From debut author, Joyce Efia Harmer, comes a hopeful and devastating YA story of friendship and freedom that crosses continents and centuries.

Enslaved on a plantation in Barbados, Obah dreams of freedom. As talk of rebellion bubbles up around her in the Big House, she imagines escape. Meeting a strange boy who's not quite of this world, she decides to put her trust in him. But Jacob is from the twenty-first century. Desperate to give Obah a better life, he takes her back with him. At first it seems like dreams really do come true – until the cracks begin to show and Obah sees that freedom comes at an unimaginable cost . . .

Joyce Efia Harmer was born in Lambeth to Ghanaian immigrants. She has a BA in English Language and Literature at King's College, London and went on to teach English. In 2016, Joyce was selected as one of six writers to take part in the Megaphone writer's scheme to support diverse voices in Children's Literature. In 2017, she was selected as a finalist in Penguin's WriteNow scheme. She lives in London with her husband and two sons and writes full-time. *How Far We've Come* is her debut novel.

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HOW FAR WE'VE COME

A NOVEL

BY JOYCE EFIA HARMER

SIMON & SCHUSTER

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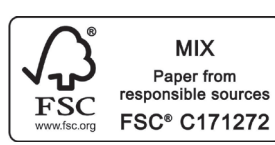
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I had reasoned this out in my mind, there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other.

Harriet Tubman

PART ONE

UNITY PLANTATION, BARBADOS 1834

CHAPTER 1

When I's running, me feel free.

I don't feel the rough scratch of grasses snapping on me heels, I don't feel the lash upon my back.

I'm in the time before here time. Me see the world so soft again, and the warm and the wet. Me remember.

I be running and colours blur. Gold-greens and blacks spin and melt into themselves as I pass, the chipping sparrow songs my ear with the breeze, and I knows the way. I feel the way. Like I be a' arrow shooting through the sky. My course be set. Wish I could run and be free for ever. Wish there was somewhere to run to.

I can run faster than any of them other slave on the plantation. Including the men, even big and strong as them is, they is no match for me in running. That's why the mistress always send for me whenever she got a message for the field from the Big House. I be pleased to serve Mistress Frida. She kind. Only ever hit me once with the back of her hairbrush, and I know that be my own fool fault. I know I do fine when I deliver her letters. Even him, that nasty Overseer

Leary, seem happy when he see me come.

'Girl, anyone seen you come up this way?' he ask, placing his night-time pot at my feet. I don't pay a mind to it, but that don't mean I don't have to clean it for him. His eyes is looking over my head into the thick cane as he pocket the letter. His can of liqueur swill some and he wipe his mouth with the back of him hand. Always, he ask me the same question.

'No, sir, me run real quick, and I go round, past the outhouse, just like always. Just like Miss Frida say.'

Overseer Leary's top lip curl a little, his whipping arm rest light at his hip, his forefinger caress that cowskin hilt, it tap once . . . twice. Me breathing stops. Then him look upon me with them pretend kind eyes that be smooth and flat as stones. Him smile. But I is wise to his ways and now me not stupid enough to smile back.

Fingers press a way through him damp hair and he seem ready to turn on his heel but sway a little and step short, as if he remembering something.

'How old you is now, Orrinda? 'Bout twelve? Thirteen?'

Me look down upon the dust. Ants is crawling on me toes. Him call me Orrinda, but this is not my true name. I is named Obah, as me mother name me herself.

'If it please, sir. I don't rightly know my age.'

I is near seventeen, but that be *my* secret. Aunty Nita tole me how I is born same day as the masser and Miss Frida's own daughter, Miss Lynette! She always say, 'On that indigo night, two sets of wailing did pierce the sky at the self-same hour. Me no work out which babe was which from the bawling alone!' Nita rub at her sore eye, but it weep on, still. 'Only ting

you two got in common was them falling tears, you know for why? Me go tell you. It because, lickle babes know what's coming, that's why them crying. *Hmhmm.* Tears of pain, Obah, that's what fly out from you like a new-sprung well. But that Missis Frida? Ha! Her babe's tears is purest joy.' She nod her head, hard and heavy. 'Babes born white cry drops of silver, but the babe born black like we? Him cry salt tears.' She laugh then, big and earthy and show me the pink drop at the back of her mouth, her own salt-tears wets her apron and she wipe them away, wincing as she bring on pain from the tender eye.

