

PART I



before: the found child

# CHAPTER I

## i

**L**ong ago, when teachers were sent from Britain to teach in the grammar schools of the West Indian colonies (it was Great Britain then, not Little England, as it is now, after Brexit and the fall of empire), there lived in Jamaica, near a town called Oracabessa-on-Sea, a poor fisherman and his wife, who was a farmer and a seamstress, and one morning they found a pale child in bushes in a basket made of reeds. The man's name was Noah Fisher, and his wife's name was Rachel.

They adopted the child and named him Moshe, which is to say, Moses, which in translation means "drawn out," and they named him in this way because Rachel was a Yahwehist, and because the bushes in which they found him were a tangle of sea grapes running low as a reed bed along the ground on cliffs above the sea, and when she found him (for it was she who first saw the child) the spray from below had made a pool around the basket so that in another few moments it would have sailed. Which is to say that in a manner of speaking, the little boy was indeed drawn out of water.

The grandmother, a longheaded woman of the countryside, tells me, "Yu nuh need fi go deh so," you do not need this long explanation of watery origins, since the ancestors of every Jamaican came over the sea, most of them in the ship's cakka, and moreover are we not an island, surrounded by water? So anyone born and found here is a child of water, and no more to be said.

But this child that was found did not look like anyone who came over in the holds of ships three hundred years ago, so it is important to give all the details of his name and how he was found.

The morning on which this happened was not unusual in the pattern of Noah's and Rachel's lives. It was a Friday, the day when they joined the long lines of sick and ailing from the town and its surrounding districts, who traveled to the parish's one hospital, mostly on foot, to get treatment for their ailments and wounds. The lines included women pregnant with their first, second, third, sometimes tenth, eleventh, or even twelfth child. It included men with machete chops all over their bodies from plantation disputes, children bent in the shape of safety pins from hookworm, young ones with yaws, whooping cough, measles, or mumps—the usual maladies of childhood in those times and in that place—and many young and old suffering from heart failure, blocked tube, hernia, unresponsive male organ, underresponsive female organ, testicular edema, old fresh cold, virulent fresh cold, consumption, out-of-control blood pressure, and various disorders from the surfeit or indigestion of sugar.

The extent and variety of ailments from saccharine indigestion on the island were both miraculous and unsurprising. In case this is unknown to you, Jamaica from its infancy had been a sugarcane plantation, where people perforce ate a lot of sugar or its byproducts and leftovers. Sugar in the boiling houses made the slaves drunk, the great vats of it with its liquorish smell when it was in the making, and when it was made, the shining crystals scooped into vast kegs for shipping to England, the mother country. The grains clung to their skins and got into their eyes and ears and even their secret parts—their vulvae and their scrotums—and that was the reason some could not have children, the grandmother said.

After the long cruel hours in the canepiece, being bitten by cane rat, sugar snake, overseer whip, hot sun, and cane leaf, when they went back to their slave cabins at night there was sometimes nothing to eat but sugar, but they could not eat it without becoming sick, or rather, more sick, since they were already sick in the beginning from too much consanguinity with its sweet stickiness. This is why it became a saying in Jamaica, *Is one of two tings going tek yu—if is not*

*sugar, is heart failure.* (Which might boil down to the same thing, for heart failure comes from eating too much salt—salt for healing, for taste, even in your tea, salt for feeling balanced, salt for good luck, throw it behind you, salt for counteracting obeah and the ill effects of sugar. In Jamaica once upon a time and maybe still now, we ate salt like sugar. Against sugar. So it still goes back to King Sugar.)

Noah Fisher, a quiet man except when he was aggrieved, had his own views as to how this alchemy of sickness took root. “Foolish Galatians. Oonu don’t know seh sugar be di one ting black people cyaan eat wid hinpunity,” sugar is the one thing that black people cannot eat without a confrontation with destiny.

He would say this rudely in the clinic, from anger that he could not (it seemed) be rid of this history that was lodged in his flesh, and because he wanted to infuriate the nurses. These women, whom he hated for their demeanor of superiority, were among the few humans who could make Noah wax almost loquacious. In the clinic he cursed like a warner, telling strings of proverbs, but profanely—not in the holy-holy language that warners used. “Ole idiot tink dem better than people, just because dem carry out shitpan fi pay while poor people carry it out fi free. Monkey rise high, expose him raw backside. Ole ooman swear fi nyam callaloo, callaloo swear fi wuk him effing gut.” A climbing monkey exposes the secrets of his behind. You have ingested your own destruction and thought it a gift. And how could it be otherwise? Can a person eat his own flesh? Not with impunity, not scots-free. You will see this in the annals of the sugar plantations, how it was that the bright brown crystals came about, how bone and blood got mixed in the métissage, tips of fingers, sometimes knuckles, and even whole arms bitten off by the great machines. The crystals at first wine-dark in blood, then soakaway to brown when the crushers smoothed them out.

