Before the Castle, she was the daughter of Big Man and his third wife, Maame. Now she was dust. Before the Castle, she was the prettiest girl in the village. Now she was thin air.

Esi was born in a small village in the heart of the Asante nation. Big Man had thrown an outdooring feast that lasted four nights. Five goats were slaughtered and boiled until their tough skins turned tender. It was rumored that Maame did not stop crying or praising Nyame for the entire duration of the ceremony, nor would she set baby Esi down. "You never know what could happen," she kept repeating.

At that time, Big Man was known only as Kwame Asare. Esi's father was not a chief, but he commanded just as much respect, for he was the best warrior the Asante nation had ever seen, and at age twenty-five he already had five wives and ten children. Everyone in the village knew his seed was strong. His sons, still toddlers and young children, were already tough wrestlers and his daughters were beauties.

Esi grew up in bliss. The villagers called her ripe mango because she was just on the right side of spoiled, still sweet. There was nothing her parents would refuse her. Even her strong warrior of a father had been known to carry her through the village at night when she couldn't sleep. Esi would hold the tip of his finger, to her as thick as a branch, as she toddled past the huts that made up each compound. Her village was small but growing steadily. In the first year of their walks, it wouldn't take but twenty minutes to reach the forest edge that cut them off from the rest of Asanteland, but that forest had been pushed farther and farther back until by the fifth year the journey there took nearly an hour. Esi loved walking to the forest with her father. She would listen, enraptured, as he told her how the forest was so dense it was like a shield, impenetrable to their enemies. He would tell her how he and the other warriors knew the forest better than they knew the lines of their own palms. And this was good. Following the lines of a palm

would lead nowhere, but the forest led the warriors to other villages that they could conquer to build up their strength.

"When you are old enough, Esi, you will learn how to climb these trees with nothing but your bare hands," he said to her as they walked back to the village one day.

Esi looked up. The tops of the trees looked as though they were brushing the sky, and Esi wondered why leaves were green instead of blue.

When Esi was seven years old, her father won the battle that would earn him the name Big Man. There had been rumors that in a village just north of theirs, warriors had come back with splendors of gold and women. They had even raided the British storehouse, earning gunpowder and muskets in the process. Chief Nnuro, the leader of Esi's village, called a meeting of all the able-bodied men.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked them, and they grunted, slammed their staffs against the hard earth, and cried out. "The swine of the northern village are walking about like kings. All around Asante people will say, it is the northerners who stole guns from the British. It is the northerners who are the most powerful warriors in all of the Gold Coast." The men stomped their feet and shook their heads. "Will we allow this?" the chief asked.

"No!" they cried.

Kwaku Agyei, the most sensible among them, hushed their cries and said, "Listen to us! We may go to fight the northerners, but what have we? No guns, no gunpowder. And what will we gain? So many people will praise our enemies in the north, but will they not still praise us as well? We have been the strongest village for decades. No one has been able to break through the forest and challenge us."

"So will you have us wait until the northern snake slithers its way into our fields and steals our women?" Esi's father asked. The two men stood on opposite sides of the room, and all the other men stood between them, turning their heads from one to the other in order to see which gift would win: wisdom or strength.

"I only say, let us not be too hasty. Lest we appear weak in the process."

"But who is weak?" Esi's father asked. He pointed to Nana Addae, then Kojo Nyarko, then Kwabena Gyimah. "Who among us is weak? You? Or maybe you?"

The men shook their heads one by one, and soon they were all shaking their entire bodies into a rallying cry that could be heard throughout the village. From the compound where Esi stood helping her mother fry plantains, she heard them, and dropped two slices of plantains so quickly that oil jumped up and splashed her mother's leg.

"Aiieee!" her mother cried out, wiping the oil away with her hands and blowing on the burn. "Stupid girl! When will you learn to be careful around fire?" Maame asked. Esi had heard her mother say this or something like it many times before. Maame was terrified of fire. "Be careful of fire. Know when to use it and when to stay cold," she would often say.