I know Miss Lynette and me, we cries different tears, but in secret, I is thinking this being born together be an omen. A good one. Maybe life got more in store for me than work, beatings and death.

Leary wipe his hands upon his thigh.

'Master Cooke is planning on taking some of the negroes to auction next week. Reckons *you* will fetch him a handsome price. You will be a good breeder when the time comes. A healthy chattel bitch is gold in this pigsty of a country.'

'Please, masser, don't sell Orrinda away. Me want stay, me tend to Miss Frida real good. Me a hard worker, masser, everyone know.' The words trip out of me mouth. Even though me know me shouldn't, me beg same way. Me palms slip upon themselves with sweat. Please, Lord, how me don't want to be sold.

Him fingering his whip again. His fingers is all-the-time restless and me keep me eye upon his hand because I know it can move fast. Me can feel him daring me to lift up me head,

but me tell meself, don't look at his black eye. Me don't forget the hurt that caused me the last time. From his night-time pot, a rotten taste settle at the back of my throat, but still, me no stoop or cower, me pray him take a little pity on me for once.

The thin breeze caresses me as it pass and as it lift up the low branches of the pine behind Leary, me eyes find something be moving there, it is white with eyes, and a face. Me cannot stop myself from jumping up with fright.

He is waiting on me lifting up me head; it be a sure sign of my insolence. Him don't need an excuse to hurt me, but him like to have one same way, so him give me a blow to the crown with the butt of his drinking can. Me feel meself fold, knees touching earth, knocking the piss pot over. His mess slides through the wet dust to kiss my legs and the stench stings, but me stays still. I ready for the something worse, waiting for the lash to fall.

Turning him head he spit. 'Come on, we're friends, I'm only playing. We won't sell you, Orrinda. I know how much Miss Frida loves you as her plaything.' Me look up at him, watching the spittle dance a little from his bottom lip, then it breaks its chain and flies off to freedom. Him stroke my arm, gently, top to bottom, with the tails of his whip. Teeth stained brown with tobacco give me his crocodile smile again. But he no see. Him no feel the eyes from the trees staring upon me now. Satisfied, for now, him take another swig from the can.

'Clean up that mess and be back in the usual time.'

He is already turning from me, making him way back to him lodge. Him always read Miss Frida's letter there as if to

hide the secrets that she telling him. Them is secrets from the masser too – that much I know.

Me take in new air, breathing heavy, but all me smell is Leary on me, even as he walk away. Me bow me head and thank God for his mercy, but the Lord is too far away, high in the sky and can never hear my mutters.

Me look again at the tree for the pale face. It be gone, but in the breezeless heat, the tree still sways.

CHAPTER 2

As me step away from Leary me see how the sun have place my shadow long and high in front of me. The black shape on the ground is tall and thin, but the top rounds where the knotted scarf sit at my head. The threads that fall from my dress hem shake like spider's legs and me pause for a moment to watch them shiver and press upon the air.

I pick up my pace. Making my way away from Leary's cabin and past the bearded fig tree to where the tamarinds begin their standing tall. The first quarters me pass be the mens. In this quarter there sit six wooden cabins, facing each other with a piece of empty red dirt dividing them like a dried-up river. Nothing grows here, as if the ground itself shuns life. The warped wooden fencing ring around them cabins keeps me from seeing more than the gap will show but I press my eye against the hole by the front post and look in. I know that here is where Uncle Hector and the other mens stay living, or at least, where they sit and ponder in the small hours that them have to themselves.

A cough ring out from within the nearest cabin and me jump a little as if me has been caught standing here staring. The cough come again, heavy this time and when it die down the cursing that follow it make me cover me ears for shame. The coughing one must be Apollo. He have a pipe that he love to fill with dried-up leaves and puff at – fashioned it himself from whittling bark. Aunty Nita say that if you ever try to keep smoke inside, it will do all its best to get out; just how it climb out of a chimney, it'll climb outta your chest, and that is why Apollo sound how he do. I just glad it ain't the cough from no ailment. Them coughs is the ones we all fear. The ones that put us into the ground when no doctor come.

Seeing how it is Sunday, me know the men will not need to make a way towards the fields for the cane harvesting. Masser Cooke be a tyrant, but he also a true servant of the Lord and his hand will never raise against us on a sabbath. The morning is full upon us, but these men refuse to rise, enjoying the sojourn of the Lord's day.

