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Opening extract from  
**Far from Home**

Written by  
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*For my parents, Robert and Thembi McLaren,  
and all those fortunate enough to have experienced  
a Zimbabwean childhood*

JANETTA OTTER-BARRY BOOKS

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# FAR FROM HOME



Na'ima B. Robert



**F**

FRANCES LINCOLN  
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

*A prince is a slave when far from his kingdom*  
*Shona proverb*

# **PART 1**

## **Tariro**

**Rhodesia, 1976**

*They killed Farai today. Killed him and stripped him, mutilating him so that even his own father would not recognise him. Then they took him to the nearest Protected Village and forced the villagers to come and look at his broken, bleeding body.*

*“Look!” the white soldiers told the villagers who stood there, trying to avert their eyes, trying to block out the stench and the deafening buzz of the flies, murmuring silent prayers. “This is how the so-called ‘freedom fighters’ punish those who do not do as they say. And they will do this to you if you allow them to camp here, if you feed them, if you don’t tell us when they are coming. We are here to*

*protect peace-loving people like you from these terrorists. Choose peace, not death."*

*It could so easily have been me. Farai and I were fighting the same war, fighting for the same dream: to take back the land. To go home again.*

*I miss my home, even now, years after we first left.*

*When I close my eyes, I can still see everything clearly, etched forever in my mind. The circular, mud house with the thatched roof where I used to sleep; the great tree in the middle of the homestead where Sekuru used to tell us stories of children taken away by witches, riding on the backs of hyenas; the fields of maize and the herds of sharp-horned cattle; the granite-topped mountains; the upside-down baobab tree; the endless sky, heavy with hopeful clouds at the start of the rainy season.*

*There is no time to look for rain-clouds here. There is no point. Now we live to die, not to sow seeds and help cows give birth to calves that will one day pay roora, bride wealth, for daughters yet to come. Now my home is the bush and my family is my comrades. We, the freedom fighters.*

*My bed changes every night as we follow the signs left for us by the savannah. Some days nothing happens, other days, like today, blood is spilled and my heart cannot stop*

*flooding with terror. But I am strong, like my mother, and I cry my tears on the inside. I will mourn my brother, Farai, on the inside.*

*Will I ever see my home again? I do not know.*

*Will I ever see my father again? I do not know.*

*Will life ever be the same again? I do not know.*

*But it comforts me, comforts me and pains me, to think of how it came to this, how I came to call the bush my home.*

*So I will think of it now; I will remember everything that happened and try to comfort myself. And ease the pain of exile under this unfamiliar sky.*

Rhodesia, 1964

# 1

## The baobab's daughter

Many, many years ago, my forefathers came to this place, this place the whites now call Fort Victoria. They liked what they saw: the vast lands, the abundant trees, enough to build many homesteads, and the rains that came like a welcome visitor every year.

'This is a good place,' they thought. 'This is a place to put down roots.'

So they did. They cut down trees to clear the grass for fields, fields of maize and beans and peanuts, and grazing for cattle. They cut the trees into many pieces and used them to build: homes for their families, homes for their cattle, homes for their dreams of a harvest to come.

This is the land our ancestors left for us. This is how we came to call this land our home.

I am Tariro, daughter of the soil. My people are the Karanga people, our totem is *mhondoro*, the lion,

and, in the year I turned fourteen, my father was the chief of our people.

My mother, Amai, loved to tell me about when I was born.

"Tariro, *mwanangu*, my child," she would begin, smiling. "I will always remember the day of your birth. It was the final days of my third pregnancy. I walked like an old woman because my joints were loose and ready for the birth. But I still went to my fields to hoe because it was planting season. All through the pregnancy, I craved the fruit of the baobab tree – those sour, powdery seeds that the elephants love so much. So I would walk to the baobab tree on the other side of the fields and, sometimes, I was fortunate enough to find that the elephants had left me some of the fruits.

"On that day I had finished my hoeing early, so I decided to go and find some of the baobab fruit. It was when I finally got to the baobab tree that the pains began. I leaned on the trunk of the tree, breathing, trying not to cry out. But the pain was so intense, I couldn't walk. I tried crawling for help, but the dry grass and stones cut my knees. I decided to go and shelter by the trunk of the tree and wait for someone to find me. But then I started to feel the baby coming, just like that! So I said to myself, MaiFarai, you will

have to give birth to this baby on your own. Isn't that what our mothers used to do? And I did, Tariro. I gave birth to you all by myself, right there at the foot of the baobab tree. Your father found us there and called for the *muchingi*, the midwife. She couldn't believe it when she saw us!"

"Then what happened, Amai?" I asked.

"They took me home to my house and made me rest for many days. Your father was very worried about me. But I had never felt better! I had a daughter, a daughter I had prayed for, and I felt different somehow, changed. Giving birth to you made me know my own strength. I will always be grateful for that. My Tariro..." Then she would smile again, tears in her eyes, stroking my head.

As a baby, I spent the days on my mother's back, tied close to her, following her every movement as she pounded the dried maize to make maize-meal, the thick porridge that was my father's favourite dish. I went with her as she tended her crops, as she carried water from the river. I grew to know her smell, her voice, to know when she was happy, to sense when she was sad. Our hearts beat in time.

When at last I came down from Amai's back and began to walk, barefoot, my skinny legs poking out

from under one of my brother's old shirts, I began to explore the world outside Amai's house. I spent my days wandering the homestead, playing in the grass with my brothers, looking for seed pods, discovering anthills and dung beetles, getting to know the calls of the birds. I played the games that little girls play and sang the songs that children sing.

And, while I amused myself, Amai carried another baby in her womb. After that one, Amai gave birth to four more children, my brothers and sisters. All the boys lived, but we buried the two little girls. Amai wept for her lost babies and she held me closer to her after that, fearful that she would lose me too.

I always thought that Amai had a special place in her heart, just for me. Maybe she held on to me because she never could hold those two little girls that the ancestors wanted for themselves.