This was not a history that Noah knew in its fine details, but his spirit apprehended it, and so his signature phrase of contempt, “Foolish Galatians, fool nuh jackass arse,” was loaded with salient meaning. Their imaginations steeped in the hattaclaptic language of the King James version, even the illiterate people of those days understood that to be a Galatian was to suffer a lack of historical memory.

Noah was among the patients sick by sugar. He had on the inside of his right thigh a long-running diabetic sore that had to be hospital-dressed every Friday morning, though after many years of dressing it still had not healed. Rachel accompanied him on these trips to the hospital because he could not read or write, but she could, and sometimes there were papers that he was required to read and sign.

Some people depended on the hospital clerk to write on their behalf, *Donovan Bright, his mark*, or *Mattie Longbridge, her mark*, or whatever their names were, their mark, and the hospital clerk would show them where to make an X on the line above this declaration. But some felt ashamed, even though many of them were in this category, illiterates who depended on others to write for them, and so, when they could, they brought their reading and writing relatives along, so that they would not have to depend on strangers to sign their names in good cursive on the correct line.

When the waiting lines were long and Rachel knew it would take some time for Noah to be attended to, or when he was misbehaving in the clinic, she went outside, around to the back of the building, to catch a breath of air. This particular morning she needed air more than ever, because she and Noah had quarreled, which meant it was one of those mornings when she hated him with a hatred that made her feel she was suffocating. Their quarrels were frequent, and grew more and more bitter as they discovered they could not have children, and Rachel felt in her heart that Noah did not renounce or protect her from the district's belief that if there was no child, it was the wife who was barren. Noah's rage, meeting her accusation, was simple: "Woman, yu tink me is God? If yu womb shet up, I can mek pickney out of the dust of the ground? Awright, mek one an call him Adam!"

She swear to God she going lef him this morning.

The hospital was perched above rocks rising three hundred feet above the sea. Boisterous waves leaped against the cliff face, scattering seaweed and stray fish. The fountains made a barking sound, like the cry of lost dogs, all along the coastline.

Rachel stood in the line of the spray and let it drench her from head to toe in a coldness that was a balm to her senses. She lifted

her face and drew the raw air deep into her lungs. The taste on her tongue was the taste of the sea's travels in places she had discovered in her imagination, places as real as if she had landed on their beaches unhindered and planted a flag.

She unwrapped her tie-head, a striped cotton cloth, and casting it on the ground shook her plaits free, letting the wind and spray wash through them. Her dress was a thin, cheap chiffon; the spray wet it through quickly and exposed all her curves: her high thick breasts that were full from never having suckled a child; her rounded buttocks, the buttocks of an African woman though Rachel was part Indian; her belly which had the slight protrusion seen in women who had given birth or women who did a lot of manual labor on a diet of heavy starches, yam, breadfruit, and cassava. She was tall and beautiful, with muscled thighs and legs. She carried water in tin buckets on her head, long distances along shale hills to water her one-acre farm after the first plantings when there was no rain, and so her neck was long and always upraised and her back straight, like royalty.

From where she stood on the cliff she could see a straight line to the high school. The main building, flanked by several smaller ones, was a pile of sepia-toned brick, two-storied, raggedly torn between Georgian and neo-Gothic styles. To a fanciful viewer who knew the island's history, it would seem the architect had wavered between the construction plans given to him by the British colonial government and the desires of the French refugee who in 1776 had bequeathed his money to establish the school; a free school, he said, for the children of plantation owners in the colony that had shown him kindness so far away from home.

No such architectural struggle had taken place in actuality. The original building, housing the main classrooms, had been a barracks that served England during the colonial wars with Spain; the adjoining mess hall and armory had been converted into the school refectory and library. But the impression of architectural clash and uneasy cohabitation of styles was symbolic, in the way all colonial promiscuity is symbolic.

In the year 1958, when Rachel Fisher stood on the bluff, the school was 182 years old. Many things had changed, though more had re-

mained the same. The population of backra children had given way to brown; increasingly, brown had become variegated with black, so that the majority of the students now were the children of the aspiring poor, the posterity of slaves. The old buildings were circled by a sprawl of new ones. The tallest was the science building, its concrete and steel a sharp contrast to the anomalous brick of the older structures. Its presence marked the turn of a different age and the oddity of the school, which was coeducational, unusual for high schools in those days, and liberal, with girls permitted to study the sciences and less academic boys sent to do typing. This was because no church was attached; the school had been a secular endowment, outside the control of missionaries.

