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Opening extract from

Hope in a Ballet Shoe

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Published by

Faber & Faber

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First published, as *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*, by Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York, in 2014

First published in the UK in 2015
by Faber & Faber Ltd
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–31446–1

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Prologue
The Black Swan

I stand in the wings, dressed in a lush black tutu embellished with black feathers and blood-red flowers. A silver tiara studded with crystal rhinestones crowns my hair, which is pulled tightly back in a thick bun. One at a time I flex my feet at the ankles, extend my legs, and point my toes to check that the ribbons of my pointe shoes are tied and securely tucked. 'A professional ballerina never allows her ribbons to flop loose around her ankles,' one of my favourite teachers would warn me. A tiny smile twitches at the corners of my mouth as I remember that seven-year-old girl with her ribbons flying about.

A sense of unreality grips me. A professional ballerina . . . is that really me? It seems that just yesterday I was an orphan child, a small, dirty-faced pikin – hungry, frightened and clinging for dear life to a dream of becoming a ballerina. As Mabinty Bangura, I danced on my bare toes in the mud of the rainy season, disturbing the breeding mosquitoes,

who would rise up in anger and bite me – bringing malaria.

My arms prickle with goose bumps. I rub them away, remembering my sister Mia once telling me, 'They're swan bumps, Michaela, not goose bumps.' Are my swan bumps caused by nervousness, the chilly Berkshire air in the Ted Shawn Theatre at Jacob's Pillow, or haunting memories?

Why should I be nervous? This isn't the first time I've danced the act-two pas de deux from *Swan Lake* onstage as Odile, the dark and cunning daughter of the evil sorcerer, Von Rothbart. But it is the first time I have danced it in front of such a large audience of critics and other dancers. They flock to Jacob's Pillow in June of each year to attend this renowned festival, and here I am about to make my entrance, the youngest professional ballerina among them, dancing a role that demands maturity and sophistication. I feel like an imposter.

The Black Swan is a seductress, tantalising Prince Siegfried with her womanly charms in order to steal him away from Odette, the White Swan. What do I know about womanly charms or seduction? After my April performance, one critic wrote, 'She was the sweetest seductress you ever saw . . . but she has yet to develop any ballerina mystique. She is only eighteen.' I showed the review to Skyler, my boyfriend. 'Do you agree?' I asked him, with tears in my eyes.

'She's right. You are sweet,' he answered.

'But I don't want to be sweet. I want to have womanly charms. I want to be a seductress. I want ballerina mystique.'

Skyler laughed and said, 'You're cute and funny too.'

'But I don't want to be cute and funny. I want to be mysterious.'

'Well, sometimes you're a complete mystery to me,' he admitted with a mischievous grin.

'That's not the same as ballerina mystique.'

Now it's the final performance of the season. I need to pull it off. For a brief second I am tempted to flee. Then the music starts, and I step onto the stage. Suddenly I am neither Mabinty Bangura, nor Michaela DePrince. I *am* the Black Swan, and as a reviewer later acknowledges, 'The vile Odile was delightfully chilly as she seduced the unwitting prince.'

Chapter 1
From the House on the Right

Before I was the 'vile' and 'chilly' Odile, I was Michaela DePrince, and before I was Michaela, I was Mabinty Bangura, and this is the story of my flight from war orphan to ballerina.

In Africa my papa loved the dusty, dry winds of the Harmattan, which blew down from the Sahara Desert every December or January. 'Ah, the Harmattan has brought us good fortune again!' he would exclaim when he returned from harvesting rice. I would smile when he said that because I knew that his next words would be, 'But not as good a fortune as the year when it brought us Mabinty . . . no, never as good as that!'

My parents said that I was born with a sharp cry and a personality as prickly as an African hedgehog. Even worse, I was a girl child, and a spotted one at that, because I was born with a skin condition called vitiligo, which caused me to look like a baby leopard. Nevertheless, my parents celebrated my arrival with joy.

When my father proclaimed that my birth was the

high point of his life, his older brother, Abdullah, shook his head and declared, 'It is an unfortunate Harmattan that brings a girl child . . . a worthless, spotted girl child at that, one who will not even bring you a good bride-price.' My mother told me that my father laughed at his brother. He and Uncle Abdullah did not see eye to eye on almost everything.

My uncle was right in one respect: in a typical household in the Kenema District of south-eastern Sierra Leone, West Africa, my birth would not have been cause for celebration. But our household was not typical. First of all, my parents' marriage had not been arranged. They had married for love, and my father refused to take a second wife, even after several years of marriage, when it appeared that I would be their only child. Secondly, both of my parents could read, and my father believed that his daughter should learn to read as well.

