

Chapter 1

In the early morning he stands in the doorway of his hut and listens for the distant rumble. The cool air bears the earthy scent of promised rain. From the verandah above I can see the plume of red dust rising in the lorry's wake long before the man with the pickaxe who waits below me hears the engine. I am ten years old. It is July 30th 1974. I am watching a dust devil heading for my home. It writhes as it chases the driver around the rocky lanes, towering above the truck, forcing the vehicle away from the main routes, past the tumble of houses towards the edge of the precipice where we live. Now I can hear its roar begin, at first low and deep it rises to a shrieking cacophony. And suddenly, silence. The driver swings out of the cab down below. Behind him the devil slumps to the ground and waits.

I watch the driver speak briefly to the waiting man, who nods in return. The driver climbs back into his cab. The man with the pickaxe moves to within a few feet of his hut and gestures with his right hand. The driver manoeuvres his vehicle forward and back, until it is almost up against the shack. The massive hulk of the truck might easily crush the flimsy *panbody* of rusting corrugated iron, wooden slats and cardboard. The roof is held down with old tyres. Twelve people live in there, my step-mother tells me. I wonder if they are inside now, while all this is going on. Finally the driver pushes a lever and the load of rocks slides to the ground freeing a mighty dust devil which spins up above the heads of all of us: the mother devil.

When the truck is gone the man and I contemplate the mountain of rocks. He leans over and picks one up. In his hand it is about the size of a melon; the surface is pitted and full of holes and it looks like a red moon rock. He positions it with care upon the edge of a boulder protruding from the ground. Then he lifts his iron-handled pick and, with the practised grace of a tennis player about to serve an ace, he swings the tool in an arc up behind his back, over his shoulder and down, lunging at the heart of the rock. It shatters, pleasingly, into half a dozen pieces. He glances briefly up at me and nods, I wave back a small acknowledgment. Then he selects another rock and repeats the same, perfect action.

The plateau where he stands is just at the point where the level ground gives way to the steep sides of the valley. There are no more houses, just a dense, green mat of tangled vegetation crossed with narrow paths of bare, red earth leading to and from the stream on the valley bed. I am forbidden by my father to go anywhere near the water. Further up the valley a slaughterhouse built directly above the narrow channel pours effluent directly into it. The slaughterhouse attracts vultures, who wait out the time between meals on the roof of our house. I often do go down to the stream alone because I can't equate the joys of playing with the glittering, cool water with the invisible danger. Neither do the family in the *panbody* who carry water from the stream to wash their pots and cook their rice.

On the opposite side of the stream, halfway up the valley, stands a wooden shed. Empty by day it serves as an illicit drinking den at night where men and women from the Low Cost houses gather and drink *omole*, a twice distilled palm wine so strong, I'd been told, that it could rob a man of his sight. The fermented liquid had to be strained of dead flies

and live maggots before it was considered fit to drink. On the weekends the drinkers become revellers and turn up the music until it reverberates across the slopes and drowns the night time sounds. Every Friday night the clamour of the frog colonies at the water's edge, the night time serenades of stray dogs and the constant clatter of the crickets give way to the rhythms of Carl Douglas singing 'Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting' again and again, until the early hours of the morning.

In our house, we love it. We learn the words and improvise dance routines. My cousin Morlai scrunches his eyes into oriental slits, spins on his heels, kicks and punches the air. He is in his twenties and wears a slim fit, patterned purple nylon shirt and matching flares with patch pockets. The girls Esther and Musu, also our cousins, laugh as though they are fit to burst. Afterwards Morlai and Santigi (who is not our cousin but lives with us all the same) leave to go out on the town. As they leave we tease them from the same verandah I where I now. They take turns at wearing a pair of cheap sunglasses and disappear from view enfolded into the unblemished blackness of the night. In the morning there will be stories of bars and bravado.

Against the metronome of cracking rocks I can hear car horns and the *poda podas* on Kissy Bye Pass Road revving their engines as they prepare to take the workers into the city. High above the motors come the sing song sopranos of the boys who lean out of the back door to call the routes: "kiss-ssy, mountain cut, savagestreet, motor ro'ad." I can imagine the people pressing forward, cramming their bodies into every available space on board, the fetid odour, the heat. The latecomers climb onto the roof, or hang on the back step.

Poda podas: 'hither and thither' the words mean. Rival teams of minibuses, covered in painted slogans and boasting the names of their owners, flying through town all day long. From here they weave their way through the tight alleys of the East End into the downtown area, where the office workers drop down and disappear into a grid of low rise office blocks and old colonial government buildings. Some buses go up Circular Road and past the cemetery, beyond whose walls thick tropical climbers coil round the Gothic gravestones as though they'd like to drag them back into the very graves they mark.