"It was an accident," Esi snapped. She wanted to be outside, catching more of the warriors' discussion. Her mother reached over and yanked her ear.

"Who are you talking to that way?" she hissed. "Think before you act. Think before you speak."

Esi apologized to her mother, and Maame, who had never been able to stay mad at Esi for longer than a few seconds, kissed the top of her head as the men's cries grew louder and louder.

Everyone in the village knew the story. Esi had her father tell it to her every night for a whole month. She would lie with her head in his lap, listening as he spoke of how the men stole out for the northern village on the evening of the rallying cry. Their plan was thin: overtake the town and steal whatever had been stolen. Esi's father told her of how he led the group through the forest until they came upon the circle of warriors protecting the newly acquired goods. Her father and his warriors hid in the trees. Their feet moved with the lightness of leaves on the forest ground. When they came upon the warriors of the northern village, they fought bravely, but it was of no use. Esi's father and many others were captured and packed into huts that had been converted into a prison camp.

It was Kwaku Agyei and his few followers who had had the fore-

sight to wait in the forest until after the eager warriors had rushed in. They found the guns that the northerners were hiding and loaded them quickly and quietly before moving in to where their fellow men were being held captive. Though there were only a few of them, Kwaku Agyei and his men were able to hold off the warriors with the stories they told of the many men they had waiting behind them. Kwaku Agyei said that if this mission failed, there would be one raid every night until the end of time. "If it isn't the West, it will be the whites," he reasoned, darkness glinting from the gap between his front teeth.

The northerners felt they had no choice but to give in. They released Esi's father and the others, who parted with five of the stolen guns. The men returned to their village in silence, Esi's father consumed by his embarrassment. When they reached the edge of their village, he stopped Kwaku Agyei, got down on both of his knees, and bowed his head before him. "I am sorry, my brother. I will never again rush into a fight when it is possible to reason."

"It takes a big man to admit his folly," Kwaku Agyei said, and they all continued into the village, the contrite and newly christened Big Man leading the way.

This was the Big Man who returned to Esi, the one she knew as she grew older. Slow to anger, rational, and still the strongest and bravest warrior of them all. By the time Esi turned twelve their small village had won more than fifty-five wars under Big Man's leadership. The spoils of these wars could be seen as the warriors carried them back, shimmering gold and colorful textiles in large tan sacks, captives in iron cages.

It was the prisoners that fascinated Esi the most, for after each capture they would be put on display in the center of the village square. Anyone could walk by and stare at them, mostly young, virile warriors, though sometimes women and their children. Some of these prisoners would be taken by the villagers as slaves, house boys and house girls, cooks and cleaners, but soon there would be too many to keep and the overflow would have to be dealt with.

"Mama, what happens to all the prisoners after they leave here?" Esi asked Maame as they passed by the square one afternoon, a roped goat, their dinner, trailing behind them.

"That's boys' talk, Esi. You don't need to think about it," her mother replied, shifting her eyes.

For as long as Esi could remember, and perhaps even before, Maame had refused to choose her own house girl or house boy from among the prisoners who were paraded through the village each month, but because there were now so many prisoners, Big Man had started to insist.

"A house girl could help you with the cooking," he said.

"Esi helps me with my cooking."

"But Esi is my daughter, not some common girl to be ordered about."

Esi smiled. She loved her mother, but she knew how lucky Maame was to have gotten a husband like Big Man when she had no family, no background to speak of. Big Man had saved Maame somehow, from what wretchedness Esi did not know. She knew only that her mother would do almost anything for her father.

"All right," she said. "Esi and I will choose a girl tomorrow."

And so they chose a girl and decided to call her Abronoma, Little Dove. The girl had the darkest skin Esi had ever seen. She kept her eyes low, and though her Twi was passable, she rarely spoke it. She didn't know her age, but Esi guessed Abronoma was not much older than she was. At first, Abronoma was horrible at the chores. She spilled oil; she didn't sweep under things; she didn't have good stories for the children.

"She's useless," Maame said to Big Man. "We have to take her back."