'If my brother is right and no one will wish to marry a girl with skin like the leopard, it is important that our daughter go to school. Let's prepare her for that day,' my father told my mother. So he began to teach me the *abjad*, or Arabic alphabet, when I was just a tiny pikin, barely able to toddle about.

'Fool!' Uncle Abdullah sputtered when he saw Papa moulding my little fingers around a stick of charcoal. 'Why are you teaching a girl child? She will think that

she is above her station. All she needs to learn is how to cook, clean, sew and care for children.'

~

My spots scared the other children in our village. Nobody would play with me, except my cousins on occasion, so I would often sit alone on the stoop of our hut, thinking. I wondered why my father would work so hard panning for diamonds in the alluvial mines, diamonds that he would not be allowed to keep. It was hard, backbreaking work to stand bent over all day. Papa would hobble home at night, because his back, ankles and feet ached. His hands would be swollen and painful from sifting the heavy, wet soil through his sieve. Then, one night, while Mama was rubbing shea butter mixed with hot pepper into Papa's swollen joints, I overheard a conversation between them, and understood.

'It is important that our daughter go to school to learn more than we are capable of teaching her. I want her to go to a good school.'

'If we are frugal, the money from the mines will eventually be enough to pay her school fees, Alhaji,' my mother said.

'Ah, Jemi, count the money. How much have we saved so far?' Papa asked.

Mama laughed. 'This much, plus the amount I counted the last time you asked,' she said, holding up the coins he had brought home that evening.

I smiled a secret smile from my small space behind the curtain. I loved to listen to my parents' voices at night. Though I cannot say the same for the voices of Uncle Abdullah and his wives.

~

Our house was set to the right of my uncle's house. Uncle Abdullah had three wives and fourteen children. Much to his unhappiness, thirteen of his children were girls, leaving my uncle and his precious son, Usman, the child of his first wife, as the only males in the household.

Many nights I would hear cries and shouts of anger drifting across the yard. The sounds of Uncle Abdullah beating his wives and daughters filled my family with sadness. I doubted that Uncle Abdullah ever loved any of his wives, or he would not have beaten them. He certainly didn't love his many daughters. He blamed any and all of his misfortunes on their existence.

My uncle cared only about his one son. He called Usman his treasure and fed him delicious tidbits of meat while his daughters looked on, hungry and bloated by a starchy diet of rice and cassava, that long, brown-

skinned root vegetable that lacks vitamins and minerals. And nothing was more galling to my uncle than finding me outside, sitting cross-legged on a grass mat, studying and writing my letters, which I copied from the Qur'an. He could not resist poking me with the toe of his sandal and ordering me to get about the duties of a woman.

'Fool!' Uncle Abdullah would sputter at my papa. 'Put this child to work.'

'What need does she have of womanly chores? She is only a child herself,' Papa would remind his brother, and then couldn't resist adding: 'Yes, not even four years old, and yet she speaks Mende, Temne, Limba, Krio and Arabic. She picks up languages from the marketplace and learns quickly. She will surely become a scholar.' Papa didn't need to rub any more salt in Uncle Abdullah's wounds by reminding him that Usman, who was several years older than me, lagged far behind me in his studies.

'What she needs is a good beating,' Uncle Abdullah would counter. 'And that wife of yours, she too needs an occasional beating. You are spoiling your women, Alhaji. No good will ever come of that.'

Perhaps Papa should not have bragged about my learning. The villagers and my uncle thought that I was strange enough with my spots, and my reading made me even stranger in their eyes and made my uncle hate me.

The only thing that my father and his brother had in common was the land that fed us, sheltered us, and provided the rice, palm wine and shea butter that we sold at the market.

At night, when I heard the cries coming from across the yard, I'd turn my ear towards my parents resting on the other side of the curtain. From there I heard sweet words of love and soft laughter. Then I would thank Allah because I had been born into the house on the right, rather than the one on the left.

Chapter 2
To the House on the Left

A civil war had started in my country in 1991, and by the time I was three years old, it had been going on for seven years. It had begun mainly because the education system shut down, and without schooling, young people could not get jobs. This resulted in poverty and hunger, which made them desperate, so they formed a revolutionary army to fight for what they needed.

