

I



THE FIRST TIME I ran away from home I was seven.

Instead of turning right outside the family house and going to school as I was supposed to, I turned left in the direction of the river and forest. Left, to find my father.

Ma had confessed days earlier that he was a creature of the forest; a creature she met in a woodland grove on a day she was harvesting wild honey. One kiss and that was it. The thought of me had seeded in her mind and I took root in her womb.

‘One kiss and you made me?’

Ma had nodded.

‘What’s his name? What’s he like?’ I’d asked. ‘Is my father an animal or a bird creature? A human being or a chick like me?’

Ma laughed. That’s what she called me, you see: her little chick, half-hidden in the feathers of her wing.

‘Tell me!’

She'd laughed again, a golden peal that spun me in circles as she tickled my ribs.

'I want to know!' I'd squealed.

'Come closer.'

I'd backed away, reluctant to touch her, to feel that fizz in my fingers, which frightened me. 'Tell me!'

'I don't recall his name. Or what happened in the forest after he kissed me. What matters, my dear, is that you're here and you're mine.'

'I'd like to meet him, Ma. Just once. *Please...*'

She'd smiled. 'Have you ever wondered if what you want is what he desires? Best not wake a sleeping snake, little chick. Best forget him!'

In truth, I couldn't. It was this, and the fizz in my fingers whenever I touched Ma's hair, that spurred me on a quest to find my father.

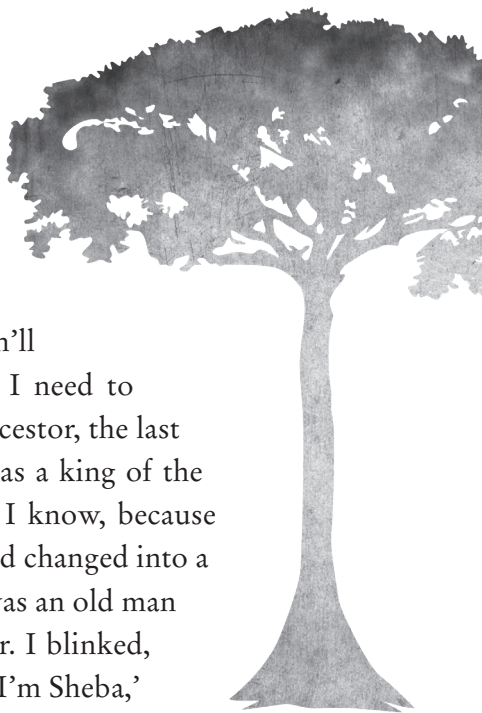


Two days later, after my mother's off on her travels again, as soon as I'm dressed and ready for school, I run.

If I find him, I decide, I'll ask my father his name. If he tells me, I'll tell him mine. 'They call me Sheba,' I'll say. 'I'm your daughter, Sheba, named after a queen in a big book. A queen as black and beautiful as I am, and every bit as wise as Nana says I'll be one day.'

I inhale a whiff of river, the one that flows through

farmland to the forest and resolve to follow the scent. I'm confident that the moment I invoke the name of my great-grandfather, Nana Gyata su, I'll find a tree, a special tree, which'll point me in the direction I need to go. With the help of my ancestor, the last chief of our village, brave as a king of the forest, I can do anything! I know, because last night he came to me and changed into a lion. One moment, there was an old man in a kente cloth at the door. I blinked, and a lion was at my feet. 'I'm Sheba,' I'll say to my father. 'Sheba, a girl who walks with lions.'



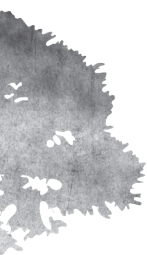
I skip down the track, sidestepping a street vendor, a woman roasting plantain and groundnuts.

'Small girl, shouldn't you be going that way?' The vendor points to the cotton tree at the centre of our village where we assemble for school.

Even as my uniform betrays me, I shake my head. 'Today I'm going to the forest.'

'Small fry like you? Go back to school.'

I shake my head a second time. 'The forest won't harm me,' I assure her. 'That's where my father lives.'



A question stirs on the woman's face. 'Aren't you the child who sleeps in the big house over there?'

Before I can answer, before I can shake my head, she replies: 'You're Nana Serwah's granddaughter, aren't you? Sika Prempeh's last-born.'

'My mother's gone travelling. If you see Nana, tell her I'm on my way to the forest to look for my father.'

The woman lumbers forward, an elephant about to drag me home with her trunk.

I dodge.

'Aba!' the woman cries. 'Someone, anyone, help me!'

There's no one else around, only the dark silhouettes of kiosks, a splash of pink in the sky as the moon gives way to the sun.

I race down the track. When I dare look back, the woman is at her stall once again.