They were all outside, basking under the warm midday sun. Big Man tilted his head back and let out a laugh that rumbled like thunder in the rainy season. "Take her back where? *Odo*, there's only one way to train a slave." He turned to Esi, who was trying to climb a palm tree the way she'd seen the other kids do it, but her arms were too small to reach around. "Esi, go and get me my switch."

The switch in question was made from two reeds tied together. It was older than Esi's paternal grandfather, having been passed down from generation to generation. Big Man had never beaten Esi with it, but she had seen him beat his sons. She'd heard the way it whistled

when it snapped back off of flesh. Esi moved to enter the compound, but Maame stopped her.

"No!" she said.

Big Man raised his hand to his wife, anger flashing quickly through his eyes like steam from cold water hitting a hot pan. "No?"

Maame stammered, "I—I just think that I should be the one to do it."

Big Man lowered his hand. He stared at her carefully for a while longer, and Esi tried to read the look that passed between them. "So be it," Big Man said. "But tomorrow I will bring her out here. She will carry water from this yard to that tree there, and if even so much as a drop falls, then *I* will take care of it. Do you hear me?"

Maame nodded and Big Man shook his head. He had always told anyone who would listen that he had spoiled his third wife, seduced by her beautiful face and softened by her sad eyes.

Maame and Esi went into their hut and found Abronoma, curled up on a bamboo cot, living up to her name of a little bird. Maame woke her and had her stand before them. She pulled out a switch that Big Man had given her, a switch she had never used. She then looked at Esi with tears in her eyes. "Please, leave us."

Esi left the hut and for minutes after could hear the sound of the switch and the harmonizing pitch of two separate cries.

The next day Big Man called everyone in his compound out to see if Abronoma could carry a bucket of water on her head from the yard to the tree without spilling a drop. Esi and her whole family, her four stepmothers and nine half siblings, scattered around their large yard, waiting for the girl to first fetch water from the stream into a large black bucket. From there, Big Man had her stand before all of them and bow before starting the journey to the tree. He would walk beside her to be certain there was no error.

Esi could see Little Dove shaking as she lifted the bucket onto her head. Maame clutched Esi against her chest and smiled at the girl when she bowed at them, but the look Abronoma returned was fearful and then vacant. When the bucket touched her head, the family began to jeer.

"She'll never make it!" Amma, Big Man's first wife, said.

"Watch, she will spill it all and drown herself in the process," Kojo, the eldest son, said.

Little Dove took her first step and Esi let out the breath she had been holding. She herself had never been able to carry so much as a single plank of wood on her head, but she had watched her mother carry a perfectly round coconut without it ever rolling off, steady as a second head. "Where did you learn to do that?" Esi had asked Maame then, and the woman replied, "You can learn anything when you have to learn it. You could learn to fly if it meant you would live another day."

Abronoma steadied her legs and kept walking, her head facing forward. Big Man walked beside her, whispering insults in her ear. She reached the tree at the forest's edge and pivoted, making her way back to the audience that awaited her. By the time she got close enough that Esi could make out her features again, there was sweat dripping off the ledge of her nose and her eyes were brimming with tears. Even the bucket on her head seemed to be crying, condensation working its way down the outside of it. As she lifted the bucket off of her head, she started to smile triumphantly. Maybe it was a small gust of wind, maybe an insect looking for a bath, or maybe the Dove's hand slipped, but before the bucket reached the ground, two drops sloshed out.

Esi looked at Maame, who had turned her sad, pleading eyes to Big Man, but by that point, the rest of the family was already shouting for punishment.

Kojo began to lead them into a song:

The Dove has failed. Oh, what to do? Make her to suffer or you'll fail too!

Big Man reached for his switch, and soon the song gained its accompaniment: the percussion of reed to flesh, the woodwind of reed to air. This time, Abronoma did not cry.

"If he didn't beat her, everyone would think he was weak," Esi said. After the event, Maame had been inconsolable, crying to Esi that Big Man should not have beaten Little Dove for so small a mistake. Esi was

licking soup off of her fingers, her lips stained orange. Her mother had taken Abronoma into their hut and made a salve for her wounds, and now the girl lay on a cot sleeping.