The dirt is warming up nice under foot and I bend to scratch away a ladybug that be inching up my leg, but when I see her, I let her stay upon my finger instead, counting up her spots, one, two, three . . . and then she open up her back and fly away. I watch until she just a speck of dust, wondering where she flying to and if I can follow.

A warning sound come from the tawny owl who live in the sassafrass tree, as though him have open one eye from him slumber to warn me off. So I pull my prying eye away from the plank and I walk along some more. I tap the letter in my pocket but dare not take it out to examine the lines written.

Even though me cannot read much, sometimes me love to cast my eye over the lines Leary and Miss Frida make with their feathers. Wondering what the river curls of twisting ink be saying to each other. Running my thumb upon the sharp sweet edge of the parchment. I stare and I stare but it never make no sense. Me can't take it out now, though, I need to be careful. One thing me know for sure is how these words cannot be seen by Masser Cooke – Miss Frida most particular on that score.

Me is approaching the women's cabins upon the other side of the path, up aways from the mens', after the storehouse and the well. The women ain't like the mens, them up and about working already. Don't seem like they have the same respite, even though it's the Sabbath and all. Them women have eyes that will see what I hold. What I hide. Masser Cooke will be delivering his sermon and that is when I can lay the letter from bad Leary at Miss Frida's door. That be the time when she prefer.

The first cabin in the women's quarters belong to the weavers, Rosemary and Anna. Both of them is ancient ladies with hair that sit upon their heads as though a cloud come down out of the sky to rest a while and forget to leave. I see them now, grass broom in hand, each one bent over and brushing away at the never-ending rusty dirt as it fan about them. Them sure is proud to keep their quarters neat and straight. Next cabin along belong to Bertha. Bertha used to work in the field but now she taken over with the soap making after Eunice passed away. She sit looking out upon the courtyard, hand playing with the soft hair beneath her scarf.

Her hair is long and silky black, falling upon her back, not like the rest of us. She laughs at how we other women has hair that seems to stand upon its hind legs. At her feet is her younguns, two little heads that look like hers sit upon their necks with hair as curly and fair as hers is dark and straight. One of her babbies, Bella, be chewing on a husk of Guinea corn and the other, Hanna, hold a slither of dried fish in her bunched fist and my stomach growl with jealousy at the sight. These are the end of the crop times, when the weather is dry and the sugar plenty, but we still feel as though we hunger all the time.

Next to, in the cabin with the broken door that wheeze when the wind blow, is where Mad Lizzy reside. She ain't nowhere to be seen. But it is day-time and we know she hate the sun for fear it brown her beige skin. More women pass me, entering into the quarters now with wet rags that they has beat against the rocks to clean. I curtsy to them and turn away, the weight of the letter heavy against my leg as I work towards our cabin, the one I share with Aunty Nita and Murreat, it sit at the far end of the quarters, under a little pip apple tree.

Further along, beyond our fence and pass the fields, is where Mimbah's cabin be. Not by the nearing thickets, where the trees are bigger and the baobab we call Martha have grown old. Not in the mens quarters nor the womens. Not by the sugar mill or by Savio the blacksmith. Mimbah stay alone. I send a longing look towards the weeds that lead to where she stay, thinking of her, my dear and truest friend, in her solitude. I will visit her soon, but now, I has to remember my duty.

CHAPTER 3

Me have a little time before Leary will be ready with him reply so me pick up him pot, gather up what slip out with a twig of cane, and walk down towards the spring in the valley to clean it. I trying not to dwell on the bump forming on my temple. The spring water's song groans, tender and pitying, she call me on as I step closer and closer. She love me for true, me can hear it in her voice. Me toe curl over roots, grasses straighten their backs from under my trekking heels, I be making my way. I stroke the tree barks as I pass, me fingers trace all them hollows and grooves, their history, their strength that's bound up in years and in that moment, me feel safe.

Maybe I did dream up that small white face by the tree just now. Maybe I did dream up them eyes, me sure they was blue, that did look upon me like them was sad.

Sometime, me love to dream. Me love to dream that me is a person, a proper one, like them white folks is. In me dream, I be eating meat with a spoon, and me hair kiss up me cheek because the wind is blowing gentle. Aunty Nita say, she worried me dreaming is going to put me into a whole heapa

trouble one day. But I know that dreams are not the same as truth. I is not a proper human. Masser himself confirm that at every Sunday sermon. I is nothing close. I is just like a dog or a chicken excepting one difference, I dream.

