Action/adventure set in Africa, with powerful moral lessons

ONCE UPON A TIME, A CHILD: YUSEF'S STORY

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Foreword

Once upon a time, there was a child named Yusef.

Yusef was a boy just about your age, and he lived in a far-off land, a land of towering bright beauty and deep dark despair, the land where mankind was born. Yusef lived with his family in a small round house made of grass. This small round house of grass sat near the edge of a high cliff that fell down, down, down and away to a mighty river far below. All around this small grass house—high on the cliff above the mighty river—there were other little grass houses, houses where Yusef's aunts and uncles and cousins all lived, in a village perched on the edge of the cliff, high above the river.

Yusef and his family were very rich. They had a well that never ran dry, and the water from that faithful well ran always cool and sweet and clear and sparkled like diamonds in the sun. Yusef's family owned a herd of twelve cattle and eighteen goats, and they had a huge garden, and Yusef's mother sold vegetables in the market so that—in good years—there was sometimes even enough money for paper and pencils for Yusef, and in the best of years there was even enough money to buy shoes for Yusef's father.

So you can see that Yusef and his family were very, very rich indeed.

This ancient land of towering bright beauty and deep dark despair was Africa. The river was the Nile, and it flowed from mountains—and from a great lake—deep in the forested Southland, and it flowed to the north and into the land of Egypt. The river was home to crocodiles and hippopotamuses, and the river valley was full of snakes and flies and mosquitoes and other nasty biting

things, and the river and its valley held terrible, terrible diseases that you do not even want to think of—worms that crawl inside your eyeballs and then devour your eyeballs from the inside out, yum—yum—yum. There are tiny, sneaky amoebae that live inside your red blood cells and pop your red blood cells open by the millions, pop—pop—pop, while you shiver and shake until you think your bones will break and then you are drenched in sweat and your urine turns black and then you die.

Then there is the fungus that silently and slowly rots your feet until your toes drop right off.

Ugh.

And that's just the beginning. The flies and the mosquitoes and the other nasty biting things also carry wormy diseases that get all inside your brain and….

Well. It really would be better if you don't think at all about those terrible, terrible diseases down in the river and its valley.

Besides, Yusef's village—perched on the cliff, high above the mighty river—was safe, for birds kept the terrible, terrible diseases from ever coming into Yusef's village.

Birds—lovely African swallows, each one of them smaller than your own small clenched fist, each one of them weighing less than a few pennies from your pocket, each with its sweet whistling song—these African swallows nested in the limestone cliffs below Yusef's village, millions upon millions of them in flocks like clouds that swooped high and low through the African air and ate the flies and the mosquitoes and the other nasty, biting things that swarmed in the steamy air above the great river, so that the terrible, terrible diseases never ever came up to Yusef's village above the cliffs, and the people there—Yusef's family, his father and mother, and his twin brother, and his sisters and

cousins and aunts and uncles—were all healthy and happy, and they never, ever worried about having worms eating their eyeballs, or having their feet rot off, or about any of the other diseases that lived down by the river among the snakes and the crocodiles and the hippopotamuses.

Yusef's ancestors had nearly always lived in this land above the river. Long ago, Yusef's ancestors had been mighty warriors. They were great archers, who could draw an arrow back and hold the bow just so and aim that arrow at a single swallow flying in a flock of millions and shoot that arrow so swift and sure and true that the arrow would pierce the throat of that single African swallow flying along as fast as the wind.

These archers' bows were so powerful that their swift arrows would pierce the toughest armor ever made, armor made of the thick, tough hides of crocodiles, all dried and baked in the hot African sun until the skins were hard as iron.

Some of Yusef's ancestors had been pharaohs and they had conquered all of Egypt all up and down the Nile, long, long ago. But then their great kingdoms had fallen, and the desert had grown, and their lands—and their mighty pyramids—had lain smothered in the sands of ten-thousand years, and Yusef's ancestors had retreated back to these peaceful plains and hills high above the Nile, and they had put down their bows and arrows, and they had taken up the plow, and they had raised goats and cattle and chickens and *dhurra* millet.

The desert and its smothering sands had grown. The desert pushed south along the river and now Yusef's home was just a little distance from the desert that grew like a wicked brown cancer in the good green world.

But Yusef's little village seemed safe, for now.

Sometimes the scorching African sun would blaze as hot as any fire ever built in the village baking oven, and the dry winds would sweep down from the desert and into Yusef's tiny village and rattle the grass walls of his home, and the dry desert winds would whip and rip and tear at all the other little houses there in the village. In the garden, the tender leaves of the young plants would curl and shrivel and wither away toward death. And in that terrible, terrible African heat, the cattle and the goats would all crowd together in the pitiful thin shade of the thorn trees and their dry tongues would hang from their mouths like strips of dead dry leather, and Yusef would wonder how any creature could live in this heat. But then the night would fall—and the nights were cool in these ancient hills above the Nile—and the winds would calm, and Yusef's father would go to the well and he would draw the water that ran down to the garden, and he would carry cool, sweet water for the cattle and the goats, and Yusef's mother would mend the wind-torn walls of their grass house, and then the family would all sit together outside in the cool of the night, and they would watch the stars in the clear African sky and tell stories and laugh together as the stars wheeled above.

Sometimes the rains would come, monsoons that lasted for weeks, and Yusef's mother would cover the tender young plants in the garden with broad banana leaves and Yusef and his brother and his sisters and his cousins would play in the warm rains and splash in the mud and turn their faces toward heaven and let the rain fill their mouths and eyes. The rain would rinse the mud from their faces and from their bodies until they were all clean and slick and cool. Then they would all go inside—into whichever little grass house was leaking the least—and they would play a game called "sow-and-capture" that you may know as "mancala," but they did not call

the name "mancala" because this word means "I lose," in Arabic, and no one would ever, ever want to play a game called "I lose."

Every year, the monsoons came a little later. Every year, the sun shone a little hotter. Every year, the sweet cool water in the well was a little lower. And every year, the wicked brown desert grew and drew nearer to Yusef's little green village.

Yusef's father was headman in the village. In his youth, Yusef's father had been a great archer. Once upon a time—long, long ago, in the days of the youth of Yusef's father—a terrible, hungry beast had found the little village. Each night, the terrible, hungry, ravening beast would prowl the edge of the village, and the goats would bleat in terror, and the villagers would cower in their grass huts, and in the morning a goat would be missing, or two goats would be missing, and the villagers might find a few bits of bone or knots of hair, or drops of blood spilt and dried upon the ground. Every night—in those days when Yusef's father was a child, so very long ago—every night, as the sun set over the hills, the villagers would gather their goats and their cattle into the kraal, for it was always at night that the beast would strike.

The beast grew bolder and stronger: cattle were taken.

Imagine a hungry beast with jaws so strong, and shoulders so mighty that it could drag a bleeding, dying bull out of the village and high into the hills while all the villagers cowered in their grass huts.

Soon, most of the goats and all of the cattle were gone, and the villagers began to die of hunger, for now the ravening beast might strike by day or by night, so the villagers did not tend their gardens, or their dwindling herds.

By day, the gardens wilted and withered in the African sun.

By night, the villagers could hear the feet of the great beast tread upon the paths between their little grass houses, and the villagers would hold their starving children tight on the other side of those thin grass walls, and they would tremble so hard that the walls would shake as if the winds were whipping through the village, but there was no wind at all in the village, only fear.

Only fear, and the beast.

And then: children began to disappear from the village. Skinny, starving children with sunken hollow eyes and bulging bloated bellies and ginger-colored hair would wander away from their little grass houses, searching for a scrap of food, and they would never be seen again, but there would be tracks of the great beast in the sand, and a spatter of blood and a hank of ginger-colored hair upon the ground.