"Weak, eh?" Maame said. She glared at her daughter with malice that Esi had never before seen.

"Yes," Esi whispered.

"That I should live to hear my own daughter speak like this. You want to know what weakness is? Weakness is treating someone as though they belong to you. Strength is knowing that everyone belongs to themselves."

Esi was hurt. She had only said what anyone else in her village would have said, and for this Maame yelled at her. Esi wanted to cry, to hug her mother, something, but Maame left the room then to finish the chores that Abronoma could not perform that night.

Just as she left, Little Dove began to stir. Esi fetched her water, and helped tilt her head back so that she could drink it. The wounds on her back were still fresh, and the salve that Maame had made stank of the forest. Esi wiped the corners of Abronoma's lips with her fingers, but the girl pushed her away.

"Leave me," she said.

"I—I'm sorry for what happened. He is a good man."

Abronoma spit onto the clay in front of her. "Your father is Big Man, eh?" she asked, and Esi nodded, proud despite what she had just seen her father do. The Dove let out a mirthless laugh. "My father too is Big Man, and now look at what I am. Look at what your mother was."

"What my mother was?"

Little Dove's eyes shot toward Esi. "You don't know?"

Esi, who had not spent more than an hour away from her mother's sight in her life, couldn't imagine any secrets. She knew the feel of her and the smell of her. She knew how many colors were in her irises and she knew each crooked tooth. Esi looked at Abronoma, but Abronoma shook her head and continued her laugh.

"Your mother was once a slave for a Fante family. She was raped by her master because he too was a Big Man and big men can do what they please, lest they appear *weak*, eh?" Esi looked away, and Abronoma continued in a whisper. "You are not your mother's first daughter. There

was one before you. And in my village we have a saying about separated sisters. They are like a woman and her reflection, doomed to stay on opposite sides of the pond."

Esi wanted to hear more, but there was no time to ask the Dove. Maame came back into the room, and saw the two girls sitting beside each other.

"Esi, come here and let Abronoma sleep. Tomorrow you will wake up early and help me clean."

Esi left Abronoma to her rest. She looked at her mother. The way her shoulders always seemed to droop, the way her eyes were always shifting. Suddenly, Esi was filled with a horrible shame. She remembered the first time she'd seen an elder spit on the captives in the town square. The man had said, "Northerners, they are not even people. They are the dirt that begs for spit." Esi was five years old then. His words had felt like a lesson, and the next time she passed, she timidly gathered her own spit and launched it at a little boy who stood huddled with his mother. The boy had cried out, speaking a language that Esi didn't understand, and Esi had felt bad, not for having spit, but for knowing how angry her mother would have been to see her do it.

Now all Esi could picture was her own mother behind the dull metal of the cages. Her own mother, huddled with a sister she would never know.

In the months that followed, Esi tried to befriend Abronoma. Her heart had started to ache for the little bird who had now perfected her role as house girl. Since the beating, no crumb was dropped, no water spilled. In the evenings, after Abronoma's work was done, Esi would try to coax more information from her about her mother's past.

"I don't know any more," Abronoma said, taking the bundle of palm branches to sweep the floor, or straining used oil through leaves. "Don't worry me!" she screamed once she'd reached the height of her annoyance.

Still, Esi tried to make amends. "What can I do?" she asked. "What can I do?"

After weeks of asking, Esi finally received an answer. "Send word

to my father," Abronoma said. "Tell him where I am. Tell him where I am and there will be no bad blood between us."

That night, Esi couldn't sleep. She wanted to make peace with Abronoma, but if her father knew what she had been asked to do, surely there would be war in her hut. She could hear her father now, yelling at Maame, telling her that she was raising Esi to be a small woman, weak. On the floor of her hut, Esi turned and turned and turned, until finally her mother hushed her.

"Please," Maame said. "I'm tired."

And all Esi could see behind her closed eyelids was her mother as house girl.