As the war progressed, the youth lost track of their goals and started killing innocent villagers. So now, instead of good luck, the dry season brought an invasion of rebels of the Revolutionary United Front. They called themselves the RUF, but their victims combined the English words *rebel* and *devil*, and called them *debils.*

~

The Harmattan that my father had always loved betrayed us that year. Instead of good luck, it brought

the war to our village. Papa was not at home the day the debils burned the rice and palm trees that grew on the nearby hillsides. He was at the diamond mines. When he got home, Mama would need to tell him that the debils left us with no crop to sell, no rice to eat, and no seed for next year's planting.

Mama and I sat on a wooden bench at the front of our home and watched the flames that were being spread by the strong Harmattan winds. The smoke made it difficult to breathe. I sobbed and coughed, and she wrapped her arms around me. 'Mama, why aren't you crying?' I asked.

Mama pointed towards another village on the hillside. I could see smoke rising from the homes there. 'We are fortunate that the debils spared our homes and our lives,' she answered. 'We should be grateful to Allah for that.'

Maybe she was right, but I didn't feel grateful. A few minutes later, a man came to our door, moaning and wailing. He told us that he was the only survivor of his village. The debils had forced him to watch as they killed his friends and family. Then, laughing, they asked if he preferred short sleeves or long sleeves. He said that he usually wore long sleeves, so they cut off his hand and sent him on his way to spread fear and warnings throughout the countryside.

Auntie Yeabu, the youngest wife of Uncle Abdullah,

helped my mother bandage the man's stump while I stood nearby, shaking with fear. Mama offered the man the small portion of rice remaining from our morning meal. She begged him to rest in our house. But the man was certain that the debils would soon pass through our village, recognise him, and kill him too. So, instead of resting, he hurried north toward Makeni, a city many kilometres away, where he thought it might be safe.

~

Mama scooped less rice than usual into the cook pot that night. I knew that she would barely eat any of it so that Papa and I could fill our bellies. I decided that I would follow her example. After working all day at the diamond mines, Papa would need the largest serving of rice.

While the rice bubbled in the pot, we continued to wait for him. Mama insisted that I eat. 'I want to wait for Papa,' I protested.

'No, you eat. I will wait,' Mama said. 'You are a growing child. Eat.'

'I'm not hungry,' I cried. I curled up next to her and fell asleep.

~

I woke up to the sound of my cousin Usman's voice. 'Auntie Jemi,' he hissed quietly. 'Auntie Jemi, the rebels came to the mines today. They shot all of the workers.'

'All of the workers?' my mother repeated. 'And Alhaji?'

'Yes, Uncle Alhaji too,' Usman whispered.

'NO-O-O!' I screamed. 'Not Papa!'

'NO-O-O!' Mama screamed. 'Not my Alhaji!'

Mama and I clung tightly to each other. She rocked me in her arms as I cried loudly.

Soon the entire village was filled with weeping, because nearly every family lost a father, brother, son or nephew. On the day my father died, I believed that I was feeling the worst pain possible . . . that I would never again feel such pain. Then I moved into the house on the left and learned that pain, like the green of the jungle leaves, comes in many shades.

~

Uncle Abdullah decided to rent our house to a refugee family and forced Mama and me to move into his house. According to Sharia, Muslim law, Uncle Abdullah became our guardian. He took the money my parents had saved for my education, and because we had no money left, Mama and I could not escape. My uncle wanted to marry Mama, but Sharia also gave

her the right to refuse his offer, which she did. Her rejection enraged him, and he would use any excuse to punish us.

Mama and I lived in constant fear of him. I'll never forget him shouting at us, 'You are punished! No food for either of you! No food today, tomorrow, and the day after that!'

Auntie Yeabu often tried to sneak food to us, but she wasn't always able to do so, because my other aunts' eyes were too sharp. We often went hungry, and for months Mama gave me most of her food. 'I'm not so hungry today. You eat my rice,' she would say to me. I didn't believe her, so I would try to refuse it, but she insisted. 'I will throw it away if you don't eat it,' she'd threaten. Tears would fill my eyes, and even though I was very hungry, the rice would form a lump in my throat as I tried to force it down.

I know now that Mama was starving and gave me her rice so that I would not starve with her. Yet, even with her food, my face swelled and my belly stuck out, something that often happens to starving children.

Uncle Abdullah would yell at me. 'You are a useless child! Look at you. How ugly you are. You have the spots of a leopard. I am wasting food and money on you. I will not even get a bride-price in return. Who would want to marry a girl who looks like a dangerous beast of the jungle?'

Oh, how I hated my uncle then. I wanted to shout back at him, but I didn't dare. Instead I ran to my mother and curled up in her arms.