My nose for the river takes me through fields of sugar cane and maize. The plants sway, fluttering and rolling in wind-dance. I wave at them, arms whirling in a welcome song of my own.

'I'm going to the forest,' I tell earth, wind and sky.

Up high, a cluster of clouds shadowing the sun peeps at me.

I grin in reply. 'Today's the day I meet my father! I'm going to tell him about Ma!'

‘What?’

Another adult. This time a farmer, his skin dark as pitch after hours labouring in the heat. In a basket, he carries tubers of yam and a machete.

‘Which way is the forest?’ I ask.

‘A lot further than those short legs of yours can carry you, girl.’

I smile, clicking my tongue to stop laughter spilling from my mouth. The man has no idea how strong I am! I’m sturdy, and yet, light as a balloon scudding through the sky, I’ll duck and dive to reach my destination. ‘Which way to the forest?’

‘Go home, girl,’ the man says. ‘There’s mud ahead, a bridge to cross and then wetlands to tramp over before you reach the forest’s edge. If you get there, beware of snakes.’

‘Snakes?’

‘This is the season of snakes,’ says the farmer. ‘But snakes are nothing compared to Sasabonsam.’

‘Sasabonsam?’

‘Ha! You mean to say you don’t know about those blood-sucking monsters in the forest?’

I step back, shaking my head.

‘Those creatures have tongues of fire.’ The man waggles his tongue, slurping, as if getting ready to gulp me down. ‘Their eyes are red, flame-red; their bodies are covered in hair and they dangle from trees to catch small girls like you.’

I lift my head high. 'I'm a creature of the forest too. I'm like my father. I'm not scared of snakes or monsters.'

The man looks me up and down. Takes me in, and then spits me out like an orange pip he's swallowed by mistake. 'Turn around,' he says. 'The forest is no place for a girl alone.'

'Where my father lives, so shall I!'

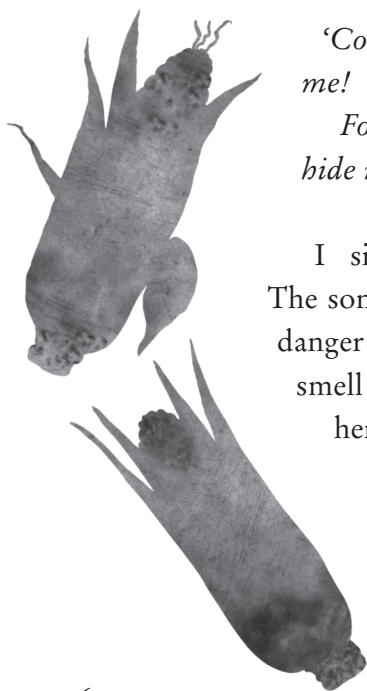
'Small girl, don't make me walk you back.'

Face set, legs apart, I stand my ground until the farmer, towering above me, lowers his hand to grab mine. Quick as a flea, I turn and run into the cornfield crying:

'Cornfield! Cornfield! Watch over me!

Form a ring of protection and hide me!'

I sing my grandmother's song. The song she's taught me to use when danger is so close, that not only can I smell her breath, I can see her baring her teeth as well. In an emergency, Nana says, I am to call for help from every living thing around me and then run and hide.



I hear the farmer behind me, thrashing about, pushing back stalks and breaking them. Stomping up and down, beating the crop with a stick. The charm I've muttered, combined with the goodwill of the plants, unite in frustrating him. A row of corn, sensing my haste and panic, responds by shifting, rearranging itself in a circle that shields me from view.

The man curses. Three times he curses, before trudging to the footpath. He picks up his basket and leaves.

When I'm sure he's gone, I step from the corn circle to be met by laughter.

Crouching in the undergrowth ahead of me is a boy. He flings back his head and cackles, a finger pointing my way. The more the boy laughs, the more my mood sours, until all I can do is glare. No one laughs at me, not if I can help it!

'Small boy, has anyone told you that you have a laugh like a hyena?'

'Are you talking to me? Are you calling me small? A hyena?' The boy unpeels himself, stretching to his full height. 'Now tell me I'm small.'

He's a head taller than I am and older as well. Wiry, long-limbed, his coppery complexion is almost as red as the ground we're standing on. His features are not as rounded and plump as mine, but sharp, thin. He looks familiar. Even so, I don't recall where I've met him before.

‘What’s your name?’ I stride to his left, then his right – the way my teacher drills us in class one.

‘Maybe.’ The boy smiles and his eyes, dark as molasses, sweeten the bitter taste on my tongue: the taste that floods my mouth when I’m angry.

‘What sort of name is Maybe?’