Yusef's father was young at this time, long ago—he had been on earth but twelve dry seasons and eleven rainy seasons—and he feared the beast, too.

But Yusef's father—who feared the beast as much as any trembling, starving child or any cowering grown-up in that village—Yusef's father had heard the tales of his ancient ancestors, the tales of powerful bows and swift arrows. Yusef's father went to the oldest man in the village, a man so old that his teeth were gone, and his hands were twisted and gnarled like the tangled roots of ancient trees, and his hair had turned all silver, and his eyes were clouded white as milk, for he was blind.

And this ancient man—blind, and toothless, and all crippled in his hands—this ancient man had felt the hard young muscles in Yusef's father's arms, and this ancient man had touched his crippled hands to Yusef's father's chest and felt the heart that beat within, and then this ancient man had sent Yusef's father into the forest to cut a limb from a tree that the man remembered

from his own youth when his own eyes had been bright and clear and his own hands and arms had been as strong and limber as any bow.

Yusef's father carried the limb of the tree that the ancient man remembered from his youth, and the man with the clouded, blinded eyes and the twisted hands carved the wood into a bow, and strung it with sinews of antelope long dead. The ancient man plucked the sinew-bowstring and tightened the bow a bit until he was satisfied. And then the ancient man crawled to the edge of his small grass hut, and he unwrapped twelve arrows from an old blanket, and he nocked an arrow and handed the bow and arrow to Yusef's father.

Yusef's father went out of the old man's grass hut, and the old man—who had not walked for many, many seasons, wet and dry—the old man crawled upon his crippled knees behind Yusef's father. And the old man—who had not seen a bow, or an arrow, or a tree, or a bird, or any other sight under the good African sun in twenty seasons, rainy or dry, with his clouded, blinded eyes—this ancient man felt Yusef's father's eyes and hands and arms and helped him draw the bow and—with a voice as dry as withered leaves, as ancient as the world—the old man whispered something into Yusef's father's ear. And then the old man crawled back into his little grass hut, and he smiled a happy toothless smile and died a happy peaceful death while Yusef's father practiced with his bow.

Then Yusef's father carried his new bow and his twelve old arrows, and he took a bit of rope, and with that bit of rope, he led a happy, prancing little goat of brown and white out of the village toward the hills and toward the setting sun.

And in the morning, Yusef's father returned to his village. He carried his bow and he carried eleven arrows, and he carried a bit of tattered rope.

Yusef's father helped to bury the old man that day. Yusef's father put into the grave with the old man the new bow, and the eleven old arrows. And, into the grave, just before the dirt was pushed in, Yusef's father put one other thing for the old man to have.

In the village, people said that it was the heart of the great beast, but no one ever knew, for Yusef's father never spoke of these things, but kept these things locked within his own heart forever.

Of course, the villagers were sure that they knew what had happened in the hills above their village that fateful night, for the beast never returned. Some of the villagers swore that they had seen a bit of blood upon the shredded rope that Yusef's father had used to lead the happy, prancing little goat of brown and white out of the village toward the hills and toward the setting sun.

In the peaceful village, new babies were born, and their parents sang them sweet lullabies at night and laughed quietly behind the thin grass walls, and no one feared the dark, or listened for fatal footsteps in the night. The babies grew fat and happy, and their hair was black, and their bellies were never swollen in hunger. Gardens stayed well-tended, and the herds of goats and cattle grew, and Yusef's father began to breed goats with brown and white coats, goats that always seemed very fat, and very happy.

The villagers made up new songs about their new hero to go along with the old songs about their ancient hero-ancestors who had ruled as pharaohs all up and down the Nile.

So, as the years passed, the new songs about Yusef's father took their place among the old songs, and by the

time Yusef and his brother, Khalid, were born, Yusef's father was—in the songs—a hero like the great archers who had conquered all of Egypt and had ruled everywhere along the Nile.

Such was the blood that flowed in the veins of Yusef.

Now—many seasons later, rainy and dry—Yusef's father was headman of the village. He had two sons and five daughters. The two sons—Yusef and Khalid—were twins. They looked so much alike that anyone looking at one of them alone could only guess which one it was.

Yusef and Khalid had formed together in their mother's womb. In the beginning, they were one. They came from a single egg and a single sperm. They were one being that split in twain—two brothers from one seed. Within their mother's womb, their hearts had beat as one, and they lived and grew within a single caul, living upon a single placenta, their umbilical cords intertwined like the roots of ancient trees. Khalid and Yusef were born moments apart—Khalid first, and then Yusef, clutching at his brother's heel. They were born in one caul, their umbilical cords so tightly intertwined that if Yusef had not been born quickly after his brother—clutching at his heel—both brothers would have died at birth. Their mother suckled them together at her breasts, and Khalid and Yusef even breathed together, in and out, in and out.

At night, lying side by side on mats in their little grass house, Khalid always fell asleep first—by as many moments as he had been ahead of Yusef in birth—and Yusef would listen to Khalid's easy breathing, and then Yusef would match his breathing to his brother's breath, and he would fall into peaceful sleep as well.

As they grew, Yusef and Khalid looked exactly alike: tall and straight, with strong lean muscles, thin faces and gleaming white teeth, and skin as black as ebony

wood, blacker than any African night. Their hearts had beat as one, and still they often breathed as one, as well.

But Yusef and Khalid did not always behave alike.

Not at all.

Sometimes Yusef's cousins and Yusef's brother and sisters fought. Whenever they fought, it was Yusef who stepped forward and stepped between them, his hands turned upward, seeking peace. "Peace," Yusef would say, as he stood between them. "Peace, elder brother. Peace, please, cousins and little sisters."

If the cousins argued, Yusef would always listen to both sides. He would ask questions. Yusef would say to the first cousin: "Cousin, tell me. What is our cousin saying? How would you express this truth that he has spoken?" And the first cousin would think about this, and say that truth in his own words, and Yusef would say to the second cousin: "Our cousin understands your heart. Do you understand his heart as well?" Usually, the two cousins wound up agreeing, and the fight would be over.

Not always. Sometimes, there were real fights, with fists.

Yusef would step forward then, too. He would stand between his fighting cousins, and he would let them pound on him until they grew too tired to hit anybody any longer and their fists were so sore that it hurt them too much to keep on hitting.

Yusef—whose ancestors had conquered all of mighty Egypt with their powerful bows and their swift arrows—Yusef wanted nothing at all to do with fighting, except to put all fighting to an end.

Khalid, Yusef's twin brother, loved to fight. You already know that Khalid was born just moments before Yusef was born. Khalid was always pushing ahead of Yusef. Khalid had a temper, too. If anyone was in a fight

anywhere in the village, you could bet that Khalid was part of that fight, and was always winning, too.

If there was not a fight, Khalid could usually get one started.

Yusef called Khalid "elder brother" and Yusef spoke to Khalid with respect, because you always have to pay respect to those who have lived longer than you have, and are therefore wiser. Khalid called Yusef "younger brother" and he always tried to be sure that Yusef did not get hurt—even when Yusef was being pounded by both sides in a fight that Khalid had started—because you always have to take care of those who are younger or weaker than yourself.

This is a book of stories about Yusef, who lived in the little grass house at the edge of the cliff above the mighty Nile. This book is also about his brother, Khalid, whom you may grow to love—as I do—despite Khalid's love of fighting. At the end of this book there is a story about another child, a child who was not like Yusef or Khalid at all, but that will be the last story in this book, and it will come a very long time from now.