Behind the school was the eighteenth-century fort named for the consort of a mad king, Fort Charlotte, its walls pitted with portholes and crenellations from which black-mouthed cannon gaped seaward, relics of wars fought over the island by people who were not the people who lived there now, over interests that had nothing to do with the interest of the people whose country it would officially become in another four years.

The fort was joined to the school by the undersea caves above which Rachel now stood. It was these caverns that gave the waves their barking sound as they beat up against the cliff. Adventurous children exploring the coastline had found ancient skeletons in some of them, and Rachel had heard rumors of wicked acts that still took place inside their entrances, where the water was only ankle deep at certain times of day and anyone, child, man, or ghost, could go a short way inside without having to swim, levitate, or drown. Because of the terrible things that were said to happen to girl schoolchildren there, Rachel's father had refused to send her to that school, though she was bright and the head teacher beseeched him not to abandon her schooling after she finished elementary.

Her father's adamant refusal broke her spirit. All her life she had wanted to go to high school and later become a nurse or teacher or civil servant. It was what you did if you were bright and black and poor and managed against all odds to get a postelementary education. In the end she apprenticed as a seamstress and married Noah,

thinking that her children might go to this school in her stead. But that hope died too. Now, looking out toward the huddle of old and new buildings against the seascape, she remembered the stories she had heard.

*A some terrible tings happen to people galpickni in dere. Dreadful tings di white man-dem do to people young girlchilids.*

The echoes of such stories merged with her own bitterness.

“Sometime Ah wish di earth cooda open up an tek mi in,” Rachel found herself murmuring, her voice low yet intense against the wind. “Sometime Ah feel Ah cooda lef dis man, lef dis dutty stinkin place, jus walk out inna di sea an never come back. If di wave tek mi, it tek mi. Woulda mercy. I dwell in di midst of a dogheart dutty set, jus a-wear mi down, wear mi down. Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not want, yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall not fear no evil. Only Yahweh keepeth me. But Ah nah lie yu, sometime Ah feel fi cuss a whole set a . . .” (An you know, she really cuss the badword, but she is the same one who wash out my mouth years later with soap and water for cussing blue, so even now I find it hard to put down on paper the words that come out of Rachel Fisher’s mouth that day.)

Lost inside her quiet scream, it was a while before Rachel was able to discern the sound of the child’s crying above the tumult. A high wail, and then an insistent shrieking in short sharp bursts, it broke through the surface of her mind and pushed her toward the clump of sea grape trees that lay tangled among the macca. Strange-looking trees. Instead of standing tall against the wind as sea grapes normally do, they lay low hugging the ground. They were several yards from the hospital building. The knotty trail they made among the macca was difficult to walk through. Nobody walked there. If a person wanted to urinate or make quick furtive love they stayed close against the side of the clinic, where the ground was smooth and baked. Only children hankering to eat the rich purple fruit that covered the branches in August ever went among the sea grapes.

But that was where the sound was coming from.

Rachel followed the cries until she caught sight of bright red cloth among the tangle. With sea spray in her eyes she thought at first



there was a woman crouched on the ground. The woman, in a blue cambric dress, was shushing her baby as she struggled with one hand to release her breast to put in the baby's mouth, while with the other she hoisted up her skirt to piss.

Then Rachel's vision cleared and she saw that no woman except herself was there. She saw the basket with the baby's tiny legs kicking above the piece of scarlet cotton that had been tucked around him on both sides. She saw the milk-blue skin exposing the tracery of veins; the wisps of snow hair that later resolved itself into the famous two-toned bush, wild blond in front and jet black behind; the old man's wrinkled cheek that all newborns have, red with pain and rage as he screamed.

The left side of his face was hidden against the padding in the basket, which was in danger of stifling him. From his size and the timbre of his crying, Rachel, who had helped her mother raise eight children, could tell at once that the child was newborn. The basket had been padded with great care, it seemed in a pitiful effort to make him comfortable; it even had a bonnet-shaped canopy to shield him from the sun. But it had not shielded him from the line of black ants that were crawling over him and causing his cries.

Rachel ran the last few steps. Frantically she began brushing off the ants in the same motion with which she lifted the child out of the makeshift cradle. With savage instinct the baby snuffled against her breast, searching for the promise of comfort he was programmed to recognize before he even left the womb. He had been dressed in a small girl's bloomers and what looked like torn-off pieces of a red sheet, as though no preparation had been made for his birth. Swaddling cloths, Rachel thought, as the wide waistband of the panties shifted and she saw he was a boy.

