

FIVE

Africa fell away as the aircraft climbed towards the roof of the world. In the window seat, Maria Andanu Okrie sat holding her breath, her hands clenched on the armrests. It was her first flight, but she had insisted on the window seat, wanting to have a final glimpse of her homeland as the aircraft carried her away.

As they took off, fear of losing contact with the earth gripped her. And mingled with it was her sense of loss – the loss of her mother and her home and her name. Now she was a stranger even to herself, a fugitive with the name Maria Akimba.

Too terrified to look down, from the corner of her eye she had a last glimpse of her homeland. The houses diminished rapidly in size as they climbed, the countryside itself a chequerboard of browns and greens with a silver river snaking through it. Beyond that there were mountains, their peaks lost in the clouds. A few moments later they entered the cloudbank and Africa was lost below them.

Maria was devastated. The invisible umbilical cord, which had held her attached to her world, had now been severed and might never be reconnected. She was a stranger, heading for a strange land that she knew only from her mother's stories and from photographs and films. She breathed in as if to catch a final essence of Africa. But the scent, a rich blend of aromatic spices, heat and earth, eluded her. Instead it was the smell of tobacco from her Uncle Joseph, and the fainter smell

of whisky from his breath, which filled her nostrils.

Joseph sat rigidly beside her, his hands making two fists in his lap. At the airport, as he gulped whisky and chain-smoked, he had told her of his fear of flying. Some of his terror had transmitted itself to her, but now, as the aircraft levelled out and the other passengers began to chat and relax, Maria eased her grip on the armrests. She reached across, clasped Joseph's hand and smiled at him, intent on hiding her true feelings. 'Papa once told me,' she said, 'that the safest place to be was on an aeroplane.'

He tried to smile. 'If only I could have a cigarette,' he said, licking his lips.

'You were always saying you would give them up; now is your chance.' Maria smiled, and was rewarded in turn with a smile that was more a grimace. But it was a start. 'Have another whisky,' she suggested, and he did. Afterwards he slept.

Despite the fact that everything about flying was a new experience for Maria and she didn't want to miss any of it, she too eventually slept, worn out by the ordeals she had endured. She woke, feeling her ears pop, and wondered where she was.

'Nearly there, Maria,' Joseph said. 'We're going in to land.' He gripped her hand tightly and she was never gladder of his presence.

She was unprepared for the size of London airport, which swarmed with people, all hurrying and looking stressed. In Malanga Maria was often singled out because of her red hair and unusual looks; here she was just one of thousands of people of all different races and nationalities. The bustle and the noise swamped her and she felt like screaming just to

relieve the tension. Joseph, happy to be back on the ground, took charge in his usual efficient manner, and they were soon processed through the system and swept along to a different area of the airport with the others fleeing Malanga.

It was late afternoon now and the flight to Ireland wouldn't leave for another two hours. Maria was hungry and she and Joseph went to the self-service restaurant for some food. The choice overwhelmed her. Most restaurants in Malanga had long ago closed down; any that remained open were frequented by the supporters of the regime, and to be avoided.

Much of the food available was unfamiliar and she let Joseph choose for her. He bought them both burgers and chips, a treat Maria's mother had prepared on odd occasions when she managed to find potatoes and beef in the shops. It was too much of a reminder now and she ate without relish. But at least it satisfied her hunger.

Their flight left on time and was very short in comparison with the long journey from Malanga. They hardly seemed to be airborne before they were once again descending, coming in over a large bay with boats bobbing on the water. There was a view of the city sprawled below them and green countryside spread about. Then with a bump they were down and faced again with crowds and noise and the highly-charged octane of a busy airport.

Joseph had told her to leave official matters to him and she stood silently by as they went through the immigration procedures. It seemed to take forever. One part of her wanted the officials to find fault with her papers and send her back to Malanga, while another part hoped that all would be well. If she were sent back, it would be a terrible burden on her father who had already suffered enough. She would have

given anything to be with him, and she knew he felt the same way. But for now they would have to make do with memories.