And so:

Yusef lived in this village of grass houses high above the ancient, mighty Nile with his mother and his father and his twin brother, Khalid, and his sisters. Yusef's father—he who had carried twelve arrows into the hills and returned with eleven arrows and never told the story to any living soul, but kept that story locked within his own heart forever—Yusef's father kept a small farm, with goats and cattle and chickens and guinea fowl, but his pride was his huge garden. He grew all sorts of things that no other farmers in the village had ever grown. He grew bananas and pineapples and mangos, and he grew peas and pumpkins and yams and tomatoes. He had avocado trees, and orange trees, and lemon trees, and a

grove of bamboo. Soon he would plant eucalyptus trees and olive trees.

Yusef's mother helped to tend the garden. In truth, she worked all day, from sunrise to sunset, weeding in the garden, and milking the cattle and the goats, and tending the chickens and guinea fowl, and she was always busy with Yusef's little sisters. There were five of these little sisters right now, and it seemed that a new sister came along every year. Yusef's mother was a big, stout woman, and she carried a wide leather strop, and if Yusef or Khalid were slow in doing what she told them to do, then—Whoosh! Whoosh!—she would swing the leather strop above her head, and—Whop! Whop!—the leather strop would slap against the bottom of the boy who was too slow. As often as not, the other brother would get a Whop! or even two, or three—Whop! Whop! Whop!—just for being near the slower one.

Once, early in the morning, just as the sky was growing pink before the dawn of the new day, the goats were nervous and bleating outside the little grass house. Yusef's mother ran from the house with the strop in her hand, and Yusef and Khalid heard the Whoosh! Whoosh! and the Whop! Whop! and they ran outside, only to see a leopard fleeing as fast as it could go, which is very fast indeed. And they saw their mother chasing the leopard, still swinging the heavy leather strop over her head, Whoosh! Whoosh!

So Yusef and Khalid learned to be very, very quick to obey their mother.

But this book is about Yusef.

Yusef lived in the tiny grass house in the small village high above the Nile River in the heart of Africa. Sometimes, high above, a tiny point of silver would streak across the sky, trailing a long white cloud, and Yusef would think that the gods had hurled a silver-

tipped spear across the heavens, but Yusef's mother would tell Yusef that there were great flying carts that held whole villages of people up there, flying across the sky faster than you can yell across a valley, and Yusef would laugh at that foolish story.

At night, Yusef's father would look up at the night sky, and point out the constellations, and tell stories about how the stars had come to be: how a Great Lion—who was the spirit of all Africa—became immortal, and Yusef's father pointed out the stars that were the lion. Yusef could see the lion in the stars, so Yusef knew that this must be a true story—not like the foolish story about a silver cart filled with people streaking across the sky. Yusef's father pointed out the stars that were the Great Archer who had slain the Great Lion, and Yusef saw those stars, and Yusef knew that the story of the archer who became immortal stars was true, also. And then Yusef's father pointed at the full moon and told Yusef and Khalid that in his own lifetime, men had built a silver boat and sailed it to the moon, and back again, and Khalid and Yusef had laughed together and said that was a very good joke, indeed.

And then Yusef's father would tell more stories about the night sky: how there was a river of stars in the sky—and Yusef's father would point out the stars, all meandering along, exactly like a lazy, vagrant river—with a hippopotamus as the brightest star right in the middle of that celestial stream.

And there was the story of Mbaka, the daughter of the Creator, who had gathered up a handful of ashes, and had flung them into the sky, and the ashes had hung in the sky and had become the Milky Way that you can see today, so that you can go outside tonight and see the Milky Way with all the stars hanging exactly where

Mbaka tossed them, and know that this is a true story, indeed.

And there was the story of Scorpion: long ago, the Great Archer had tried to kill all the animals that the Creator had put upon the earth, and the birds of the air, as well. This Great Archer nearly succeeded, so that there were just two of each creature left alive upon the earth, and the Great Archer meant to slay them, too, so that men would not have to share the earth with the Creator's other children. But the Creator loved all his children—men and beasts and the birds of the air, and the rocks and stones and the forests and the grass that covered the broad savannas as well—and so the Creator sent Scorpion, with his brave heart, red as rubies, to slay the Great Archer. On that day, the Great Archer was hunting the last two lions on earth, and the lioness lay in the thin dry grass and her belly was swollen huge, for her womb was filled with lion cubs waiting to be born. The Great Archer let fly an arrow, straight at her heart, but her mate leapt into the air and caught the arrow in his own heart, and died. The Great Archer nocked another arrow, and aimed again at the lioness, and, at that moment, Scorpion stung the Great Archer and slew him. Then the Creator gathered the dead lion and the dead archer in His arms, and He raised Archer and Lion into the sky, and breathed life into them, and He put Scorpion—with his crimson heart—into the sky as well, so that men upon the earth might always remember how the Creator loves each of his children. And upon the earth, in the thin dry grass, the lioness gave birth to her cubs, so that there are still lions upon the broad savannas today.

Yusef walked—or more often, Yusef ran—everywhere barefoot, for, as you know, he owned no shoes, and so he

had to be careful not to step on real scorpions. When you are running around barefoot, and you see a real scorpion, you must smash it with a stick until its green blood oozes out all over and its wickedly curved stinger stops twitching, because a scorpion sting can kill you as surely as it killed Archer, and if you let the scorpion live—if you don't get every drop of the nasty green blood squished out, or if the stinger is still twitching—that scorpion will certainly kill one of your little cousins who is too young to know about scorpions.

Yusef wore no shoes, and no shirt, either. Yusef wore only a loincloth for modesty—a thin cord around his waist, and a slip of brightly colored cloth in the front and in the back. The weather is very warm where Yusef lived, and this loincloth was all the clothing Yusef ever needed when he was a child.

In this book, you will learn many things about Yusef. You will learn a lot about Yusef's family, too. Many wonderful things will happen to Yusef, but there will be sad and even terrible things, as well.

You already know that Africa is a land of towering beauty and deep despair. You will find that Yusef's life is like that, too. Yusef had to be stronger—even as a child—than most people ever have to be in their whole lives. You should not expect these to all be happy, smiling stories. If they were all happy, smiling stories, they could not be true stories in this world.

I hope you enjoy the stories about Yusef, and that you will learn and grow strong with him.

Foreword, part 2 (for the grown-ups)

Once upon a time, a child needed a bedtime story, every night. If you have already read *ONCE UPON A TIME, A CHILD*, then you know the story of Jacob (whom you will meet again, late in this book), and you also know that in

that long-ago once-upon-a-time, when I was the age of a mother or father reading this book, I made up a story every night for my son. And you know that—many years later—I wrote the stories I wish I had told Christopher then.

Over my many years practicing medicine and teaching medicine, I have been lucky enough to teach in schools and in universities, in hospitals and in clinics all around the world. During those years, I taught undergraduates, graduate students, medical students, interns and residents, fellow physicians, and military men and women at many levels.

The most important teaching job I ever had was at home, with my own son.

You don't have any job that is more important in your life, either.

I have never found anything in teaching that surpasses the power of the story. "Once upon a time," is a magical phrase. It commands our souls to attention, and we wait: breath held, eyes wide, rapt. We listen, we hear, we make for ourselves myth, archetype, and meaning after all that follows that magical incantation.

So I have taken for my titles in these stories of Jacob, and Bobby, and Yusef, and all the others, the four most powerful words in the English language: Once upon a time….

A word about language: Yusef lives in a mythical place on a plain and in the hills high above the Nile. You might guess that it is the White Nile, and you may be right. Or you may wonder if Yusef lives a bit farther south, along the Albert Nile, and you might be correct. The precise location of Yusef's home can not be found on any map—although you will easily find Juba and Nimule, where Yusef's Uncle Njuko goes to trade in guns and ivory—for

the site of Yusef's village, the good green heart of the world, is in the heart and soul and DNA of each of us.