The ants had begun to eat his foot, but even that pain had faded in the greater pain of his hunger as he snuffled for food. Not finding where to suckle, he began screaming again. Rachel rocked her body to and fro to quiet him, while turning the little face toward her, to see further what manner of child this could be.

What she saw of the rest of the face made her hide it in pity in her shawl.

There are moments in life when something, some object or vision or encounter, moves a person in the heart with such force that the future, that is to say one's way of looking at it, is changed forever. No course of action presents itself, and so, without condition, the heart surrenders; something irrevocable gives over. Such is the irresistible arrest. In the unique recognition of helplessness, the knowledge that there is nothing in the universe that could ever be done, no sphere of influence within which one has the power to act, we reach blindly for the familiar. For Rachel, the Yahwehist, when she saw the child's indescribable face, this was such a moment. (This she told me many years later, when she saw I finally understood that I had no power over him.)

And Rachel Fisher, a cursing woman in whom faith had the force of superstition, kneeled down on the ground there with the found child in her arms, and prayed.

The baby fell quiet. When she got up off her knees and looked at his face again, she smiled, a slow, astounded, beatific smile, and decided to say nothing to anyone about what had happened in that translucent moment when it became clear that she and the found child had been lifted, for an uncountable moment, out of time.

"Moses," she whispered. "Moshe." And again, "Moshe."

Then she added, as if in defiance of some objecting voice that only she heard, "Yu name Moshe, because I draw yu out of di water." As you can see, this account of how she found him was not accurate, but it was Rachel's account, the one that was told throughout Moshe's early life.

Rachel went back inside the hospital, entering from the front, an erect young woman with her hair demurely wrapped in a tie-head and her nylon dress that had got soaked through in the flying spray now chip-dry, floating softly around her hips. With the child cradled in the crook of her left arm, the basket in which she had found him hanging from the other, she was what she seemed: a decent woman, a real woman now, carrying her newborn child.

**N**ews of the find spread like wildfire and people came to look and marvel. For a town like Ora (the short name for Oracabessa-on-Sea) and a district like Tumela Gut, where the Fishers lived, the baby's parentage was never in question.

No one doubted that he was the product of serial fornications between one or other of the nubile black girlchildren who attended the high school, and one or other of the white man-teachers from Britain, married or unmarried, who did the "bad things" (tek wife from the barely fill-out girlchilids) in the undersea caves and hotel rooms on school trips for which certain girls were selected. Nobody ever claimed the child, and no girl was discovered to have been recently pregnant, though police investigations were carried out. After a while rumor went underground, though people did not forget, and so Moshe Fisher might have grown up in a normal way if his lineage had been the only abnormality about him.

But it wasn't. For one thing, there was the fact that he didn't look like his adopted parents. Rachel was part Indian, and fair, while Noah was pure African and very black of skin. For another, even in a society bred in mixture and anomaly, the child was not any color or physiognomy that allowed anyone to say what he was.

Moreover, his mother was Rachel Fisher, who was a staunch Yahwehist, a true believer. There was no Yahweh church in Jamaica at the time and there probably isn't now, but Rachel got her religion the way many poor people at the time got their reading material (*Reader's Digest*) and overseas education (Durham College correspondence courses)—by cutting out coupons from the *Daily Gleaner*

and mailing them to addresses in England or Scotland or America, receiving in return unconscionable masses of pamphlets and other small literature.

According to Rachel's understanding, an understanding which like all understandings of foreign goods in Jamaica was only a version of the original (the meaning change always began in the passage across the sea), the essence of Yahweh (the religion, not the god) was that the Christian Bible had distorted the truths of God by translation. The force of Yahweh consisted in returning to the Hebrew pronunciations of words.

As a retranslation, young Moshe was a virtual cache of symbols.

To begin with, Rachel and Noah's childlessness took after Noah's family, not Rachel's: the Fishers were known to be a mainly barren family who never produced in any of their branches more than two offspring, more often one, and sometimes none at all. In the district of Tumela Gut, this was the sign of a curse. So, quite apart from his prophetic name, his advent as a gift to the desperate couple who had no child of their own made Moshe not only the fulfillment of a hope and a dream, but a hope and dream that would break the curse of the father's line.