When at last they had cleared all the documentation checks, they were taken by bus to a hostel in the city. It was late evening now and growing dark. As they drove through the busy streets, Maria was taken by surprise by the brightly lit shops and their displays of clothes and electrical goods and food. Outside a cinema she saw a queue of people of her own age, all of them well dressed and clearly relaxed and happy. They reminded her of all she had lost. Couples strolled hand in hand along the pavements and she noticed that there were many elderly people out and about also, something that was rare in Malanga.

They left the bright lights behind and drove through a part of the city that looked rundown and neglected. Here the shops were drab and shuttered and there were fewer people about. Some of the houses were dilapidated and the small front gardens were overgrown and strewn with litter.

The hostel was a four-storey building with peeling paint and a strong, and unidentifiable, smell of food. This was to be their temporary home, an official told them, until arrangements could be made to transport them to Culduagh. On the way from the airport he had shown them a map of Ireland and pointed out where Culduagh was located. It was little more than a dot, too small to have a name printed beside it.

The hostel was crowded and noisy, filled with strange voices and languages and accents. Maria wanted to run and hide, but there was nowhere to run to. Men and women were separated and that night she slept in a room with four other Malangan women. They were older than Maria, and although

they had been on the flight with her, they were not friendly. She lay awake for hours, glad of the soft orange glow of the streetlight outside her window. She felt abandoned and alone, fearful of her future and haunted by the terrible events of her recent past. Many times that night she resolved to beg Joseph to allow her return to Malanga.

In her moments of weakness she reached out to images and memories of her father and drew strength from him. Finally, sleep claimed her and when she woke a new day had already begun. Joseph had meetings to attend and she was left to her own devices. Local people came to the hostel to offer what help they could to the refugees, bringing used clothing and gifts of food and fruit, and sweets for the children. But Maria shrank from them and they frowned and let her be.

The next few days seemed interminable and she looked forward to the short time that Joseph came to spend with her. He seemed both worried and harassed. She guessed that his meetings with the officials were not going well. But when she asked him about them, he just smiled and nodded and assured her that they would be leaving for Culduagh in three days. He had managed to buy her two pairs of jeans and a few warm tops. They were not what Maria would have chosen for herself, but Joseph said it was better for her not to go out while they were in the city. She would have plenty of time for that when they reached the country.

The morning finally came when they boarded a minibus with a group of other Malangans and set off on the journey to Culduagh and a new, but still temporary, life. They soon left the city behind, and the tranquillity of the rolling green countryside relaxed Maria. She saw cattle and sheep and horses

grazing in the fields; they passed tractors and roadside stands selling potatoes and vegetables. It all seemed so normal and peaceful. This was the Ireland that her Irish grandparents and her mother had described. Then the official who was travelling with them took a call on his mobile phone. He looked worried. When the call was over, he stood up at the front of the bus and told the passengers that he had been informed about a protest taking place against them in Culduagh. It would be noisy, but they were in no danger and must not react to it.

Maria's sense of peace vanished, to be replaced by anxiety and apprehension. Her father had told her she would be safe here. Why was this happening? When the bus turned off the main road onto a narrow road, edged with hedges, she felt imprisoned. She was in a tunnel into the unknown and from which there seemed no escape.

They passed a sign for the village and here the road was edged with flowers and shrubs, bright and colourful in the summer sunshine. A fuchsia was weighted down with red bells and in another garden she saw geraniums in full bloom.

The place seemed so peaceful and quiet, it was impossible to imagine that a demonstration awaited them. From the side window she saw a man sitting quietly on a stationary tractor. A boy of roughly her age, and with hair as red as her own, was squashed into the cab beside him.

She caught the man's eyes as they passed and she sensed a sadness about him like a mirror image of her own. Suddenly his face changed and an unmistakable look of fear came over it. His head swivelled to follow the bus, his eyes locked on hers. Maria turned to look through the rear window; he was still staring, his eyes wide and alarmed. Compelled by

something she couldn't understand, she watched both him and the boy until a bend took them from her view.