Yusef is neither Nuba, nor Dinka, nor Masai, but he regards all of these people as his close cousins. His native language is a Nilotic-Hamatic tongue known only to a few linguists, and, of course, to Yusef's tribe. Yusef also speaks Arabic, French, and English, and he would be speaking these languages at various times in these stories. In order to avoid confusing children hearing these stories, I have not made attempts to transition from one language to another except where the transition is critical for the narrative, and I have not quoted many words of Yusef's own native language—*la-ka* and *ku-kek* are two notable exceptions that you will meet in chapter one. All of the otherwise unfamiliar words are easily understood in context, and some of them will help to satisfy the intense scatological interests of younger boys.

And, of course, the English language you are reading here does not adequately express the rich complexity and subtle nuance of the Nilotic-Hamatic tongue of Yusef's village: our single word 'cousin' corresponds to a dozen different words that would include a word for 'the daughter of my mother's sister,' and a word for 'the son of my mother's brother,' and a word for every different permutation of family relationship and gender. In many ways, Yusef—barefoot, clad in a loincloth, tending cattle among the thorn trees—lives in a more complex world than we do.

Yusef lives in a dangerous world, too, as we shall see. But the real Yusef lives in a far more hostile world than the mythic place I have given his avatar, for there is no safe haven—high above cliffs, protected by African swallows—no safe haven for Yusef and Khalid and their cousins, no safe haven at all from the malaria and the

other fevers and dread diseases that stalk this tragic continent. No safe haven but the one we can build, of science and community, if we so choose.

Some readers will be offended that I have presented in a book for children such themes as war and murder and slavery. The stark fact is that we adults—in charge of this world, making economic and political decisions every day—are, at this very moment, inflicting upon millions of children war and murder and slavery and starvation and rape. Children are moral beings. Moral beings have a responsibility to know about these things and to work for change. If I am guilty of anything, I am guilty of soft-pedaling the truth, and for that, I do apologize.

I am gratified that *ONCE UPON A TIME, A CHILD* has touched the hearts and souls of readers. I hope that you left those stories wanting to know more about Yusef: where he came from, and what happened to him. This book is a part of the answer.

Chapter 1

Once upon a time, a child helped a little baby calf to be born. This is the story of how the child helped the baby calf to be born, and how the child lost the calf, and about what happened next.

Yusef and his twin brother, Khalid, were tending their father's herd of cattle. There were twelve cattle right now, but two of the cows were pregnant, so there would be new calves soon, gangly silly things that Yusef and his twin brother, Khalid, would have to look after even more carefully. The cattle were skinny this time of year, in the dry season. The grass was dry and thin and the blades of grass were few and far between, for the rains had not yet come. The air was scorching hot—so hot, that if you took a deep breath, it seemed that someone had set fire to your lungs—and the thorn trees provided scant shade from the blazing sun.

The cattle were slow and lazy in the hot African air. Flies buzzed and landed on the cows' backsides—all dirty with cow poop, or *la-ka*—and the flies would eat this cow poop, the *la-ka*, or the flies would bite the cattle to drink their blood. Then the cows would swish their tails, and the flies—swollen fat and round with all the cow blood and all the *la-ka* they had eaten—the flies would buzz about some more and land upon the faces of the cows and crawl to the corners of the cows' eyes for a sip of the cows' tears, for that was the only water around at all in the thorn forest in the dry season.

Yusef felt slow and lazy, too. When flies landed on him, he would swat at them, and sometimes he would smash one—splat!—and it would burst and splatter *la-ka* and cow blood, or Yusef's own blood, all over. But the air was so hot, and there were so many flies that usually it was not worth the effort of swatting the flies at all.

In this awful heat, Yusef would daydream: one day, Yusef thought, he would have his own herd of fat, sleek cattle that were full of milk and bore twin calves every year, and the grass would grow so rich and sweet and in such plenty that Yusef could just let the cattle find it all on their own.

While Yusef daydreamed, the skinny cattle grazed slowly in the thin dry grass.

The cattle were moving so slowly that Khalid decided that he didn't need to help Yusef take care of the cattle at all. Khalid picked up his bow and a half-dozen arrows, and he wandered off, hunting for antelope. No one around here had seen any antelope for many days. As soon as any antelope came along, they would be killed for meat. But that really didn't matter to Khalid: he loved hunting, and he hated tending cattle, and he would far rather hunt than tend their father's herd.

Khalid said nothing as he left, and Yusef said nothing: There were no words of "Go well, elder brother," and no "Stay well, younger brother," for Yusef and Khalid never spoke words of farewell to each other. How can you say good-bye to half your soul?

So Yusef was alone with the skinny cattle that were grazing on the poor dry grass in the thin shade of the thorn trees. The ground was so dry that it had turned to dust, and every time a cow would take a step, her hoof would raise a little dust cloud, like a puff of smoke.

One pregnant cow—the oldest cow in the herd, so old that it was a wonder that she was pregnant at all, dried up old thing—wasn't eating. She was just standing in a tiny clearing among the thorn trees, breathing hard. Her belly was swollen huge and round—even though the rest of her was so skinny that her bones were poking out all over, and her bony hips looked like the broad wings of a vulture soaring in flight—and her swollen sides were

heaving, in and out, in and out beneath these bony wings. Yusef watched the cow. The cow peed a bit and then there was a great gush of fluid from out of her bottom—her *ku-kek*—and then two long, skinny legs poked right out of her *ku-kek*.

A calf was being born. But all that was out now were two wet skinny legs with pink wet hooves.

Yusef looked around for Khalid. Someone needed to run to their little grass house in the village, to tell their parents.

But Khalid was nowhere to be seen. Khalid could run very fast, and by now, Yusef knew, Khalid's strong legs had carried him far away from here, pursuing antelope.

Yusef looked again at the cow. Her *ku-kek* was bulging tight and her swollen sides were heaving hard, and she started lowing, moo—moooo—mooooooooo. There were thirsty flies gathering all over her wet backsides now. The flies were sipping at the water she had spilt out of her, and the flies were biting her while she was busy giving birth to the calf. Her tail was stretched out straight behind her, and she wasn't swatting it at the flies at all. She was just concentrating on trying to push the little calf out into the world.

Cows are not terribly bright, and it is very hard for a cow to concentrate on more than one thing at a time.

The two long, skinny legs poked farther out of the cow's bottom now. The legs were slick with the wet stuff that had come out, and the legs were streaked with blood. The cow was mooing louder.

"Khalid!" Yusef yelled.

There was no answer.

"Khalid!" Yusef called again, just as loud as he could.

Still there was no answer.

Now the cow was bellowing louder than Yusef could possibly yell. If Khalid were within a thousand long,

running strides, he would have to hear this bellowing, Yusef thought.

Yusef knew that he would have to stay with the cow.

The cow's knees buckled, and she fell to the ground in a great cloud of dust. The little calf's legs were still sticking out of her *ku-kek*, and there was more blood on them.

The cow was bellowing so loud that Yusef was worried that she might attract hungry lions. Nobody had seen lions around here for years, but you never knew when the lions might return. Besides, there were always hyenas around here, smaller than lions, but just as deadly, with powerful jaws that could crunch right through the bones of a man's leg in a single bite.

Yusef squatted down in the dust and waited. The cow—collapsed in a heap upon the ground—bellowed, and her sides heaved, and more watery stuff gushed out of her, and now the fluid that was gushing out ran bloodier than ever, and made a huge puddle of mud and blood behind the old cow.

Yusef wished his mother or his father were here. They would know what to do.

In a while, the cow stopped bellowing so loud. Her tongue was lolled out in the dust and she looked exhausted. She lay still on her side, one bony hip pointed up toward the sky.

She looked as if she might die.

Yusef looked up at the sky. There were already vultures circling. Somehow, vultures always knew when death was near.

Yusef turned his attention away from the vultures.

The little pink hooves of the calf—still sticking out of the cow's *ku-kek*—started kicking in the mud that had formed when the cow had gushed water.