Esi decided then that she would send the message. Early, early, early the next morning she went to the messenger man who lived on the edge of the village. He listened to her words and the words of others before setting out into the forest every week. Those words would be carried from village to village, messenger man to messenger man. Who knew if Esi's message would ever reach Abronoma's father? It could be dropped or forgotten, altered or lost, but at the very least, Esi could say that she had done it.

When she got back, Abronoma was the only person yet awake. Esi told her what she had done that morning, and the girl clapped her hands together and then gathered Esi into her small arms, squeezing until Esi's breath caught.

"All is forgotten?" Esi asked once the Dove had released her.

"Everything is equal," Abronoma said, and relief rushed through Esi's body like blood. It filled her to the brim and left her fingers shaking. She hugged Abronoma back, and as the girl's body relaxed in her arms, Esi let herself imagine that the body she was hugging was her sister's.

Months went by, and Little Dove grew excited. In the evenings she could be found pacing the grounds and muttering to herself before sleep. "My father. My father is coming."

Big Man heard her mutterings and told everyone to beware of her,

for she might be a witch. Esi would watch her carefully for signs, but every day it was the same thing. "My father is coming. I know it. He is coming." Finally, Big Man promised to slap the words out of the Dove if she continued, and so she stopped, and the family soon forgot.

Everyone went along as usual. Esi's village had never been challenged in Esi's lifetime. All fighting was done away from home. Big Man and the other warriors would go into nearby villages, pillaging the land, sometimes setting the grass on fire so that people from three villages over could see the smoke and know the warriors had come. But this time things were different.

It began while the family was sleeping. It was Big Man's night in Maame's hut, so Esi had to sleep on the ground in the corner. When she heard the soft moaning, the quickened breath, she turned to face the wall of the hut. Once, just once, she had watched them where they lay, the darkness helping to cover her curiosity. Her father was hovering over her mother's body, moving softly at first, and then with more force. She couldn't see much, but it was the sounds that had interested her. The sounds her parents made together, sounds that walked a thin line between pleasure and pain. Esi both wanted and was afraid to want. So she never watched again.

That night, once everyone in the hut had fallen asleep, the call went out. Everyone in the village had grown up knowing what each sound signified: two long moans meant the enemy was miles off yet; three quick shouts meant they were upon them. Hearing the three, Big Man jumped from the bed and grabbed the machete he stored under each of his wives' cots.

"You take Esi and go into the woods!" he screamed at Maame before running from the hut with little time to cover his nakedness.

Esi did what her father had taught her, grabbing the small knife that her mother used to slice plantains and tucking it into the cloth of her skirt. Maame sat at the edge of her cot. "Come on!" Esi said, but her mother didn't move. Esi rushed to the bed and shook her, but she still didn't move.

"I can't do it again," she whispered.

"Do what again?" Esi asked, but she was hardly listening. Adrena-

line was coursing through her so urgently that her hands trembled. Was this because of the message she had sent?

"I can't do it again," her mother whispered. "No more woods. No more fire." She was rocking back and forth and cradling the fat flap of her stomach in her arms as though it were a child.

Abronoma came in from the slave quarters, her laugh echoing through the hut. "My father is here!" she said, dancing this way and that. "I told you he would come to find me, and he has come!"

The girl scurried away, and Esi didn't know what would become of her. Outside, people were screaming and running. Children were crying.

Esi's mother grabbed Esi's hand and dropped something into it. It was a black stone, glimmering with gold. Smooth, as if it had been scrubbed carefully for years to preserve its perfect surface.

"I have been keeping this for you," Maame said. "I wanted to give it to you on your wedding day. I—I left one like this for your sister. I left it with Baaba after I set the fire."

"My sister?" Esi asked. So what Abronoma said was true.

Maame babbled nonsense words, words she had never spoken before. Sister, Baaba, fire. Sister, Baaba, fire. Esi wanted to ask more questions, but the noise outside was growing louder, and her mother's eyes were growing blank, emptying somehow of something.