The incident disturbed her as much as the hostility they encountered moments later. A small, chanting crowd had gathered in the main street, held back by a police cordon. She had an impression of enraged faces and wildly waved placards: 'No Blacks Here', 'Refugees Go Home', 'Keep Culdugh Disease Free', 'Aids-Free Zone'.

The words struck her like blows. A protester broke through the ring of policemen and thrust his face against one of the windows. His mouth moved like a fish in a bowl, but she could not hear his words above the noise. His face, like that of the others, was white, but it might have belonged to any one of the Malangan soldiers who had come to the rose garden that terrible afternoon. The naked hatred was the same.

Inside the hostel the atmosphere was different. The locals who had gathered there mingled easily with the resident refugees and gave the newcomers a warm welcome. Maria tried to respond to their kindness, but she could not get rid of the images of the terror-stricken man on the tractor, and the hate-distorted faces of the protesters.

Joseph took her aside and introduced her to her 'uncle', Benjamin Akimba, a tall, stately Malangan. His grey hair and something in the dignity of his expression reminded her of her father, and a pang of loss shot through her. Benjamin shook hands with her in a formal way and she noted that his fingers were deformed.

'You will be safe here, Maria,' he assured her. 'But you must be vigilant always. You do not look like other Malangans and that will be noticed. And you must always be careful that you do not mention your real name. Everyone here

knows of your father and would immediately associate you with him. Later I will introduce you as my niece, Maria Akimba, my youngest brother's only child. Now do not worry. All the people here have suffered and will know that you have suffered too. We must all help each other.'

His kindness and gentleness soothed her and already she felt that she would be more at ease here than at any time since she had arrived in Ireland. But when it was time for Joseph to leave, all her old fears returned. She clung to him, intending to plead with him to take her away with him. But when she touched his face and felt the skin moist, she bit her lip and stayed silent.

This was the worst moment of all – watching the minibus leave the hostel with Joseph. He was her last link to her real family, and with him gone she felt that she would never see her father again. Benjamin stood beside her and placed his deformed hand on her shoulder. When the bus disappeared from view, he led her back inside.

That night Maria lay awake for a long time, thinking of her father and her home. If she closed her eyes, faces swarmed in her vision – her parents and Joseph, Kegale with his dark glasses, the angry face of the protester at the bus window. But more prominent than those were the faces of the man and the boy she had seen on the tractor. They loomed in her vision as she fell asleep and nightmares claimed her.

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She hauled herself hand over hand from the pit into which she had fallen. Above her a light shone and she desperately wanted to reach it. Near the top she became aware that someone waited. It was her father. He was laughing. He reached for her and as she stretched out her hand she saw that his

hand was skeletal. The bones gleamed white, and what little flesh remained seethed with maggots.

She screamed and fell back into the pit and woke from the nightmare.

Maria found herself in a bed, but with no recollection of how she had come to be there. Silence as cold as a tomb enveloped her. Nearby, a small light glowed, but it only made the darkness beyond it press even heavier about her.

The darkness closed in on her, smothering her. She jerked upright, her heart pounding, her breath coming in short gasps, her mouth dry. The realisation of where she was dawned slowly, but knowing she was thousands of miles from danger did little to dispel the sense of terror she had experienced.

She hunched forward, drew her knees up to her chin, and hugged them to her. In the nights that had passed since she had crossed the Malangan border to safety, she had learned that this was the best way of dispelling the nightmares that had plagued her sleep since then and of banishing the terror they left in their wake.

Slowly reality returned and she realised that she was in her bedroom in the hostel in Culduagh. Uncle Joseph had gone away and for the first time in her life she was utterly alone. She hugged her knees tighter, feeling unwanted and unloved, the memory of the protest which she had witnessed still vivid. She was afraid to fall asleep, certain that the nightmare would return and she would have to endure the terror of the pit again.