With characteristic superstition, his mother insisted on inscribing in his name the mark of fertility—the maternal line. He was Rachel's talisman of the future, a future in which her name would never be wiped out. So, above the objections of his father, she named him, in full, Moshe *Gid'on* Rachel-Fisher. "*Gid'on*" was the Hebrew spelling of Giddion, her family surname on her mother's side; the apostrophe was to be pronounced like a short *i* to produce the same sound as the family name. "*Rachel*," the first part of Moshe's hyphenated surname, was to be pronounced with a short *a* instead of the long *a* with which her own name was pronounced. That way it sounded less feminine. She did not want him to be teased at school. She had thought of including her father's last name, her maiden surname, Sharma, but could find no way of slotting it in without destroying the rhythm of the sentence which the name was becoming, unless she placed it before *Gid'on*, her mother's surname, which she was not prepared to do. In the end, her son's name was a whole sentence,

of which the meaning was, *Drawn out of water, he was a small axe, ready to cut you down, but in the end he brought the comfort of fish for the hungry*, 2 Kings 6: 5–6.

This you must understand, if you are to understand how Moshe grew up, and how he died: a strong believer in signs, kabbalah, and cryptograms, forms of meaning that traditional Yahwehists regard with suspicion because such meanings begin in folk talk, not written holy words, Rachel was the kind of person who studied the license plates of vehicles to discern patterns of meanings in the arrangement of the numbers. A license plate with *AM 5439*, for example, to her mind was meant to show the sequential relationship among 3, 4, and 5, the fact that 9 is a multiple of 3, that 5 plus 4 equals 9, and that 5 plus 3 equals 8, which immediately precedes 9. In other words, although the creator of the license number thought he or she was choosing the numbers at random, there was always an occult logic at work that caused them to fall into predestined patterns, a logic beyond human control or comprehension, and it was this same logic of the universe (which Rachel called faith) that had caused her to find this child when she thought she would have no daughter or son, and at the precise moment when she had determined in her heart to leave her husband.

By this logic, Moshe was predestined to become a superstitious man, following in the footsteps of his mother. Moreover, he was destined to remain so, because he traveled and lived in many places all over the world.

(I cannot say what Rachel made of the fact that she found Moshe four years before Jamaica's independence. The number 4 was not significant in any system of signs that she espoused.)

In addition to carrying the weight of new translations on his birth certificate, Moshe carried in his body outlandish signs of illegitimacy, the peculiar transgressions from which rumor had it he was made. Please understand. In that country illegitimate did not mean what it means to you, not born out of wedlock, which most of the people were, but born from terrible occasions that placed their mark on you. If you were born out of wedlock you were simply a bastard. Nearly everyone there was a bastard. Illegitimate was something else altogether. A curse.

With his pale skin, one sky-blue and one dark-brown eye, his hair long, wavy, and bleached blond in front, and short, black, and pepper-grainy in back, the kind of pepper-grainy that people called “bad hair,” or “nayga head,” the child seemed to represent some kind of perverse alchemy that had taken place in the deep earth, between tectonic plates, where he was fashioned. People said the boy just looked like sin. Big sin at work when he was made.

For why else had the crossing come out in him not as a judicious mixture of yellow-gold skin, in-between hair (“pretty hair”), and a singular eye color either black or brown or the two blended for hazel (“puss eye”), or even sea-green blue, which sometimes happened even in children with black skin, as it did in the boy Brendan, the Wells’s son from Tumela?

Furthermore, what a skin! The color of milk that had been watered, so pale and thin it gave off a sheen of translucent blue, like certain types of coral or small swimming fish, the kind we called gray angelfish, though they were not gray but grayish blue.

Only one of the male teachers from Britain who worked at the school had hair the color of Moshe’s bleached blond. His was the name that call, meaning that people whispered the child was his. He was a married man and had brought his wife to Jamaica with him, but he fooled around with the black little girls in the school. The pepper-grain hair was more commonly distributed—it could have come from any one of many of the schoolgirls, except that the owners of that type of hair were not in the group that frolicked with the white man-teachers. The white man-teachers preferred brown girls with long hair and black women’s bodies (breast, buttock, and hip), or very black girls who had hot-combed their hair to straight.

The mayor of Ora’s daughter was black as sin but with beautiful long tresses, almost as if she had been high brown. At first her name call too, as the mother who was unable to throw away the belly before the baby came and had thrown away the baby instead. (Some babies are stubborn, resisting all boil-bush, guzzu, enema, heavy load, jump-up, exorbitant exercise, beat-belly-wid-bat, and other efforts to dislodge them from the womb.) But rumor stuttered somewhat on that score because of the mayor’s daughter’s hair, which had nothing

pepper-grain about it, and then rumor zipped its mouth, *prrrrrrrps!*, because the noise of it came to the mayor's ears just as he was about to give out Christmas work on the roads, and Christmas work came by favors. You didn't badmouth the mayor's daughter and hope to get on the list for Christmas work.