The cold from the spring climbs into me as I bend, bidding me welcome and I cup both hands to sip the cool water. I study my hand in the stream, looking at how black it be all over, me turn it to and fro, seeing it grow darker and darker still. Then me hand gone – disappear! I lift up me eye, searching for the light, but the pot-belly sun is gone. All is dark where the sun did glow and silence come with it. There's only nightfall all around and even the rowdy blue birds stop their chatter to bear witness to the sudden dark sky. I blink in the blackness for a moment more, listening to the silence, even the spring has stopped her mouth. The darkness rests on me as if she be weary, waiting for a time to rest her aching bones. What has happened to the day? How can it disappear in but a moment? I never saw the like of this before.

I turn about, alone in the day-dark, my eyes searching for light. And then, slowly a golden scythe appears in the sky, growing bigger and brighter till I have to turn my head away. And with my blinking the night-time fades, like when one of my dreams is dying. I rub a little on my temple, staring at the strange sun. That brutish and wicked Mister Leary did hit me harder this time for true.

Shaking my aching head, I sup some more from the spring, but me thirst don't quench easy because that growing, silent midday sun is beating down hard again. Me know me got time enough to sing me lickle song three times over before

Leary be ready with his letter. I sip more water, clean and bubbly cold and sit down at the old baobab tree, thick with ash-white bark. Me run me fingers upon her thick veins. I know this tree, I feel the familiarity of it and hug its life to me for protection. This be the tree I call Martha, living and breathing, a bit like me. Me press me back to her and open me mouth to sing. This day, somehow, new words flow out of me, a new song, a new gift. The melody pour forth as though it a song of past times, as though it from an ancient memory.

'Oh, lickle lamb, why you tremble so?
me not gone
me not gone
Oh, lickle lamb, take me hand so.
me not gone
Yet.'

Me get to sing it just once before me see him, a stranger from behind the pines, coming for me.

Stepping out, me see him. He be looking on me and like he calming a babe, him have arms outstretched low. It be a white, a white around my age, but me no recognize him from here, him not from Unity. Me feet is itching to run because them know something about this don't look right, but they stuck fast, me can't get 'em to move. 'Stead of running, me fix to gaze upon him. Him so strange looking that me eye want to take in all his looks before my feet will move. He be tall, higher than Master Cooke, with a slender limb and hair darker than charred tin. Him features be even and regular,

skin smooth and pale as the cameo Miss Frida like to rest at her throat. Just a freckle or two on his left cheek, sky-blue eyes is large, sitting under the longest dark lashes me ever see. Him strange garments be so clean they almost gleaming like him no have a speck o' nothing living on him.

This white boy, this stranger in the brush, he breathing, but nothing else. Me stare still and him stare back at me, the both of us quiet. Seem him eyes is as round and scared as mine, his head twist and turn about as if confusion sit upon his shoulder as he stare at me hard, his eye taking in my stained and ragged garments, my unshod feet, my rag-tied hair as if him have never seen a slave before. Them be the same pained eyes on me as before, in that tree behind Leary. Why him follow me here? A cold wetness sit on the back of my neck as I watch him, waiting for his next move.

His pitying eye open larger and his mouth open too, new sounds start to come, such as me no hear before. What is him saying? His voice mellow in colour, soft, it wash me up, wrap me into it even though me cannot understand him words. Sweet and kind, him voice is not gruff and angered. Me have lean me head close to him, as if to hear him well. Me have never heard a white speak like this. Him voice make me lose myself a moment, me enjoying it, him word sounds prickle my skin, prickle my blood.

Suddenly, him stop his words and his eye meet mine. I stare into the warm blueness and him stare back at me. We blink, together, and somehow, I is certain me is looking into the eye of friendship. But then, I straight myself up. Me wake up from me stupor. Me look to see where he carry him whip but

he don't seem to keep it in him belt. Like a negro, him don't have any belt! Me can't feel any comfort when me can't see a white man's whip, can only mean he hiding worse things for me to worry about.

'Please, Master, me not fixing to run, me just do a little errand is all.' Me voice break up as me plead with him, this stranger. Me not supposed to be seen in these parts, not in the noon time. Miss Frida say to make sure of it and me don't want to get in no trouble. Where Miss Frida concerned, me must be straight and true, me no want her to become vexed with me. Him keep him eye on me and keep mouthing words me cannot understand. Me cannot understand him body neither, twisting and turning about his head from tree to sky to me and back again, looking all about him as though him is lost.