Esi stared at her mother then, and it was as though she were seeing her for the first time. Maame was not a whole woman. There were large swaths of her spirit missing, and no matter how much she loved Esi, and no matter how much Esi loved her, they both knew in that moment that love could never return what Maame had lost. And Esi knew, too, that her mother would die rather than run into the woods ever again, die before capture, die even if it meant that in her dying, Esi would inherit that unspeakable sense of loss, learn what it meant to be un-whole.

"You go," Maame said as Esi tugged at her arms, tried to move her legs. "Go!" she repeated.

Esi stopped and tucked the black stone into her wrapper. She hugged her mother, took the knife from her skirt, put it in her mother's hand, and ran.

She reached the woods quickly and found a palm tree that her arms could manage. She had been practicing, not knowing that it was for this. She wrapped her arms around the trunk, hugging it while using her legs to push her up, up, as far as she could go. The moon was full, as large as the rock of terror that was sitting in Esi's gut. What had she ever known of terror?

Time passed and passed. Esi felt like her arms were encircling fire instead of the tree, so badly were they burning. The dark shadows of the leaves on the ground had started to look menacing. Soon, the sound of screaming people falling from the trees like plucked fruit could be heard all around her, and then a warrior was at the bottom of her tree. His language was unfamiliar, but she knew enough to know what came next. He threw a rock at her, then another, then another. The fourth rock slammed into her side, but still she held on. The fifth hit the lattice of her clasped fingers; her arms came undone, and she fell to the ground.

She was tied to others; how many, she didn't know. She didn't see anyone from her compound. Not her stepmothers or half siblings. Not her mother. The rope around her wrists held her palms out in supplication. Esi studied the lines on those palms. They led nowhere. She had never felt so hopeless in her life.

Everyone walked. Esi had walked for miles with her father before and so she thought that she could take it. And indeed the first few days were not so bad, but by the tenth the calluses on Esi's feet split open and blood seeped out, painting the leaves she left behind. Ahead of her, the bloody leaves of others. So many were crying that it was difficult to hear when the warriors spoke, but she wouldn't have understood them anyway. When she could, she checked to see if the stone her mother had given her was still safely tucked in her wrapper. She didn't know how long they would be allowed to keep their clothes. The leaves on the forest ground were so damp with blood and sweat and dew that a child in front of Esi slipped on them. One of the warriors caught him, helped him to stand up, and the little boy thanked him.

"Why should he thank him? They are going to eat us all," the

woman behind Esi said. Esi had to strain to hear through the haze of tears and buzz of insects that surrounded them.

"Who will eat us?" Esi asked.

"The white men. That is what my sister says. She says the white men buy us from these soldiers and then they cook us up like goats in soup."

"No!" Esi cried, and one of the soldiers was quick to run up to her and poke her side with a stick. Once he left, her flank throbbing, Esi pictured the goats that walked freely around her village. Then she pictured herself capturing one—the way she roped its legs and laid its body down. The way she slit its neck. Was this how the white men would kill her? She shuddered.

"What's your name?" Esi asked.

"They call me Tansi."

"They call me Esi."

And like that, the two became friends. They walked all day. The sores on Esi's feet had no time to heal, so soon were they reopened. At times, the warriors would leave them tied to trees in the forest so that they could go ahead and survey the people of new villages. At times, more people from those villages would be taken and added to the rest of them. The rope around Esi's wrists had started to burn. A strange burn, like nothing she had ever felt before, like cool fire, the scratch of salty wind.

And soon, the smell of that wind greeted Esi's nose, and she knew from stories she had heard that they were nearing Fanteland.

The traders slapped their legs with sticks, making them move faster. For almost half of that week, they walked both day and night. The ones who couldn't keep up were beaten with the sticks until suddenly, like magic, they could.

Finally, once Esi's own legs had started to buckle, they reached the edge of some Fante village. They were all packed into a dark and damp cellar, and Esi had time to count the group. Thirty-five. Thirty-five people held together by rope.

They had time to sleep, and when they awoke they were given food. A strange porridge that Esi had never eaten before. She didn't like the

taste of it, but she could sense that there would be nothing else for a long while.