She glanced around to check if she had woken her two sleeping companions. She was sharing a room with Mama Ombabta and her daughter, Lanu. Mama was the self-

professed mother of all at the hostel. In the much too narrow bed beside Maria, her large frame was distinguishable beneath the two duvets that were required to keep her warm.

In the bed next to Mama, hardly more than a vague impression of a person beneath the bedclothes, lay her only surviving family member, her youngest daughter, Lanu. She was tall like Mama, but skeletally thin, and so quiet that she might be a ghost. Mama had not spoken of what the soldiers had done to Lanu, but its horrors were written plainly on their sad faces.

In the corner a nightlight burned, a concession made to Maria on her arrival when, shamefaced, she had admitted to Mama Ombabta that she was terrified of the dark. 'You not worry, Maria,' Mama Ombabta said. 'You will sleep in room with my Lanu and me. You be safe then. I will get light, so it not be dark. Now you not be shamed. No person here, not even brave men, not be frightened of darkness. They see such terrible things ...'

But neither Mama's assurances, nor the nightlight, had kept the nightmare at bay. Awake now, sitting up in the bed, the soothing rise and fall of the women's breathing close by, Maria felt a little easier. The nightmare was only a bad dream after all.

But nothing could banish her loneliness and the awful longing she experienced for home and for her father, who for all her hopes and prayers, might already be dead. There had been no word of him since she left Africa, and despite Joseph's assurances that he would be all right, her fears lingered.

She tried now to draw her parents' faces from memory, from a time before terror and violence became part of their lives. Her mother's face when it emerged was not smiling, but

was soft and tender nonetheless. Her father *was* smiling, his eyes shining with merriment.

She had loved them both – did love them still – for death could not destroy that love. She had been so proud of her father when he opposed the regime, and had supported him. Dying for freedom had seemed such a noble thing then, and her pride increased when she saw his name or picture in the foreign newspapers. It was dangerous to possess them, and her mother burned them as soon as they were read, hoping against hope that she could keep the terror from her door. But terror had no rules, or boundaries, and could strike at anyone.

On the morning her father disappeared while on his way to the university, Maria had felt no pride, just a gut-wrenching fear. She was convinced that the soldiers had taken him and that his mutilated corpse would turn up in the city streets as a warning to others. He had spoken of those discarded bodies; how oftentimes the victim's relatives were too frightened to recover the corpse and it was left to rot for days in the street until it became a health hazard, or dogs began to eat it.

She had heard him speak too of summary executions and of prisons with torture chambers, and when she thought of them she was overcome with dread at the image of him locked away in some dank cell where the sun never shone. He loved the sun so much that to be deprived of its warmth would be intolerable.

Then her uncle Joseph had come to tell them that her father had gone into hiding. The soldiers had attempted to arrest him on his way to the university, but he had escaped with seconds to spare. He could not return home until the regime was overthrown. Until then they would have to live with their

memories of him.

Now Maria tried to reach out to him with all the will she could summon up. She wanted to give him her strength, and her love. But Malanga and Africa were far away, separated from Ireland by distance and time and tradition and culture. And as she had come to realise since her arrival, separated too by the colour of her skin. Although, through her mother's genes, she was half white and half Irish, her skin precluded her from real citizenship and now she was beginning to feel that she belonged nowhere and never would again.

Mama Ombabta had said to her, as they got ready for bed, that it was ignorance and fear that made people react badly to them. 'They not understand us, Maria,' she said. 'They be frightened of our colour, our speech, our clothes. It be always so. All peoples fear what they do not understand. But we show them not to fear us.'

'But they do not want us here,' Maria said. 'Today they were shouting such terrible things. One man rushed forward and banged on the window of the bus. His face was full of hatred, just like the soldiers ...' she faltered. 'They do not want us.'

'And why they want us?' Mama asked. 'We be strangers. They be like our villagers at home. They not live in big city. If strangers come to village in Malanga, we not be happy. We be frightened too. But they like us better soon. You see.'