Maybe this young one here be a new overseer. Maybe he been sent out by Master Cooke himself. Have him come out to check upon we, and have follow me up from the Big House? Master Cooke do like to keep we upon we toes, like to make sure we not lazing. Him known to lash us himself; him not just leave it to nasty Leary. This boy do seem young but that don't account for nothing, everyone must work if them not own land. If them is able and have a limb that can swing in the sun, them work. Me know that well enough.

Me have bad feeling in me belly 'bout this. Me mind run quick and me trying to work out how me can get out of this situation whole.

Slowly, him advance, stepping his foot towards me like him gliding. Me blink. Me want to scream, but it seem like dirt sit

in my throat. As him slip up to me closer, on silent feet, me do what any sober slave do if she see a white man pressing upon her person, me turn on me heel and run. Heart jumping in me chest, like it want get out, me breathe shallow.

Once me reach the other side of the stream, me catch a breath. Set down behind the hanging tamarind, me find a tallish thicket to hide by. Crouching low, but me can still hear him voice coming at me from all around, like it know where me hide. Me think this time me understand him.

'It's okay. Look, it's okay.' *What do 'okay' mean?* 'What is this place?' me hear him say. *What? Him don't know where him be?* Me cover me mouth with both hands. *What him be?*

A five-finger of sunlight slide through the cracks in the branches to warm me in my hiding place, but me feel only cold. Him going to find me and what then?

Mimbah did give me the warning before about this little wood, she tell me how there be persons living here *that is not from Unity's parts.* Them talk different. Them have moved from the earth and gone to the other side. When me tell her about how me must carry message for Miss Frida, she tell me, 'Obah, mind yourself out there, hear me now? Me warning you for true. After you pass by mill is when you soon start to see duppy roaming, duppies is them peoples that be dead but come back, thinking them still living! Did me never tell you how me see one there before? Them harvest the tamarind there. Him use him teeth to bite straight off the tree while me watch.' She open her mouth wide and bite an empty bite at me.

Mimbah, she have the sight, so she know all the ways and

habits of the dead. She know how when them restless, them seek to feast on we that's living, but me never believe her, till today.

Him voice come nearer again, like him playing some kind of seeky-seeky game on me. Me must get back to the lodge but that mean running back into the clearing, no trees to hide me. Overseer Leary expecting me to return for his letter. If me not there . . . me fingers graze upon me elbow and me shiver, rubbing at my scar from before.

Me feel a hard fear. This white duppy must be here for my blood. Me scream out. Me can't keep it in no more, it fling out into the trees, up to the sky. Slow, me head stretch out from the bush and the sun bite as me come out. Me nail stinging from when me press hard at the white bark, but me all right. Him gone. The way is empty. Me start to laugh at me foolishness. This have to be a dream of mine, Mimbah must have put a little fear in me is all. There is no ghost upon me.

'Please, don't run again. I'm not going to hurt you. I . . . I need your help. Where am I? What is this place?' Him back and he be speaking to me in him strange tongue full of fear. How him right beside me? Me never see him walk, me never hear him footstep. Me swallow.

'Please, masser, what me can do for you?' Me voice be weak with fear. Slow and strange, I watch how him turn his body all around, him arms stretch out and touch the tree but shrink back, as if it have burn him. His eyes widen and his head look up at the trees and all about, as if he a stranger in this place. Maybe duppies have no memories of how the world be?

'Masser? What do you mean? What's a masser?' Him

breath stings the cut on my cheek. Him voice have a soft lilt. Me never hear a white man speak soft so. We stare upon each other in the quiet like neither one of us breathing.

'Is you living or dead?' I says. Me say it real soft, soft like him speak to me. Me scared to death, but me use all me courage, me must try to save meself from this elsewhere visitor.

'Dead?' Him clear eye be as curious as him voice.

'Yes, sir, is you living and breathing?' me says. 'Kind sir, I beg you tell me now, if you is a duppy? When we all fall dead, is it a white skin we must wear?'