Then the little legs went still.

Yusef decided that he had to do something.

Anything to save the cow and her calf and defeat the hungry circling vultures.

Yusef knew that the calf had to come out of the cow and into the world, but the cow didn't seem like she had enough strength left in her to push the calf out. The cow wasn't concentrating on anything now except breathing, and she wasn't even doing very well at that.

Yusef was barefoot, as he had been all his life. Yusef had never owned any shoes, but he thought that someday—after his feet stopped growing—he might save up money to buy some sandals.

Yusef walked with his bare feet through the hot dust. He trod over the thorns that had fallen to the ground, but his feet were tough from walking barefoot all his life. Yusef put his hands around the little hooves of the calf that was partly born, and he wiped the mud and the blood off the partly-born calf's legs and hooves. The hooves were soft and pink, not like the hard brown hooves of the grown-up cattle, and now the little pink hooves were beginning to turn blue, and Yusef thought that blue was probably a bad color; sometimes when people died, you could see their fingernails, or the palms of their hands, or their lips, turn blue as they died.

It wasn't fair for the little calf to die before it had even got finished being born. It wasn't fair at all, and that made Yusef angry.

Yusef grabbed the calf's knees. He tugged with all his might. He tugged with all his anger. He tugged so hard that his feet slipped in the mud and he fell—face down, Splot!—into the mud and the blood.

Yusef stood up. He wiped the mud and the blood out of his eyes. He grabbed the calf's knees again, and he planted one bare foot on the rump of the old cow, and he

pulled and he tugged and he yanked and he jerked, and he pulled some more, just as hard as he could.

Still the little baby calf would not be born, no matter how hard Yusef pulled. Yusef put down the calf's legs.

Yusef broke a big branch off a thorn tree. He sat down in the mud behind the old cow, and he put both his bare feet on her bottom, on either side of her *ku-kek*. With one hand, Yusef held one leg of the calf; and with his other hand, he whipped the old cow with the big thorny branch.

The old cow mooed. She bellowed and she tried to stand. Her sides heaved hard, and she struggled and stood. Yusef grabbed both legs of the calf and held on, pulling against the cow just as hard as he could.

The old cow ran for ten or twelve big running strides with Yusef hanging on for dear life. Then there was a great slurping sound and the calf shot right out of her *ku-kek* and Yusef fell down—Thump!—and the wet little calf fell right on top of him—Splot!

Yusef heard a loud laugh of delight.

Yusef's father stepped into the clearing.

Yusef's father laughed another bright, clear laugh. He ran over to Yusef and helped him up, laughing all the while. Yusef looked down at himself. He saw that he was covered in mud and blood and goo from the old cow. On top of the mud and the blood and the goo, there was a layer of dry gray dust that covered Yusef's black skin. It made Yusef look like a pale gray ghost.

Yusef started laughing, too.

The old cow limped over to her calf. The calf was lying on the ground, covered in a thin gray membrane—a caul—that looked like a layer of loose wrinkled skin. The old cow knew her duty—she had given birth to many calves over many seasons, wet and dry, poor withered-up old thing—she knew her duty, and, tired as she was, she

bent down her neck, and she licked the thin veil of the caul, and the caul slid off the calf, and then she licked the calf all over his body, all the way from his bony little head down to his little bottom, and she licked the little calf's long gangly legs as he stood up and wobbled on those four wobbly, gangly legs, and then the calf went over to the old cow's udder. The calf found a nice teat, and he started suckling there—Slurp, slurp, slurp.

"That is a very handsome bull calf," Yusef's father said of the skinny, wobbly, wet creature.

The little bull calf kept making hungry slurping sounds. He was already getting plenty of milk, even if his mother was the oldest cow in the herd.

"I thought he was going to die," Yusef said.

"You did all the right things," Yusef's father said. "If you had not pulled the calf out, he would have died. The cow would have died, too. So the thorn tree branch was a very good idea."

"You saw me do that?" Yusef asked.

"I saw everything," Yusef's father said. His voice was low and strong and serious.

"Why didn't you come help, then?" Yusef asked. He cast his eyes down at the ground to show respect for his father when he asked this impertinent question. Then Yusef added, "If the calf had died, and the cow had died, you would have lost two of your cattle."

Yusef's father looked at Yusef very seriously. "I am not just raising cattle," Yusef's father said. "I am raising sons."

Yusef's father cast his eyes about the clearing.

"Has your elder brother gone off hunting again?" Yusef's father asked.

"I do not know where my elder brother has gone," Yusef said. It was not a lie, not exactly, Yusef thought. He knew that Khalid had gone hunting, but he did not

really know which direction, so he didn't know where his elder brother had gone.

At that moment, however, Khalid entered the clearing. He held his bow with an arrow nocked and ready.

"I heard the old cow bellowing," Khalid said. "I thought perhaps I might have to save my younger brother and my father's cattle from a lion."

"Your younger brother has done all of the saving of cattle today," their father said. "And for this, I give him the new little bull calf. It will be the first of his own herd."

Yusef remembered his daydream about having his very own herd of fat cattle grazing in lush grass. Yusef was happy, and he was proud, too.

But Khalid's eyes flashed with anger.

Khalid looked right at their father and met his eyes straight on. Khalid was not showing respect at all. This was most rude.

Father folded his arms and stared back at Khalid. Their father looked deadly serious now.

Khalid lowered his eyes, but only a bit. His fingers tightened on the nocked arrow. "Why should my younger brother get a bull calf before I have any cattle for my own?" Khalid asked. "I am the elder brother, and I have a birthright."

"No," Father told Khalid. "You have only the rights I give you. If you wish to have cattle of your own, you will earn them, as your brother has done this day."

The little calf was still nursing at the old cow's udder, slurp, slurp, slurp. Yusef could see the calf's little belly growing rounder as it filled with milk. In Yusef's mind, the calf was already growing into a handsome, strong bull.

Khalid drew the bow. He pointed the arrow straight at the little calf's chest.

"Khalid can have the calf," Yusef blurted out. "I don't want it."

"You must not allow your brother to steal from you," their father said.

"Did you not give me the calf?" Yusef asked his father. Then Yusef paused. He lowered his voice, and he cast his eyes down again, to show respect. But he went on, his voice firm: "Is the calf not mine, Father, to do with as I please?" Yusef looked at the little bull calf, and he looked at the sharp arrow and the tight bowstring, and he looked at his brother's narrowed eyes peering down the length of that terrible arrow.

"The bull calf is yours, Yusef," Father said. "The bull calf is yours, to do with as you wish."

"Then I give the bull calf to my elder brother, freely," Yusef said. He held out his hand and gently pushed his brother's bow-hand toward the ground.

"Please," Yusef said to Khalid, very softly, "Please, my elder brother, take good care of your new bull calf."

The old cow died of fever two days later. When an animal dies of fever, its flesh is poison, so Yusef helped his father to drag the carcass far away from the village and far away from their precious well of sweet, cool water. They dragged the old cow up into the hills until they were both sweating and tired, and the vultures were circling. They left the old cow there for the vultures that would feast by day and for the hyenas that would move in at night and crunch her bones in their powerful jaws and help the old cow to become part of the earth again.

On the same day the old cow died, the other pregnant cow gave birth to her own new calf without any problems, and Yusef took the membrane—the caul—that the new calf was born in, and he laid the caul over the bull calf that had been his, and the mother of the new

calf licked the caul off the bull calf, and she thought that he was her own calf, too, so she raised both of the calves as her own.

Yusef made sure the young cow got plenty of water, and he always took her to the best grass. The two little calves grew fast from the rich milk that she gave them because of the good green grass and the cool sweet water Yusef always made sure she had.

Khalid spent every day off in the hills, hunting.