But as you can imagine, rumor didn't die, it only went underground for a while. Stumped momentarily by the problem of hair and the advent of Christmas, rumor would surface again in the coming years and go on its way, loquacious, malicious, and unrelenting, without any sense of trespass, and without any self-doubt at all. The clairvoyance of the poor regarding the secrets of their betters is fundamentally secure, and confident. But it (rumor) would start to kill Moshe, though it also started to set him free.

Skin. Hair. Eyes. Enigmas. Only in Moshe's infant face was there no equivocation. It was, uncompromisingly, a nigger face.

But what people did not know, even the most clairvoyant, was the face that Rachel saw the first time she picked up her son. This was something that she pondered in her heart, and kept secret, even from her own husband, until the day of her death.

It had not been a nigger face.



here is only one other thing I need to tell you before the story begins.

The day Moshe was found was my first birthday. It isn't that I am superstitious. I am not; I am no Rachel Fisher, but experience teaches you to read itself, and somehow that coincidence, that we were born on the same day though one year apart, seemed a sign of everything that was to come, the way we belonged to each other and the way we kept missing and missing and missing each other, in one-step two-step, one step at a time. When he died, I was almost not even there, and we had been together all our lives.

I returned and found him slipping into sleep, the day after I lost my fear of him leaving me for America. Only it wasn't the sleep you wake up from, but the long one where you say goodbye.





ne last last thing. In parentheses.

You see that thing I tell you about how people say Moshe came to be born? I have to tell you that though what happened to Moshe touched me near and deep because I was his twin, not witness and bystander to his life, I cannot shake the feeling that the thing affect not just me or others like me who it touch that close and personal, but all of us—all of us get deeply affected. I mean to say I believe none of us who went to that school ever recovered from this practice of big man abusing little girl. None of us, even those who were only witness and bystander to that particular wickedness.

I feel it have a whole heap to do with how Mosh turn out in the end, meaning how it turn out in the end between him and me, why we never did anything that gave us children together. I feel that maybe if something in me never damage by it (even the rumor of it), I could have approached him more bold. But maybe deep down I have a shame or a terror that is more than the shame and the terror I absorb from him because of his mother—I mean not his mother Rachel but his birth mother. Maybe is the shame and terror of girlness in the face of that unspeakable initiation of the body, so premature and so soon. Maybe is this denuding that happen in a girl's body before its secrets reveal even to itself or its owner, that put what Rachel call my dutty willfulness at bay, and I just follow-backa that terror instead of pushing forward and taking the lead the way I used to do in everything else with him.

They say a parent or grandparent and maybe even a far ancestor can eat sour grape or wet sugar, and as a result, pickni who come long after, their teeth set on edge.

# interval

One more last thing. (Forgive: I am losing brain cells, and moreover I am afflicted with the affliction of the people who come from where I was born, the habit of everlasting and divaricate endings, whether in bearing record or saying goodbye. It is the fear of departure, the final line. A fear that belongs only to people whose history began in death.)

So. This last last is about Tumela Gut, the district where Moshe was grown. To get there you traveled west five miles on foot from Ora-on-Sea, passing through another district named Jericho. Veering east at Fus Stick (First Stick—Elgin Town on the map, which was the first place where a freed slave planted his boundary line, sticking the center pole in the ground), and cutting through bushes at Mosquito Cove on the Montego Bay Road, you could shorten your journey by half. This was the route Tumela people took to catch the Morning Star bus or the Years of Jubilee bus to Montego Bay, or the Blue Danube to Kingston. (Yes, buses were named like that, for far-away places in the east of Europe, or Palestine, or even the heavens, though most of the people had never traveled beyond the circumference of their dreams, and those who had, had gone no farther than England or Panama or North America, not so very far away at all.)

Tumela, a place that was frightening to people in other districts far and near. Sometimes, especially at night, it was frightening to Moshe and me.

Tumela was then one of five districts that bordered each other. The others were Jericho that I told you of, Mount Peace, Georgia, and Cascade. To a stranger looking on from the outside, especially one who was not from our part of the world, the five districts were

uniformly beautiful, the kinds of places that are called paradise. Lush hills stretched in every direction, and if you stood on any of them, you saw the deep blue sweep of the Caribbean Sea, which changed colors like a chameleon in certain lights and times of day.

A few people in these districts lived in wall houses (that is to say, houses built from concrete and steel). One or two had houses two stories high. Most, however, lived in small board houses (that is to say, houses of one or two or three or four rooms, and dressed or undressed wood) with fretwork eaves made by the skilled carpenters of Tumela and Mount Peace. Regardless of the size or modesty of the house, the eaves were always extravagant and beautiful.