Other *poda podas* inch their way around the massive trunk and soaring branches of the Cotton Tree, which appears on postcards and in calendars as the symbol of Freetown, home of the freed slaves, once but no more the Athens of Africa. The words are always written with capitals: The Cotton Tree. In between the massive roots the lepers sleep on, undisturbed under their makeshift awnings. The *poda podas* start up Independence Avenue but turn off half way up, before they reach State House, where the President rests in air conditioned rooms; across to Pademba Road they go and past the prison. At Savage Street the schoolchildren jump down and separate into shoals: royal blue follows royal blue, brown checks group together, green blazer and boaters drift into one.

On a free run down Savage Street the *poda podas* pass the brightly painted shutters and cottage gardens of the old Creole houses: little enclaves of Louisiana brought home to Africa. At Congo Cross passengers for the fishing villages at Juba and Goderich or those

going out to Lumley Beach and Aberdeen switch to transport headed in their direction. Next the buses ease up the hill to Wilberforce and Hill Station, where the view from the windows opens out onto the curved line of the hills of Freetown. At their base, lying like grounds in a broken coffee bowl is the city. Beyond that the sea. Up here, above the heat and the constant clamor, is where the British once lived in a line of looming, identical wooden houses built on stilts with covered balconies and latticed stairwells. Here they thought themselves safe above the rank, malarial air of Freetown. When enough of them had died in revenge they dubbed this whole region of West Africa ‘the white man’s grave.’

There was a time when we lived up here, too. The roads are lined with fruit trees: avocados, breadfruit, and mangoes hanging on loops like a woman’s emerald earrings. We children used to pick the mangoes green and eat them with salt, then roll around with bellyache. We stole the long seed pods from the Flamboyant tree and used them as rattles. Weeks later, when every pod had fallen, the tree burst into beautiful, fiery blossoms. There were the tamarind trees, *black tombla*. In the tamarind season every local child went their way holding onto branches of the tiny, dark fruit and sucking the sweet-sour sticky brown flesh from the smooth seeds. But that was nearly four years ago. Almost half my life time away.

Today from West to East above the city clouds slowly mass, crowding in between the hills. They drift above the trees on the slopes below Wilberforce and mingle with the fumes from factories and diesel exhausts above Kissy. They seek one another across the sky. They are waiting. Today rain is certain.

Last night it did not rain. I lay on my bed reading a book and outside the night was still. In the middle of the ceiling a naked sixty watt bulb glowed. Above me my mosquito net was draped over itself. A few insects were beginning to gather around the light, but it was still early, only a little after seven. Daylight had just departed. It would stay dark another twelve hours. This close to the Equator the days and nights are measured with precision. Long before bedtime Morlai would spray the room with repellent and leave a mosquito coil burning under my window.

My rubber flip flops had fallen off my feet onto the bare, stone floor at the end of the bed. I was lying on my stomach in shorts and T-shirt, lost in the lives of Gerald Durrell’s family and their anthropomorphic pets, when my brother’s head appeared at the door. His face was riven the excitement of one who knows and is about to tell: “Have you seen the man?” was all he asked.

Our house has two verandah’s. The one at the back, away from the road, overlooks the crevasse and is next to the kitchen. We reached it in moments. We ran along the corridor, skidded round the corner, raced through the living room, past the dining room table and out of the kitchen door. There were a number of people already out there and they were crowded around in a semi circle facing the other way from me. The span of their backs blocked my view. People were talking in low voices. I edged around the outside of the group.

A man sat almost motionless on one of the hard backed chairs. His face was damp, great globes of sweat hung on his forehead, his head and eyes rolled slightly backward. Our father, balanced on the arm of an old black, plastic easy chair, was bent towards him.

I pushed in past them all and eased myself in next to my father. I smelled stagnant sweat and alcohol rising from the man, who must have been in his twenties. His skin was dusty grey. It reminded me of something I once saw on a trip we made up country. We were driving back to Freetown, late at night, everyone around me in the car was asleep. Our driver swung the car around a bend and we came suddenly upon a dark figure walking at the side of the road, miles from any village, petrol station or even crossroads. The walker turned abruptly and the headlights lit up his face. I gasped and so did Sullay, the driver. The man's black face was smeared with pale ashes. His robes were dark, their colour obscured by the darkness. He came like an apparition out of the night. Seconds later the car had left him far behind. That, and the time a boy I knew was stung by a scorpion, were the only occasions on which I had ever seen someone turn that colour.