And so—over the seasons, wet and dry—the little bull calf grew, and grew, and grew. The bull calf loved to be with Yusef. Sometimes Yusef would doze off in the warm shade of the thorn trees, or he would be lost in a book he was reading while he was tending the cattle, and the bull calf—who soon was not little at all, and who stopped being a calf, and who was fast becoming a very large bull—this bull whose life Yusef had saved would find Yusef lying on his back in the shade, and this massive bull would put his cold, sloppy wet nose right on Yusef's bare belly and snort. The bull would snort and paw at the ground. If you have ever seen an angry bull that has just seen a red flag, pawing at the ground and snorting, then you know exactly how the bull looked, with shoulders wider than you can spread your arms, and wickedly curved horns that came to points as sharp as knives in front of his head. And when this massive bull would push his sloppy nose into Yusef's bare belly and hold his wicked pointed horns just inches from Yusef's eyes, Yusef would wake from dozing, or put away his book, and he would rise in front of that snorting, pawing bull, and Yusef would scratch behind the bull's ears and dig his fingers in as deep as he could, and scratch as hard as he could, until the bull moaned low and happy. Then Yusef would throw his arms around the bull's neck

and swing his legs up and over the bull's back, and the bull would amble off with Yusef mounted high, riding as proud and noble as any knight or any king of any age in all of history.

In the evening, Khalid would come back to the village and practice with his bow and arrows. Some evenings, after the cattle and the goats were safely in their kraal, Yusef would practice with his brother. Khalid tied together heavy mats of millet straw and built them into the shape of a man. Khalid could stand thirty long paces away from the straw-man target and hit that straw man square in the chest almost every time.

Yusef tried, but he nearly always missed.

Yusef decided the target was wrong, that he missed because he didn't like using that straw-man target. So Yusef made a heavy ball of straw about twice as big as a man. He stood off at ten paces, and shot an arrow, and missed.

Khalid laughed at him. Yusef was angry. He picked up another arrow and drew it back, and peered along the shaft of the arrow. He closed his other eye, and he squinted down the arrow and he concentrated, and he calculated—very carefully—in his mind, the path of the arrow, and he let it fly.

And missed again.

Again, Khalid laughed at him.

Yusef nocked another arrow. This time he tried twice as hard. The arrow flew wildly away from the target.

Yusef threw down the bow.

"It is not fair," Yusef shouted. "I tried very hard."

"It is a good thing, my younger brother," Khalid said, "that you are so good at tending cattle. Otherwise, you would be worth nothing."

Yusef's and Khalid's father, who had been sitting in the shade and drinking cool water from a calabash and watching his sons, rose and walked over to the boys.

"Khalid," Father said, "You are the fastest runner in the village. I need for you to run to the village of Kameri. Tell your uncle Njuko that I have a young cow to trade with him. You are very fast, and you can be back before it is time for dinner. That is why I send you."

Khalid stood with pride. He really was the best runner in the village. Not only was he fast, but he could run all day, through the dust and heat, and never seemed to tire.

It was not that Khalid did not tire, however, but that he never, ever gave in to tiredness. Neither did Khalid ever give in to fear, or to pain.

"Go well, elder son," Father said to Khalid.

"Stay well, Father," Khalid said. Khalid ducked his head out of respect, and he turned and ran, the dust rising behind him and hanging in the air like smoke.

Yusef's father bent down and picked up the bow that Yusef had thrown to the ground. Yusef's father wiped the dust from the bow.

"Your ancestors," Yusef's father said, "were great archers."

Yusef knew the stories. His ancestors were such fine archers that they had conquered all of Egypt, and some of them had ruled as pharaohs. Usually, Yusef liked to hear the old stories, but after missing a huge target—twice as big as a man—at ten paces, he really didn't want to hear about those ancestors at all.

It didn't matter what Yusef wanted, though.

Father went on: "Their bows were so powerful that their arrows would pierce the shields of their enemies, shields made of the skins of crocodiles, dried and baked in the hot sun until the skins were hard as iron. Your

ancestors were great archers. They could shoot a tiny bird out of the air."

Yusef ducked his head and cast his eyes low, out of respect. "I know those things," Yusef said. "I have thought about that, Father, and I have tried very hard to learn to shoot." Yusef paused, and he raised his eyes just a bit to stare at the bow regretfully.

"Those ancestors were a very long time ago, Father," Yusef added.

"They are our ancestors," Yusef's father said. "Their blood flows in your heart at this moment. As it flowed in my own heart when I was your age."

Yusef stared at his father—although staring is very, very rude—for it was as close as his father had ever come to speaking of what the songs all said, about how Father had slain a great, ravening beast with a single arrow.

But Father looked away, as if he had already said far, far more that he had ever meant to say about that story and that night, so very long ago.

Yusef's father handed the bow and an arrow to Yusef.

"Therefore," Yusef's father said, "I tell you what an ancient, blind and crippled man once whispered in my ear, when I was as young as you are today: Let your heart and the blood of your ancestors aim your arrows. Do not think about the aim, only feel it in your heart and in your hands. Your eyes and hands and heart will remember what your mind has never known."

Yusef nocked the arrow. He drew back the arrow until the feather-fletching brushed his cheek, and he closed his left eye. With his right eye, he squinted down the arrow at the fat round straw target.

"Keep both eyes wide open," Yusef's father said. "And stop thinking. Feel the living bow in your hands. It is made of the heart of a tree and the sinew of an antelope."

Yusef felt the bow quivering with the tension of his muscles. For a moment, he felt as if the bow remembered that it was once living tree and leaping antelope.

"Let the target fill your eyes and just watch the arrow fly into it," Yusef's father said.

"How do I decide when to release the arrow?" Yusef asked.

"You don't decide," Yusef's father said. "You only see what your heart and your hands have already done."

Yusef tried to turn off his mind and let his eyes and heart and hands do the work. In a moment, the arrow flew. It hit the edge of Khalid's man-target, far, far away from the big round target Yusef had been aiming for.

"That was a very bad shot," Yusef said.

"It was a shot," Yusef's father said. "The arrow went where the arrow went. The shot was not good or bad, it just was. Now let your hands and heart remember what they did and let your eyes tell your hands and heart how the arrow flew."

Yusef picked up another arrow. He nocked the arrow, and he drew the arrow back until his right hand just brushed his cheek, and he felt the hum of the living bow in his hands, and he let the target fill his eyes, and his heart flew with the arrow through the clear African air.

The arrow flew where the arrow flew.

Yusef shot again and again.

The arrows landed where the arrows landed, and Yusef felt as if he were just watching the arrows fly, not shooting them at all.

So it was a surprise when Yusef woke—as if from a dream—to the sound of clapping hands.

Yusef's mother, with Yusef's youngest sister strapped to her back, was applauding.

Yusef shook his head to wake himself completely.

"It was like dreaming," Yusef said.

Yusef's father walked to the round straw-ball target. Yusef saw that the last six arrows he had shot were clustered all close together, right in the center of the target.

"I am an archer," Yusef said.

Yusef's father smiled very slightly.

"When you have shot ten-thousand arrows as you have shot these last six arrows," Yusef's father said, "And when you have shot another ten-thousand more just the same, and another ten-thousand just the same again, only then you may have just begun to become an archer."

Yusef sat down with his father to make more arrows.