Him laugh, throw back him head and open his mouth so I can see how him still have all him teeth. Him laugh make me ponder if him have a duck living in him belly, but me don't know what is the joke. Only thing this can mean is, maybe him not a duppy at all, maybe him just white, and that is worse. Me no laugh with him, me keep me face stern so me can be ready for him when him turn. For when that laughter stop and the joke be over and the whipping start and the pain and screaming with it. But he don't switch. Him hug up him sides, body bending like cane pushed back this way and that. Me lick at the cold wetness sitting above my lip. Me waiting. And suddenly him stop. Him face turn dark and me feel him chill.

'Look, you know what? I have no clue what you're saying or why you're speaking like that? All this sir and masser stuff? What is this place? Who are you?'

Feathery tamarind leaves hanging low from the branches brush me shoulder, them smell sweet and clean. Funny, me never did notice that smell when I been here before, never

notice how them pods be dripping with scent. Me head say, 'Run, Obah – you know you can move fast, you can get away from him.' But, from above me, the swaying brown pods send out another word, soft, soft, them tell me 'stay'. Like me have nothing to fear. Me take in him dark head of curls and the bright clear eye and the clean teeth, the strange words and me wonder how come all these dead things put together, don't make me feel terrible afraid.

CHAPTER 4

Overseer Leary don't seem to pay no mind to my absence. Me must have gone for a high time, but it seem him only just be coming out the lodge as me now return. Most days, him not take much time at all on him writings, but today him letter be long and thick. I glad for it. One beating from him be enough for one day. Them black eyes scowl and him inky black nails leave prints like raccoon tracks on the letter he press on me, weighty in my palms.

'Hand that straight to your mistress. Don't tamper with it, or tarry. I will know if you do. The good Lord gave us whites special eyes in the back of our heads to hunt down the idle.'

'Yes, Masser.' I bob my head. Me can well believe him. Me hate God just a little more for that.

Clutching his hot letter in me hand, me run back to where the strange white boy be waiting. Lord, me can't believe him stupid enough to want to follow me, like a puppy, and the whole time me have to explain to him that he need to stay out of sight. , Only thing me can tell for sure is that him talk like we is friends and that mean he don't have no sense. Me

wonder if he gon' be there still and me surprised that he is. Shoulder against the tree, him finger stroke on something in him hand, a ball of shining silver it look to me. Him slip it into his shirt pocket when him see me coming. I look on his strange clothes, the colours sing bright, his shirt be blue as his eye but him breeches be dark night and a heavy material. The shoes on him feet be strange too, white as a china plate! Never see a shoe shine in the sun like them, even though them standing in all the black of the earth. Me wonder where him have left his hat.

Living or dead? Me not sure, but me can't seem to mind. Him eye be kind, with a small speck of damp.

Me wonder for a moment if him know me is black. Slick black as a wet creek, me face is shinier than oil. No high red or pale tones in my skin, no way me can pass for white, not like baby Emmie and Mad Lizzy. Me is just black. Maybe a duppy can't see colour?

'What's that?' him ask, pointing to the letter in my hand. I tuck it inside me apron pocket, but my hand stay firm on it so it don't slip out of the hole that's there. Miss Frida say these letters be our special secret. Me must keep my mistress's counsel.

Him don't press my silence, instead he nod and accept my secrecy. 'So, what's your name?'

'Me name? Them call me Obah . . . pardon me, sir, Orrinda.'

'Obah or Orrinda, which one is it?'

'Pardon, masser, them call me Orrinda, negroes call me Obah.'

'Er, sorry, what?'

'Begging pardon?'

'I can't believe you said that!'

'Sir? Me sorry if me spoke bad, me did mean to say niggers.' Him take a step back as if me have slap him and his pale face get more white, shaking him head from one side to the next as though him having a bad dream that him cannot wake from. There is a silence between us before him speak again but the colour stays drained from his face. His voice is soft when him finally open him mouth.

'I like Obah. Does it mean anything?'

Me eye move down to him hands, me must be sure him hands and my free tongue match up. Him fingers be playing soft with a branch, picking at the leaves, but me know that sassafras tree limb not strong enough to make a good whip. Me eye stay upon him white fingers, marvelling at them clean nails, everything about him seem shiny and unsullied, my opposite. A rustle behind him drag me eye away to the tamarind branch where a hummingbird sit, watching us converse, green neck cocked curious at this exchange.

Me know who named me, and me know what it mean too. But can me trust this stranger? Can me tell him my truth? Me can hear Nita's voice telling me to hush me mouth, but me no listen.