Soon, men came into the room. Some were the warriors that Esi had seen before, but others were new.

"So these are the slaves you have brought us?" one of the men said in Fante. It had been a long while since Esi had heard anyone speak that dialect, but she could understand him clearly.

"Let us out!" the others tied to Esi began to shout, now that they had an ear that could listen. Fante and Asante, fellow Akans. Two peoples, two branches split from the same tree. "Let us out!" they shouted until their voices grew hoarse from the words. Nothing but silence greeted them.

"Chief Abeeku," another said. "We should not be doing this. Our Asante allies will be furious if they know we have worked with their enemies."

The one called Chief threw up his hands. "Today their enemies pay more, Fiifi," he said. "Tomorrow, if they pay more, we will work with them too. This is how you build a village. Do you understand?"

Esi watched the one called Fiifi. He was young for a warrior, but already she could tell that one day he would be a Big Man too. He shook his head, but didn't speak again. He went out of the cellar and brought back more men.

They were white men, the first Esi had ever seen. She could not match their skin to any tree or nut or mud or clay that she had ever encountered.

"These people do not come from nature," she said.

"I told you, they have come to eat us," Tansi replied.

The white men approached them.

"Stand up!" the chief shouted, and they all stood. The chief turned to one of the white men. "See, Governor James," he said in fast Fante, so fast Esi hardly understood him and wondered how this white man could. "The Asante are very strong. You may check them for yourselves."

The men started to undress the ones who still had clothes on, checking them. For what? Esi didn't know. She remembered the stone tucked in her cloth wrapper, and when the one called Fiifi reached her

to undo the knot she had tied at the top of it, she launched a long, full stream of spit into his face.

He did not cry like the boy captive she had spit on in her own village square. He did not whimper or cower or seek comfort. He simply wiped his face, never taking his eyes off her.

The chief came to stand next to him. "What will you do about this, Fiifi? Will you let this go unpunished?" the chief asked. He spoke low, so that only Esi and Fiifi could hear.

Then, the sound of the smack. It was so loud, it took a moment for Esi to determine whether the pain she felt was on her ear or inside it. She cowered and sank to the ground, covering her face and crying. The smack had popped the stone from her wrapper, and she found it there, on the ground. She cried even harder, trying to distract them now. Then she laid her head against the smooth black stone. The coolness of it soothed her face. And when the men had finally turned their backs and left her there, forgetting for a moment to take off her wrapper, Esi took the stone from against her cheek and swallowed it.

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Now the waste on the dungeon floor was up to Esi's ankles. There had never been so many women in the dungeon before. Esi could hardly breathe, but she moved her shoulders this way and that, until she had created some space. The woman beside her had not stopped leaking waste since the last time the soldiers fed them. Esi remembered her first day in the dungeon, when the same thing had been true of her. That day, she had found her mother's stone in the river of shit. She had buried it, marking the spot on the wall so that she would remember when the time came.

"Shh, shh, shh," Esi cooed to the woman. "Shh, shh, shh." She had learned to stop saying that everything would be all right.

Before long, the door of the dungeon opened and a sliver of light peeked through. A couple of soldiers walked in. Something was wrong with these soldiers. There was less order to their movements, less structure. She had seen men drunk from palm wine before, the way

their faces flushed and their gestures grew wilder. The way their hands moved as though ready to collect even the very air around them.

The soldiers looked around and the women in the dungeon began to murmur. One of them grabbed a woman on the far end and pushed her against the wall. His hands found her breasts and then began to move down the length of her body, lower and lower still, until the sound that escaped her lips was a scream.

The women in the stack started to hiss then. The hiss said, "Quiet, stupid girl, or they will beat us all!" The hiss was high and sharp, the collective cry of a hundred and fifty women filled with anger and fear. The soldier who had his hands on the woman began to sweat. He shouted back at them all.

Their voices hushed to a hum, but did not stop. The murmur vibrated so low, Esi felt as though it were coming from her own stomach.

"What are they doing!" they hissed. "What are they doing!" The hissing grew louder, and soon the men were shouting something back at them.