They sat in the dust, and they leaned their backs up against the sturdy old baobab tree that grew in front of their grass house. The baobab tree was far older than their village—it was already old before the last pharaoh died—and the trunk of the baobab tree was twice as wide as Yusef's house. The thick trunk—twice as wide as a house—was just about all that there was to the old baobab tree, except for a few stubby gnarled branches at the top that twisted like thick roots in the air. The first baobab tree in all creation had been a lovely, graceful shade tree, the tree that gave the coolest, darkest sweetest shade in all creation. But the first baobab tree was not content; it had demanded of the Creator more fragrant blossoms, and then more luscious fruit, and then longer limbs, and then more and more and more of everything, until the Creator—the father of Mbaka, she who had thrown the ashes into the sky, the ashes that had become the Milky Way—the Creator had become angry with that first baobab tree, and He had pulled it up by the roots, and He had jammed it back into the ground upside down, and that is why the baobab tree is

today called 'the upside-down tree,' for its roots are in the air, and its branches are buried deep within the earth, and it has neither fragrant blossoms nor luscious fruit, nor long limbs, and that is why the only shade of the baobab tree is cast by its thick trunk. Once in a while, a few leaves appear at the tips of the thick twisted root-branches—two leaves here, three leaves there, perhaps twenty leaves on the whole tree, scattered, forlorn, and pitiful.

And the baobab tree is no doubt sorry for treating the Creator so rudely.

But the shade of the trunk of the baobab tree is good shade, dark and cool—for the Creator did not take that gift away. If you sit in the shade of the baobab tree to work in the heat of the day, you can lean your back against a creature that has lived on earth for twice a hundred generations of your own puny kind, and while your own hot heart pounds away your life so fast, the old baobab tree supports your weight and cools you with its shade and draws water from the earth and light and air from the sky and slowly goes about its own business with no regard for such a brief creature as yourself.

And so it was that Yusef and his father leaned their backs against the old baobab tree and set to work, making more arrows

"If you are to shoot ten-thousand arrows," Yusef's father said, "you will have to learn to make arrows for yourself."

Yusef's father handed Yusef a dozen short sinew strings made of the tendons of antelope. The strings were dry and stiff.

"Chew on these," Yusef's father said. "Chewing will make them soft." Yusef's father took another dozen of the sinews, and he put them into his own mouth and started

chewing on them. While he chewed, he took a long, straight stick and scraped the stick smooth with a knife.

Yusef watched and did exactly the same. He took the dried sinews into his mouth. They tasted like dried meat, and felt all gristly. Yusef scraped a stick with a knife, trying to do the work just as his father did it.

Yusef and his father worked. Soon the arrow shafts were straight and smooth. Yusef's father carved a nock deep into the butt of his arrow and Yusef did the same on his arrow.

The sinews were now soft in Yusef's mouth. The flesh-taste was still strong.

Yusef's father picked up the tail-feather of an African swallow. The feather was straight and thin. Yusef's father split the feather down the middle of the shaft. Then he touched a bit of sticky goo from a *nyalela* bush to the split shaft and stuck the feather to the arrow. He stuck two more feathers onto the arrow and bound them down with a wrap of soft, wet sinew pulled from his mouth.

Yusef did the same. His efforts were clumsy, and the feather was all glopped down on the arrow.

"Try it again," his father said.

Yusef tried again. This time the arrow looked better.

"Will I have to make ten-thousand arrows before they are fit to shoot?" Yusef asked his father.

Yusef's father smiled—with his mouth still full of softening sinews—and he went on making arrows in silence.

And so did Yusef.

Khalid returned just toward suppertime. Khalid was covered in sweat and dust, and he was breathing hard.

"I see you, elder son," Father said.

"I am here, Father," Khalid said. And then Khalid was rude, for he did not ask, "Are you well this evening,

Father?" Khalid was always in too much of a hurry to be polite.

"My uncle Njuko says he accepts the young cow you offer," Khalid said. "My uncle Njuko says he will give you six goats of his choosing or four goats of your choosing."

Father—who was always far too patient with Khalid—handed Khalid a calabash of cool water. "You have done well, elder son."

Khalid drank deep from the calabash. He wiped the dust and sweat from his face.

"My uncle Njuko will give me five pregnant cows," Khalid said.

"Why would your uncle give you five pregnant cows?" Father asked. Uncle Njuko was a very sharp trader, and he never, ever gave anything away. Besides, Uncle Njuko was still bitter about a goat his brother had taken from him when they were both children.

Khalid looked at Yusef. Then he then turned back to their father.

Yusef's heart was in his throat, for he knew what was coming next.

"I shall make a trade," Khalid said. "I shall trade him my handsome young bull for the five pregnant cows, and I shall have my own herd."

Father looked at both his sons. He looked a long time at Yusef, and Yusef just stared down at the ground.

"If you make this trade," Father said, "you will have five cows and perhaps five or ten new calves to look after. You will have to give up hunting to care for them."

"Yusef already watches my bull and all your cattle," Khalid said. "He can easily look after my five cows and their calves. He will have more time if he is not riding around on my bull."

"I saved the life of that bull when he was born," Yusef said. "I used a branch of the thorn tree to make his

mother stand up and run while I pulled him from his mother's womb. I put the caul of another calf on him so he could get a new mother when his own mother died. I led his new mother to sweet grass so she would have enough milk for two calves. I have watched over him every day of his life. You were out hunting while I did all of these things. The bull might belong to you, but he doesn't know that."

"He is mine," Khalid said. "That bull is mine, younger brother."

"Try to ride him," Yusef said. "If you think he is your bull, just try to ride him, elder brother. See what happens."

Nothing ever scared Khalid, and Khalid never, ever turned down a dare. And so, the next morning, instead of going hunting, Khalid accompanied Yusef with the herd. As the herd was grazing among the thorn trees, Khalid approached the bull. The bull—who had never liked Khalid, as if he recalled and understood that Khalid had once drawn an arrow and aimed it at his little chest, still damp from his mother's womb—the bull pawed at the dry ground and snorted and pawed and snorted and pawed and snorted until he was standing in a cloud of dust and great gobs of snot were hanging down from his nose and his eyes were shot with red. Yusef could see that this was not at all the same sort of snorting and pawing that the bull did when he would rouse Yusef from a nap to scratch his ears and go for a ride on his back.

The bull was not playing, not at all.

Khalid stepped toward the bull.

The bull charged, head low, thick curved horns sharp as serpent teeth. Khalid stood his ground. Yusef thought he had never seen so much courage: the bull was a fearsome sight, charging fast, trailing a cloud of dust,

massive shoulders and broad horns that curved into those deadly points.

"Run!" Yusef screamed at his brother. Yusef hated himself for making that dare.

Khalid glanced at Yusef.

Khalid threw his head back and laughed. It sounded like their father's laugh, high and bright and clear. It did not sound like the sound a person would make who was about to be gored and trampled by a bull. Yusef hated himself even more.

The bull charged on ahead, churning a plume of dust behind.

The bull's head was down low, ready to gore deep into Khalid's soft, bare belly.

Yusef tried to close his eyes, but his eyes would not obey.

At the last moment, Khalid danced forward, right at the bull. Khalid raised one foot onto the bull's head, right between the deadly horns, and he straightened his leg just as the bull threw his head up, and Khalid was tossed into the air as if he weighed less than a feather.

He didn't come down.

The bull turned, and charged again, his eyes red as blood, his nose snorting great gobs of bloody snot, and the bull charged right at the spot where Khalid had stood and laughed his bright clear laugh. The bull charged right through that spot where Khalid had stood, and the bull turned and charged through it again, and again, and then the bull returned to that spot where Khalid had stood and the bull stamped and snorted and stamped some more, as if he had stomped Khalid right into the earth.

Then the bull ran in a tight little circle, celebrating his victory.

Yusef heard laughing high overhead. He gazed up. Khalid was high up in the thorn tree, well out of reach of the bull.

Khalid laughed even louder.

"You can take your bull away now," Khalid said.

"I don't have a bull," Yusef said.

"Of course you do," Khalid said. "I just danced on his head."

"Are you hurt?" Yusef called up into the thorn tree. "Are you slain, elder brother? Are you giving me your bull because you are dying? Do not leave me, elder brother."