The light was yellow and poor. I peered down until I was able to see what my father was doing. In the man's lap there lay a bloodied object. I thought at first he was holding onto something, a wounded creature maybe, so badly hurt as to be unrecognizable. Then I realised it wasn't an animal but a hand, his own hand. Or rather, what remained of his hand. It lay in tatters. There were no fingers, no finger nails, no palm to speak of. The flesh seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at once. It looked just like raw meat. Amid the quantities of blood there was a gleam: a nub of bone, a sliver of white tendon, a glint of grey muscle. I stood mesmerized, as my father set to work removing pieces of dead flesh with a pair of tweezers.

There was no breeze; the air was close. I began to sweat. I wanted to stay and watch but my father ordered me quietly:

“Am, you go and help with the bandages.” Esther and Musu were sitting at the dining room table just inside the door. They were tearing a sheet into strips and sewing the pieces end to end. I moved to obey, disappointed at being sent away, placated that I had a task. My father called for antiseptic and Morlai dashed into the house at once. A moment later he reappeared with a near empty plastic bottle.

“Uncle, the Dettol is all done,” he gestured with the bottle, half shrug, half question. A beat passed and then I pitched in:

“I have some.” I saw my opportunity to be of real use and seized it.

I raced to my room, slid to my knees and reached under the bed. One day I wanted to be a vet. In a cardboard box that I kept hidden was my First Aid Kit for injured animals. Week by week I used my pocket money to add something new: gauze, tape, splints. Everything else I foraged, like the cotton wool, or else was donated: my father had given me a couple of plastic syringes from his own medical bag. So far I had effectively treated only the dogs and, with less success, a lizard that lost its tail.

At Choitrams supermarket a few days before I bought a tiny glass, quarter bottle of

Dettol. It was still new and unopened, easily the most prized piece in the entire collection. I loved the long Excalibur sword on the label and the sharp scent when I unscrewed the top. It was this I returned bearing, primed with self-importance.

“Here’s some Dettol. It’s mine but you can use it,” I held the little bottle up high. I took up the position next to my father again, and again he sent me away. For the next hour I sat with my cousins and stitched yards of bandages more, I imagined, than anyone could possible need.

A long time later, after the wounded man had been taken away and the detritus of soiled dressings cleared, I fell asleep on the same plastic covered armchair where my father had been sitting. Someone must have carried me to my bed. When I woke up this morning, less than half an hour ago, I was lying under my mosquito net, sheets tangled round my legs. Dawn was barely a memory across the sky. For a little while I stayed there half dreaming until images of the previous evening began to come back to me.

In her bed on the other side of the room my elder sister lay still sleeping, I could hear her breathing. Outside a cock crowed, a tuneless, inarticulate and abrupt cry. It was a young cockerel and it hadn’t quite mastered the full throated song of the rooster. It annoyed me because it often woke me up. One morning I went outside and threw a stone at it.

I lay there listening to the ordinary sounds. I hadn’t fallen asleep and been put to bed for years. Had I somehow imagined all of it? I wriggled free of my sheets and yanked up the mosquito net. Pulling it over my head, I leaned out, balancing myself with both hands on the floor. I ducked my head under the bed and slid out my vet’s box. The tiny bottle of Dettol was still inside, the top was on. Everything else was in place. I was about to close the lid and push the box back, when I paused and instead I removed the bottle to inspect it. It was my bottle, that was certain, and someone had returned it to the box. But there were no more than a few drops of liquid left inside. And the label was spoiled. It was bloodstained and covered in reddish brown fingerprints so that you couldn’t even read the words any more.

At breakfast our father tells us the man had a car accident. He is wearing a brown suit, ready for the office. I am eating Weetabix, soaking them in milk and mashing the biscuits up. At the weekends my step-mother supervises in the kitchen and we have *akara*, deep fried balls of banana, rice flour and nutmeg; or else fried plantains with a hot peppery sauce made with fish and black-eyed beans. On weekdays we eat cereal and toast.

“How did he crash?” we ask. I layer sugar thickly over the cereal.

“I don’t know,” our father replies.

“What happened to him?”

“He’s gone to a hospital.” We nod. I spoon the soft, brown mush into my mouth while I begin to formulate another question, but my father’s next statement stops me dead in my tracks.

“Am, I’m seeing someone today. A math’s tutor. I want you to have some extra lessons during the holidays.”