Yet there were still some people, the desperate poor, who lived in houses made of bamboo wattles fortified with marl or papered inside with pages torn from magazines that had come in parcels of clothes from relatives in England or North America. Sometimes these houses had no floors. That kind of house has died out now, and it seems strange to imagine that such a house could have existed so long into the twentieth century, but that was the way it was, long ago, when we were growing up, Moshe and me. I suppose, in a way, such houses were beautiful, meaning picturesque.

If you, a stranger, were searching for a word to describe these five districts, picturesque would easily come to mind. All the districts were picturesque, like places drawn in a book to entice children to read; green, bright, and lush with their tiny hillside farms, sun-drenched valleys, and sugarcane fields. Paradise, you would think, arriving in these districts which were so bright and green that your eyes hurt, if you were a stranger coming fresh to these parts from somewhere that was not our part of the world. And your eyes, blinded by their brightness, would fool you into thinking that this beauty was all that there was and you wouldn't know that each district was, in its different way, a place of terrors, which you could escape or endure only if you knew its spells and counterspells for redemption or retaliate.

If an outside person threatened to fight or work obeah on a Tumela person, the counterspell was easy as pie. "You know where I come from? I come from Tumela Gut, where pot boil up without fire." That

was enough to make the challenger run away, hurrying slow on his dignity until he was out of sight, then taking to his heels like the wind.

This is because it was true. There was a place in Tumela where pots boiled without any fire beneath. The longheaded grandmother, Mama Mai, described how many years ago a colony from the days of slavery had taken up residence near the center of the village, at the end of the long grassy slope below the elementary school, just behind the ceiba cotton tree above the red river. This river was called Raiding. (There was another river, Foster-Reach, where women went to wash clothes.) Was there a raiding that took place there? A hunt for runaway slaves? I do not know. I have wondered if that river was meant to be called Riding, perhaps Tumela Riding, after the West Riding and the East Riding in Yorkshire, England, since so many places were named after other places in England, until the people pronounced them in their own language, and then they became something else again—but I do not truly know.

The duppies were a known nuisance. They spent their days, but especially their nights, quarreling in thin voices and cooking insatiable meals in three-footed Dutch pots that roiled and bubbled on unseen fires, disturbing the peace. The meals, we knew, were meant to be seductive. The aromas they emitted were not so much inhaled as insidiously imbibed, through the mind and the pores of the skin, so that anyone who was unlucky enough to pass by while the colony was cooking was haunted by dreams of a feast in paradise, and bright red pustules rose on the surface of their skin and broke to release a liquid that ran down sometimes like boiling sugar and sometimes with a vague presentiment of crab soup.

As children, we (not just Moshe and me but the collective children of Tumela Gut) were afraid of this place, and if our mothers sent us to the shop in the twilight, we wept and begged not to go. Running past, we heard the wind in our clothes, sometimes the ghosts laughing or singing, but to us it was all one: we heard only the sound of terror.

I often wondered if they ever ate their own meals, or cooked only to entice us. It seemed to me that they were love-starved, and hungered for something more than memory—this kind of aggressive solicitation through food could only mean a desire for the attention

of living hearts, above bare remembrance. But children avoided them like the plague. Though Moshe and I were twins, and identical, we had this difference, that I never reconciled to their dwelling among us, but Moshe had a natural affinity with ghosts. He thought they had a right to live, and if they chose to do it among us, right there, then why not?

The name Tumela Gut still disturbs my head. A lot of places in those days were surnamed Gut, and you will still find most of them on the map. Stony Gut in St. Thomas, where Paul Bogle rebelled against the British in 1865, Starve Gut Bay in St. Elizabeth, where people must have suffered unbelievable hunger, and Running Gut, another name for running belly, or diarrhea, that might have been caused from hunger, or from eating too much too fast after a period of starvation, or from eating food that was spoiled, or even, in babies, drinking, instead of milk, sugar water. This Running Gut was in the parish of St. James, Gut River was to be found in Manchester, which was said to have no rivers, and Tumela Gut in Hanover parish, near to Oracabessa-on-Sea.

Most of these are names of hardship, except for Gut River, which some foreigner on the Internet has written was a name given to the river by a German (was he a visiting German or a German from German Town, Westmoreland, which we pronounce *Jahman*?—he does not say; he probably does not know). According to this foreigner, who might himself be a German, “Gut” means “good” in German and the man who named the river gave it this name because he thought it was a good river, but I think that is not true, I think it is a place where people were gutted, impaled on iron, just as there are rivers all over the Caribbean named Massacre, because people were massacred in slavery there.