The other soldier was still walking around, looking at each woman carefully. When he came upon Esi, he smiled, and for one quick second, she confused that act as one of kindness, for it had been so long since she'd seen someone smile.

He said something, and then his hands were on her arm.

She tried to fight him, but the lack of food and the wounds from the beatings had left her too weak to even collect her saliva and spit at him. He laughed at her attempt and dragged her by the elbow out of the room. As they walked into the light, Esi looked at the scene behind her. All those women hissing and crying.

He took her to his quarters above the place where she and the rest of the slaves had been kept. Esi was so unused to light that now it blinded her. She couldn't see where she was being taken. When they got to his quarters, he gestured toward a glass of water, but Esi stood still.

He gestured to the whip that sat on his desk. She nodded, took one sip of the water, and watched it slip out of her numb lips.

He put her on a folded tarp, spread her legs, and entered her. She screamed, but he placed his hand over her lips, then put his fingers in her mouth. Biting them only seemed to please him, and so she stopped. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to listen instead of see, pretending that she was still the little girl in her mother's hut on a night that her father had come in, that she was still looking at the mud walls, wanting to give them privacy, to separate herself. Wanting to understand what kept pleasure from turning into pain.

When he had finished, he looked horrified, disgusted with her. As though he were the one who had had something taken from him. As though he were the one who had been violated. Suddenly Esi knew that the soldier had done something that even the other soldiers would find fault with. He looked at her like her body was his shame.

Once night fell and the light receded, leaving only the darkness that Esi had come to know so well, the soldier snuck her out of his quarters. She had finished her crying, but still he shushed her. He wouldn't look at her, only forced her along, down, down, back to the dungeons.

When she got there, the murmur had subsided. The women were no longer crying or hissing. There was only silence as the soldier returned her to her spot.

Days went on. The cycle repeated. Food, then no food. Esi could do nothing but replay her time in the light. She had not stopped bleeding since that night. A thin trickle of red traveled down her leg, and Esi just watched it. She no longer wanted to talk to Tansi. She no longer wanted to listen to stories.

She had been wrong when she'd watched her parents that night as they worked together in her mother's hut. There was no pleasure.

The dungeon door opened. A couple of soldiers walked in, and Esi recognized one of them from the cellar in Fanteland. He was tall and his hair was the color of tree bark after rain, but the color was starting to turn gray. There were many golden buttons along his coat and on the flaps above the shoulders. She thought and thought, trying to push out the cobwebs that had formed in her brain and remember what the chief had called the man.

Governor James. He walked through the room, his boots press-

ing against hands, thighs, hair, his fingers pinching his nose. Following behind him was a younger soldier. The big white man pointed to twenty women, then to Esi.

The soldier shouted something, but they didn't understand. He grabbed them by their wrists, dragged them from atop or underneath the bodies of other women so that they were standing upright. He stood them next to each other in a row, and the governor checked them. He ran his hands over their breasts and between their thighs. The first girl he checked began to cry, and he slapped her swiftly, knocking her body back to the ground.

Finally, Governor James came to Esi. He looked at her carefully, then blinked his eyes and shook his head. He looked at her again, and then began checking her body as he had the others. When he ran his hands between her legs, his fingers came back red.

He gave her a pitying look, as though he understood, but Esi wondered if he could. He motioned, and before she could think, the other soldier was herding them out of the dungeon.

"No, my stone!" Esi shouted, remembering the golden-black stone her mother had given her. She flung herself to the ground and started to dig and dig and dig, but then the soldier was lifting her body, and soon all that she could feel instead of dirt in her steadily moving hands was air and more air.

They took them out into the light. The scent of ocean water hit her nose. The taste of salt clung to her throat. The soldiers marched them down to an open door that led to sand and water, and they all began to walk out onto it.

Before Esi left, the one called Governor looked at her and smiled. It was a kind smile, pitying, yet true. But for the rest of her life Esi would see a smile on a white face and remember the one the soldier gave her before taking her to his quarters, how white men smiling just meant more evil was coming with the next wave.