My mouth is full of Weetabix and I am left speechless. It’s true that my math’s is not

good. I routinely come midway down my class, unacceptable by my father's standards. Every term he hands out awards for first, second and third place but I rarely manage to make the grade. At the last minute he comes up with a booby prize 'for effort' which somehow always has my name on it. But the holidays have only just begun; we arrived home from our boarding schools in England ten days ago. I cannot decide whether I am affronted or pleased to be singled out for such attention, to have my own math's tutor. While I am considering all this my father finishes his breakfast and borrows my milk glass. He pours himself a glass from one of the bottles of boiled water we keep in the fridge. As the glass fills the water turns cloudy. It doesn't look very appealing.

"Ugh!" I say.

"It all goes to the same place," My father smiles, amuses us by draining the whole glass with exaggerated delectation. He kisses us and he is gone.

In the afternoon the rain begins. The ground around the house fills up with rust coloured puddles. Little rivulets of blood join into ever larger tributaries which weave down the slopes to the slaughterhouse stream. The heat doesn't abate and the smell of steaming dirt is like a wet dog. The drops hurtle onto the corrugated roof of the garage, bouncing obliquely on the curves of tin and crashing like a thousand demented timpanists. Through their discordant rhythm rises the regular beat of the man with the pickaxe who keeps on splitting stones. He has stripped down to a pair of torn shorts and the water washes away the sweat and shimmers on his torso. The man doesn't pause once. On his right a second mound of small stones has begun to overtake the original pile of rocks.

On the balcony, below the curled iron railings, pools of water form and stretch out over the tiles. I take my book and sit in one of the long line of chairs. I am alone. No-one comes to the house today. Ordinarily, by mid-afternoon the people have begun to arrive alone and in pairs, usually on foot from Kissy Bye Pass Road, more rarely by taxi. Anyone known to the family goes through the house and keeps company on the back verandah. The others sit out front on the roadside. They come from Freetown and from the Provinces in need of help.

The chairs are strung with green and yellow plastic cord which is no longer taut and cuts into the flesh. The people sit uncomplaining on the uncomfortable chairs, nursing their requests until my father comes home from work. If he is late or busy, they come back the next day. Some of them are his former patients wanting further treatment but without money to pay another doctor, others bring news of a death or need help to school a child. Sometimes he is asked to intercede in a family dispute or help find someone a job. Most of them just want a little money.

When they start to arrive I usually disappear somewhere else. Once a blind man climbed up the stairs from the road and accidentally sat on top of me. In school we were taught that blind people had super sensory powers and hearing like a bat's radar, we were warned never to treat them as though they're helpless. So I watched as the blind man lowered his bottom believing, until it was too late, that he must somehow know I was underneath him, my tongue locked with the shame of the moment. As soon as his buttocks touched me the blind man shot up in the air like a Jack-in-the-box and groped

his way silently into another seat. The blind man isn't here today. There are no visitors at all. Perhaps it is the rain that is keeping them away.

After an hour or so I wander through the house. Inside everyone is preoccupied with their own business. Santigi is at the back of the house sorting the laundry. Morlai is in the room they both share off the kitchen. I expect he is studying. Santigi wants to go to school too, but he's already over thirty, though he fibs about his age and says he's twenty one. He was once sent to literacy classes but he struggled to learn to read and write. Still, on occasions he borrows my maths and English school books and works through the chapters alongside me. 'I want to learn,' he always says. A few months ago Santigi bought a Bible and changed his name. One day he stood before us all at supper and addressed our father directly with a deadpan face:

"Doctor," he said, in Creole. "Ah wan change me nam. Please, oona all for call me Simon Peter." He has remained resolute since, he withstands our teasing and corrects us every time we call him Santigi.

Santigi arrived at the same time as my step-mother four years before. No-one knows who Santigi is, meaning that we don't know his family or to whom he belongs. In a society built, layer upon infinite layer, on the rock of the extended family, Santigi can produce neither mother nor father, aunt nor uncle, sibling nor cousin. All he knows about himself is that he was born in a village called Gbendembu, near Makeni in the Northern Province. After giving birth his mother, who was without a husband, put herself to work digging diamonds in an illegal pit many miles away in Bujubu. She left her baby with neighbours and never returned to claim him. Much later news came that she had died. Once Santigi was of an age the couple who had taken care of him sent him to Magburaka to work for my step-mother's family. He first met my step-mother Yabome off the train when she was a schoolgirl returning home for the holidays and he has been by her side ever since. Santigi often spends time with me, but not right now.

The rain and the day wear on. Sullay drops by at lunchtime and stays at the back of the house whispering with Santigi and Morlai. Sullay has a deep, matt black complexion, a strong jawbone and sharp eyes shaded beneath a rather brooding brow. His whole face is a study in intensity. He rarely smiles, but he is very kind. I stop by to say hello. Sullay doesn't stay long.