His eyes crinkle as he smiles again. This time the sweetness in him tumbles out, spilling over me. My mind empties while my face mirrors his. A grin spreads to my cheeks, flickering over my lips as my dimples dance.

Perhaps this was what it was like for Ma and my father. One smile and that was it. One kiss and they made me.

‘Come, let me take you to the river. It’s on the way to the forest,’ the boy says. ‘Follow me and I’ll tell you the story of my name.’

Side by side, his hand brushing mine, the lure of water beckons while he tells me his tale.

‘My mother gave me my name to cheat mischief-makers and soul-eaters,’ he explains. ‘Before I came along, none of my brothers or my sister survived. Within a week, *peh*, they were gone. Number one. Number two. Number three. Come and see my mother crying. Every day, crying!’ The boy traces tears down his cheeks, and, wrapping his arms around his head, he rocks from side to side to demonstrate his mother’s grief.

My mouth opens in sympathy.

‘At last, she goes to see a mallam, a wise man, and asks for help. All she wants is a child. A living, breathing child! The mallam tells her that the best way to confuse masters of mischief and death is to give her next baby a name they won’t understand. A name that will make it impossible for them to know if the child is a girl or a boy, an animal or a plant, dead or alive.’

‘Truly?’

‘True, true,’ he replies. ‘As soon as I was conceived my mother called me Maybe and I’ve endured up till now because my name confuses those who wish to destroy life. I am the first of my mother’s children to grow tall!’ Head high, he grins.

‘Maybe,’ I murmur. ‘My name is Sheba.’

‘I know. I’ve seen you under the cotton tree with the small fry at school. I don’t always bother with school myself...’

We’ve walked far enough to hear the river’s call: the splash and gurgle of waves amid the chatter of women washing clothes. Downriver, a gaggle of girls are fetching water. Buckets filled, they lift them on to their heads while children laugh and play. Amazed it’s taken me until now to find my way here, I stop and stare.

In that moment, time freezes as, one after the other, heads turn to meet my gaze. A woman whispers. Another laughs. There’s a murmur of sighs before a

buzz unfurls and I catch snippets of what's said:

'That's Nana Serwah's granddaughter.'

'The old woman in that house without men?'

'Those witches in the former chief's palace who keep us hidden?'

'We're all outlaws or runaways here...'

I've been warned not to listen to gossip, not to search for approval on the faces of my neighbours.

Those who smile at you today may condemn you tomorrow, Sheba. A wise woman closes her ears to speculation and finds her own path.

That's Nana talking. She's raised me as a daughter of the royal house of our village. A princess in our line, I'm used to being petted and pawed – a cub among lionesses. Yet what I've heard unsettles me.

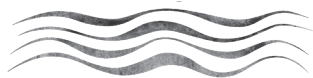
Stomach churns. Legs wobble.

Maybe and I have walked for miles. There hasn't been much mud to speak of, just raised beds of yam and cassava that we tramped over to get to the river. The wetlands are on the other side. Beyond a sprawl of mangrove bushes, on the rim of the horizon, is the forest. Remote and distant as a star, it shimmers in a haze of heat.

I remember the farmer's words, how legs as short as mine would struggle to walk so far. The sun, already high in the sky, beads sweat on my brow. A trickle runs down my back. My school uniform clings. I'm wilting, and as my hands grow clammy, my throat dry,

I sink to my knees.

Maybe sits beside me on the riverbank. He's hot as well. He must be, because he plucks a frond from a broad-leaved plant and, cupping it in his hands, scoops up water. He drinks and then dribbles the rest into my mouth.



The water is cool, earthy, yet instead of reviving me, tiredness crawls through my body.



'Do you have to go to the forest today?' asks Maybe.

'I have to look for my father.'

'Can't you search for him another time? I'll come with you.'

'Will you?'

His eyes say 'yes'. That's when I touch his head.



While his eyes probe mine, delving deeper and deeper into the heart of me, while he turns me inside out as he rustles through the truth in me, I caress his hair. I fondle it, savouring its softness, the crinkle-twist of each curl. I touch, and as I do, pictures in his mind slip into mine.

I see his mother's smile, hear yelps of delight in his

little brother's laughter, and flowing through him I taste a lake of kindness as full as the river at our feet; a kindness that tickles my soul.

'You have the heart of lion,' he says, 'a heart that's strong and true.'

I flinch, reminded of why I turned left outside our house. I wanted to confide in my father, tell him about the fizz in my fingers and then ask him if I'm a creature of the forest too.

My father will know what to do. He, more than anyone, will teach me how to quell the fire that rages in my mother; the fire that burns me when she lashes out. He'll show me the way. He has to.

'We'll find him soon,' says Maybe. 'With my help, we'll track him down!'

I nod, hoping that what he's said will come true.