I guess at these names, how they came about, and I think my guess about most of them is probably the truth. But I still wonder what or who Tumela was. I suspect she was a woman of strong and secret powers. For years I tried to find out more, but could discover nothing in the archives in Kingston, and not even the longheaded grandmother remembers. Through many searches I came upon a book that mentioned a Tswana word, “Tumelo,” meaning “faith,” and I did

wonder if Tumela was Tumelo and people had come to Jamaica from southern Africa—Botswana or Lesotho, not just West Africa after all, because Tswana is a language spoken in the south. I rather like the thought of a woman named Tumela. A dangerous, unfathomable woman, our very own Nanny of the Maroons, one who belonged altogether to us, we one. Miss Tumela Riding, in tall black boots and her skirts hitched up to ford a red river, her hair the same wild hemp as her riding crop. Skuy! Hiya! Di image seduce mi.

And Rachel had said no, the revenants' cooking is not a cry for love, not a sign of lack but a declaration that their God *Is*. The real God, 1 Kings 18:39, not the god of the ones who kill them with hot rod and old wuk, who done dead himself, can't see, speak, nor hear, nor stop from pursuing—check verse 10 plus 2 verses back, 10 fi perfection and 2 fi di two gods inna contest, si who win; the old duppy dem tallawah, that is all. And I was ready to believe her, even though she is the same one who would cuss them dutty raw and exorcize them rapid if they come into her house. Miss Tumela Riding, I decided early, was a woman whose God could see and speak and hear and stop Lucifer himself from pursuing, if she had a mind to it.

Tumela Gut was a different kind of place from Ora, which was a town and the parish capital. Ora had a cinema, a regatta, a country club, a hotel, a high school (where we went), a high church (meaning Church of England), bustling narrow streets, cars, blaring bus horns, the chakka-chakka noise of a thriving market town, a cache of white people (meaning people straight from England, not backra, not homegrown), and a tiny middle class with pretensions. Ora also had the sea, not as a distant shimmer but right there, beating low against the seawall that was almost level with the street along which we walked to school.

Yet some would say Ora wasn't all that different from Tumela, not that far from the canepiece or the bush, both running equally on rumor and gossip and a long history under the sway of King Sugar.

In one of his earliest drawings, when he was nine years old, just after we started going to the high school in Ora, Moshe drew the two of us standing with split faces, like moons on wane, half turned right, the other half left, at a signpost on a road saying *This way to*

*Oracabessa-on-Sea* on the right, *This way to Five Districts* on the left. We belonged to both places, as far as it was possible for either of us to belong anywhere (which was not very far), though he less than I.

Not until much later did it bother me that he had drawn our faces opposite to each other—where the right side of his face looked toward Ora, the left side of mine looked in the same direction; where the left side of his was toward the five districts, mine was toward Ora. Like images in a mirror, where you cannot get over to the other side where your reflection is.

But we were children of both places, Moshe and I, and like Ora and Tumela, completely opposite and yet like twins.

You can imagine it was hard growing up between this district and this town where every day he was mocked and admired for his skin—not so much skin but the absence of it (for his color was really because he was born before his skin was finished making); not so much admired if you are thinking of admired in the way that is meant by the twenty-two categories of words of approval that substitute for it in Mr. Roget's thesaurus, words like adore, appreciate, cherish, commemorate, delight in, distinguish, dote upon, honor, idolize, love, laud, venerate, worship, praise; not admired as in the four columns of ten synonyms under each of the twenty-two categories—but admired as in their antonyms: review, surveil, gaze, observe (keenly, as in pinning to the wall), eat up, size up, get down on, get high on, get off on, gaze, gawk, survey, put down as, price, put away. Assess, estimate, take the measure of, behold. Tag, typecast, inspect, peer at (but not see), wonder, look fixedly at in wonder.

Growing up under the crushing weight of this negative admiration, which sometimes became pity and even sometimes acclamation, almost like he was being hugged (as in “after all is said and done, him is one a wi”), he might have been able to bear all this—for cruelty and ambiguity were never an exception in our part of the world, but a rule—and even the daily surveyance, the intense look under the microscope, the two-faced giving of succor for the wounds so cruelly inflicted, he might have accepted as in their own way a kind of love.

But in the end, when he went away, it was not because of any of this but because of another trouble altogether, which made us inseparable.

arable and kept us apart. Yet I think the two things—his lack of skin and this other trouble—were one and the same, sides of the same basic coin. Judas silver.

It is only left to say that my part in all of this—to tell you what happened to us, in the way it happened—was always fated, though when we began, it was not only Moshe, but both of us, who could not speak.

It is totally fitting that we met and fell in love on our first day of school.