Shortly before dusk the sound of the pickaxe stops. There are no more rocks to split. The man stands in his doorway out of the rain, dwarfed by the enormous pile of stones. He is listening and waiting for the truck to come back.

My step-mother drives up in her Volkswagen and goes through to the master bedroom. A little while later our father comes home, running through the rain.

I am restless. I fetch a game of bingo given to me for Christmas. It is an inexpensive set with small, wooden disks upon which the characters are stamped, slightly irregularly, in red ink. Once I had unwrapped it I ignored it in favour of grander gifts, but this summer holiday I have rediscovered it and there have been several uproarious games involving

the entire household.

We use matchsticks instead of money and today I ask Santigi to let me borrow the big box of Palm Tree matches. It has a drawing of an inky native stepping between two palm trees on the cover that reminds me of the pictures in an old book of Edward Lear poems I used to own. I empty the matches out and count them into neat red-tipped piles, one for each player.

Each card has a row of numbers along the top and another row of letters down the side. The caller must draw from corresponding bags of letters and numbers. As our games draw to a close everyone always starts to call the combinations they need to win. It's the best part of the game. Some of us call our numbers out as loudly as possible; others jig with anticipation; Morlai half closes his eyelids and mutters the figures like an incantation. Whoever is calling blows his finger tips, plunges into the bag and with great theatrics calls the winning sequence. Since I own the set I get more turns to do this than anyone else.

The last time we reached this point our father was sitting in the front on the settee, his card covered with little torn squares of papers. He only needed one more to win but several others were in the same position. The atmosphere was intense, and yet there was one outcome in which we were all united: if you couldn't win yourself the next best result was that our father should win. After a few games I had reached the point where I stopped wanting to win at all. Instead I wanted to protect my father from the disappointment I imagined he would feel if he lost.

I had been calling the numbers. My father needed a B and a five. He said: "Give me a B five, Am! B, five!" Everyone was hopping about, waving, calling out. I took my time, drawing the process out for as long as possible. I closed my eyes. I wished for a B and a five. I put my hands in the bags simultaneously and pulled out two wooden disks. "B, five!". I was astonished, I dropped the five back into the bag. No-one believed I had actually drawn it. "I did, I did!" I shouted and started to grow upset. I saw my father watching me. He was not sure what to believe. He smiled as if to say, 'you don't have to do this, Am.'

Outside the truck has arrived. The two men are shoveling stones into the back. Afterwards the driver takes some money out of his pocket, flicks off two notes and hands them to the man who lives in the *panbody*, who nods in return but doesn't smile. As the truck departs he leans on his shovel and watches.

On the coffee table I lay the bingo cards alongside the matchsticks. Outside the window a movement makes me look up. Two men have come up the outside stairs and are standing on the verandah looking in at me. I go out to see what they want. They are standing directly beneath the fluorescent strip light with their backs against the growing darkness; the white light casts downwards, bouncing off their cheeks and their foreheads, turning their eyes into dark orbs. I have never seen either man before but I sense something

indefinably familiar about them. They are both slim, sinewy with close cropped hair and they wear short-sleeved safari suits. One of them has on a pair of fake crocodile skin shoes, of a type sold in the market. The shoes are badly scuffed. Who are these men? Many years later I will discover they are called Prince Ba and Newlove, names as surreal as stage names - or aliases. Their faces are impassive; they impart an air of unutterable menace. One of them tells me they are here to speak to the doctor.

My father appears directly and speaks to them for a few moments. My bingo set is beside me on the table ready for our game. He turns to me, sees that I am there and says:

“I have to go with these two gentlemen now, Am.”

He walks ahead of the two men through the door and out onto the verandah. I see them pass the window.

“Daddy, when are you coming back?” I am unsettled.

My father half turns from me, seems to pass a hand across his eyes, takes a few more steps. Then he stops and faces me again. The two men wait and so do I. All my life my father has had a habit of chewing the ends of toothpicks. He always keeps a couple in his breast pocket. Now he says to me in a low voice:

“Am, go and get me a couple of toothpicks.” So I run to the sideboard on the other side of the room and find the little plastic toothpick dispenser. I shake out three or four toothpicks and hurry back to him. My face still holds the question. “Tell Mum I’ll be back later.” These are the last words, the very last words he says to me. And he steps out into the rain.

At the bedroom door I call to my step-mother that my father is gone. A moment later she runs past me with Morlai right behind her. They run silently, eyes fixed ahead and disappear into the crystal darkness. Through the rain I hear the sound of the car engine starting; the tyres splashing through the puddles.

The next morning we three children have our breakfast together, just the three of us. Outside the truck arrives and deposits another load of rocks. The rain is still coming down, it rains all through the day and the next night. It rains until October.