'I be given that name from my own mother, before she leave,' me say, pride walking in my voice. 'But Miss Frida, she give me Orrinda.'

'Your own mother?' him say, questioning if he hear me right.

'Yes, sir.' Me courage is all at the front of me chest as me speak what is true. 'Me mother, she come from Africa, the Guinea coast. Me don't remember her face good, but Nita say me face be hers anyway. She have one pickney before me but him die before him can take a breath and Nita say, when she pull me out and me mother see me breathing, she give me my name. It mean, "she have come".'

'She have come.' Him pause, thinking on something in him mind. 'I'm Jacob. That's my name.'

Me hear the kick in his voice, and me look hard on him, my new half-white, half-duppy shadow. In that moment, the voice, the clothes, the softness of him; me legs feel like them be sinking down into earth and darkness. Like him burying me dead with him.

Me must get back to the Big House. Miss Frida will be wanting this letter and me have chores calling for me too, there be yams to peel, the yard to sweep, and me must tend to the pickney hunger. Aunty Nita gon' bite my ear when she see me come. But, somehow, even though trouble be waiting, there be a pull keeping me here that's just as strong. This half-dead Jacob may be bearing a peril I can't see, but me think, if him feeling to beat me, him would have done it already. White men can't resist a whipping, them not like dogs who can bury a bone and keep it for later, them bite when them hungry.

'You no come from Barbados, sir?'

Him eyes widen. 'Barbados? Is that, this? Wow . . .'

'And, you not gon' hurt me?'

'Why would I want to hurt you?'

'Why?' I ask him back and we stand staring at each other. Me is blinking at his question and him stand blinking back. Me have me confirmation. Him is most suredly a duppy from the dead.

'The thing is – I'm not really from around here.'

'Sir, me know it.' I curtsy to him low, keeping my head down as I speak more. 'Me happy not to be beaten, but still, I is sorry you dead. You seem young to die. Was it a fever that did take you?' My tremble has lessen, now that I have say out loud what I know, I feel the release of all my fear. Me do not fear this ghost. Me will go ahead and tell him about me mother. Duppies only stay for three days before them have to leave earth, me know that from Mimbah. Maybe that's why me tongue go so loose with him.

Jacob blink at me and leave a silence in the air. So I tell him what happen. 'Them say she run off. Them say she did make it to Haiti, where the negro can live free. Either way, she be gone ten year now and them never find her.'

'Your mother?'

Me nod me head. 'Me think she get away. Me think, she push herself into a ship, in a hogshead bound for Haiti, Nita did tell me how she clever.'

His eyes is lowered, but me know them seeing me, them following my words. So me go on.

'Me never been beyond Unity. Me cannot picture what this Haiti do look like, but me know you must cross a big body of water to reach it. Apollo talk of freedom soon come for us negro, just as in Haiti. I was a small pickney when him did tell we what him overheard from Masser's own mouth,

how in England, them have stopped the slaving. Meaning them cannot bring more of we from Africa, massers must be making do with we on the plantation. When the time come, when freedom come, Mother will return and bring me to her home, because all should be free as she!'

Gasping, me finish. Me have never said this aloud before. And now him know me secret, I will know if him living or dead. Me lift up me head and look into him eye which brim with strange tears.

'Listen. Did I hear you right? Are you some kind of *slave*? Trapped here?'

'What else me could be? Me speak free with you on account of how you is a duppy-man.'

'What . . . what year is it?' Him hand have climb up to rub at him throat, once, twice.

'Year?'

Him exhale a breath hard and long. 'This is . . . wow . . . Okay, listen. Obah. You need to understand something, I don't know why I'm *here*. I'm not like the others you know, who live here with you on this . . . plantation. I'm from the future.'

The eye is earnest, the blue of it seem burning black at me with its sincerity.

'Me have never heard of any "future" – it near to Haiti?'

Jacob open him mouth, but before him speak, we both of us hear it. The angry rumble of the sky above us. Him tilt him face up at the sky and me can see it too, a tight fist in the air, rolling towards us like Mother Nature been beating at her rug. A storm soon come.

Him turn to me, pick up me hand and shake it, like one white gentleman to another. Him hand feel soft like the cloud above.

'This is so messed up. But I'm gonna fix this, okay? I need to go and get help.'

And as me blink, him gone. Him leave me standing, looking at me hand, wondering why me still can feel the warmth of him.