'But they say we ... we bring disease. They're frightened we'll infect them with a terrible plague. I heard a man speaking on the television when I was in the hostel in Dublin. He said we were dirty ... that we all had Aids.'

'I know, Maria. I know.' Mama Ombabta put a heavy arm about Maria's shoulders and drew her to the yielding comfort

of her body. 'Maria,' she whispered, 'it be late and you tired. You sleep now and call Mama if you be frightened.'

Awake now, Maria desperately needed that protective arm about her and to hear those soothing words. But she didn't wish to disturb Mama. Instead she threw back the bedclothes and climbed out of the bed. She walked to the window and looked out.

The night was dark and cloudy with neither moon, nor stars, visible. The hostel, which had once been a boys' boarding school, was built on a rise and the village lay below her, bathed in the orange streetlights. It was so quiet and peaceful that she might have imagined the protest she had encountered earlier.

This place would be her home for the foreseeable future. But she didn't want to be here. She wanted to be back in Malanga with her father. A tear slid down her face and she shivered as she wiped it away. It was cold here too and that was another cross to bear. But she would persevere for her father's sake and one day she would go home.

A movement on the driveway up to the hostel caught her eye. Someone was approaching the building, only his bright knitted hat visible above the hedge that lined the drive on both sides. She followed the progress of the hat until the wearer came into view. It was Tamba, a young man she had met today who was not much older than herself. A weal, like tightly closed lips, ran from beneath his right ear to the tip of his chin. It gave him a sinister look, which the anger on his face and in his body language only emphasised.

He disappeared into the building and a few moments later she again saw movement on the drive. This time it was Benjamin Akimba, her so-called uncle, who emerged. He limped

into the hostel and she assumed that like herself, neither he, nor Tamba, could sleep and had gone out to walk their troubles and fears and sadness away.

She was about to turn from the window when a glimmer on the horizon caught her eye. It came from beyond the village, high up in the hills, a flickering glow against the dark sky. Something was burning out there in the night and suddenly she was transported back in time to Malanga, the city burning from the riots and the crackle of gunfire echoing in the darkness.

Fear froze her and she couldn't move. The headlights of a vehicle swept the sky and she heard the siren of the fire engine before she saw it. It came from somewhere to her right and sped through the village like a red monster. Her fear took a tighter hold, clenching her stomach with bony fingers, making her gasp.

'Maria?' Mama Ombabta spoke gently behind her, breaking the spell and loosening the grip of fear. The bed creaked as the older woman sat up. 'What is it?'

'There's a fire, Mama,' Maria said, her voice quivering.

'Here!' The single word betrayed Mama's panic.

'No, not here. It's a long way off.'

'It frighten you?'

'Yes.' It was easier to pretend that than to try and explain about the nightmare.

'Do not be frightened,' Mama said. 'You come here. Come to bed.'

Maria obeyed, glad to creep back to the comfort of the bed. She lay down and drew the duvet about her. Mama Ombabta reached out and sought her hand beneath the quilt. 'Sleep now,' she said. 'You be better tomorrow.'

Mama began to sing, a low crooning that might have been a lullaby. There were words and sounds in the song that had been crooned for thousands of years, words whose meaning had long since been lost, but whose power to lull the mind to sleep had not waned. Deep in the heart of Africa, mothers had soothed their restless or frightened children with those selfsame words and sounds. Now in Ireland, thousands of miles from home, Maria Andanu Okrie fell beneath their spell and drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

At the sound of Maria's regular breathing, Mama Ombabta grew silent. She lay back in her uncomfortable bed and began to cry quietly for what she had lost and for those she had left behind, dead in Malanga. But most of all she cried for her daughter Lanu, once an innocent young girl like Maria. Mama had sung that same lullaby for Lanu as a child, soothing her night time fears. But now there was no lullaby that could quieten the demons that possessed her.

She held the hand of Maria Andanu Okrie until dawn lightened the window and the room emerged from the darkness. Then she gently disengaged her fingers and wiped her eyes and prepared to become again the dependable Mama, the rock to which everyone clung.