"I have thorns everywhere in my body," Khalid said, and he laughed again. "There is no place on my body that does not hurt. And I shall get more thorns in me as I climb down. But I am not slain. I have a story that is worth every bit of the pain. It is worth giving you the bull. I care nothing for tending cattle, anyway. I am a hunter and a warrior, and now I am a dancer of bulls. Take your bull away, younger brother."

Yusef called softly to the bull. He calmed the bull with gentle words, and he led the bull away from the thorn tree. Yusef led the bull to sparkling cool water, and Yusef let the bull drink, long and deep and slow. The bull nuzzled Yusef's bare belly and Yusef scratched the bull's ears and swung up onto the bull's back, and Yusef rode the bull into the village to tell everyone that Khalid—Khalid, his elder brother, always strong, always brave—that Khalid had danced upon the biggest, fiercest bull in the world.

Yusef's bull.

Chapter 2

Once upon a time, a child helped to start a new school. This is the story of how the child started the school, and what happened next.

Yusef and his twin brother, Khalid, had plenty to do. There were cattle to be tended as they grazed the sparse grass among the thorn trees. There were goats—the herd of fat little goats, all brown and white—to be tended as well, though Yusef's and Khalid's sisters were older and could do most of that work now. Much of the work in the gardens—the digging and the planting—was done by Mother and Father. The weeding was now done by Yusef's sisters, who were growing fast as weeds themselves.

Yusef did not trade away his bull calf that had grown into such a massive bull. The bull was so big and so handsome that people from many villages said it was the biggest and finest bull they had ever seen, and they brought their cows here to be bred by the bull so that they could get such excellent calves, too.

Yusef charged a high price for breeding by his handsome, massive bull. When the cows that were bred gave birth to their calves, if there were twins, one of them would belong to Yusef, and Yusef brought the calves to his own village as soon as they were able to leave their mothers. If just one calf were born, Yusef would receive a thin silver coin, and these coins he kept buried in a leather bag in a hole under the old baobab tree, saving the coins for the day when his feet stopped growing, and he might buy himself sandals, or even shoes.

Soon the bull had sired enough calves that Yusef had brought home sixteen new calves—all females, heifer calves, and his leather bag of silver coins clinked brightly when he dropped in ever more coins. Yusef had given

eight of the calves to his father, and he had given four of the calves to his brother, and he had given half of the silver coins to his mother so that she could buy bright cloth to dress his sisters in. And Yusef had bought his mother a bottle of sesame oil to keep her skin soft and shining black when the dry season came.

Yusef and Khalid were growing taller and stronger every day.

Khalid still went hunting many days, but now he was more interested in building a herd of his own. Even though he still hated the work of tending the cattle, Khalid had a motive.

"I shall need a wife," Khalid said. "A hunter and a warrior and a dancer of bulls cannot easily afford the bride-price. So I shall need my own herd."

"How much do you think the bride-price will be?" Yusef asked.

"Perhaps ten cattle," Khalid said. "In the village of Kameri, our Uncle Njuko has found for me a girl who is not too ugly, and the bride-price for her will be just ten cattle."

"Kameri is a poor village," Yusef said. "They drink too much beer there, and their children are always sick, with swollen bellies and ginger-colored hair and sunken eyes, and they grow up sick and ugly and poor, with very bad teeth. You can do far better than to take a wife from Kameri."

"A wife from Kameri will let me go hunting any time I want," Khalid said. "A wife from Kameri will brew my beer for me and let me sleep in the shade while she tends the garden. And she can tend my cattle too. A wife from Kameri will obey me far better than our mother obeys our father," Khalid said.

Yusef laughed, because it was their mother who really ruled at home—with or without her heavy leather strop.

Their father was headman of the village, but inside of each grass house in that village, it was the woman who decided everything that mattered.

"Our cousins, the Dinka, pay a bride-price of fifty cattle, or a hundred, or two hundred cattle," Yusef said. "And I hear that their women are in charge there, too, and the Dinka are very, very rich. Perhaps that is the better way, to have the women in charge of things. Our Uncle Njuko rules Kameri, and you can see what kind of village it is."

"I cannot imagine paying two hundred cattle for a wife," Khalid said. "What if she dies the first time she gives birth?"

"Our mother has given birth nine times now," Yusef said. "And only three of her babies have died. She has a baby almost every year, and she is still very stout and strong. So if you pick a stout, healthy wife—not a sickly wife from Kameri that costs you only ten cattle—she will not die the first time she gives birth."

Khalid thought about it.

"Anyway," Yusef said to Khalid. "I plan to wait many years before I take a wife, for I wish to go to school, and learn, and build up a great herd of fat cattle. In the meantime, I shall help you to build your herd also."

"I do not like school," Khalid said. "Or cattle, either."

Part way down the cliff below the village, there was a huge outcropping of old limestone, rocks that had formed under ancient seas millions of years ago. Once, there had been a great house—a mansion for the rich—on the outcropping of limestone, for there was a spring there that never failed, and when the British had come briefly to this country, there had been a coffee and tea plantation in the hills where Yusef's village lay, and the British family that owned the plantation had built their

house there, perched high above the Nile. They had built a mansion of many rooms, and had brought with them books and furniture and even a grand piano from England. But the children of the family had sickened with fevers, and they had died, and the mother had gone mad with grief and had hanged herself, and the father had wandered one day down to the banks of the Nile, and had never returned. Now the coffee trees and the tea trees had grown wild and ragged, and the grand piano was home to hungry termites, and most of the old mansion had fallen into ruin. Even so, there were many rooms remaining, and two families lived among the ruins.

Imam Reza was from Persia. He was a very holy man with two wives and seven children. He prayed, with his two wives and his seven children, five times every day.

Father MacGregor was a holy man, too. He had no wife at all, and he had no children, and he prayed a great deal, but perhaps not as often as did the imam.

Imam Reza and his family, and Father MacGregor with no family except himself, shared the ruins, all covered over with a tin roof.

Yusef and his brother loved to hike down a narrow trail that wound down the cliff to the ruins where Father MacGregor and Imam Reza and his family lived. At the entrance, Yusef and Khalid would put on light robes to cover their bodies, out of respect for Imam Reza and his family. Then Yusef and Khalid would play among the old stones with the imam's children, and—when the imam's children were called to prayer, five times a day—Yusef and Khalid would visit with Father MacGregor.

Father MacGregor had lived in Africa for many, many years. He said that he was far older than anyone in the village was, and indeed, no one in the village could remember when Father MacGregor had not lived in the

ruins that sat upon the limestone outcropping just below the cliff.

It was said that Father MacGregor was related to the British who had built the mansion—he was a nephew, perhaps, of the woman who had gone mad, or of the man who had wandered down to the banks of the Nile and had never returned.

It was said that—those many, many years ago—the young white priest had arrived by boat and had climbed the long trail up to the mansion, and that this young priest had wandered through the mansion—which already falling into ruin, with termites eating through the wooden floors, jungle vines bursting through the glass windows and twisting around the legs of the grand piano like leafy green snakes—and that this young priest had called aloud the names of all the children who had died of fevers, and of the woman who had gone mad and hanged herself, and of the man who had gone down to the banks of the Nile to be devoured by crocodiles.

And it was said that the young priest had opened a small case that he had carried with him, and had spread a small white cloth upon the termite-infested grand piano, and had said a Mass for the Dead, and then he had opened up a liquor cabinet in the old ruin, and he had poured himself a whiskey, and another, and another, and that had kept on drinking whiskey for weeks, until Yusef's grandfather had crept one day into the ruin and found the thin, sick, and stinking white priest—turned yellow from the whiskey—and had brought him to his own grass hut and had bathed him and fed him until he was well, and his skin had gone from the sickly yellow to its normal color of surpassing whiteness.

Now—many years later—Father MacGregor was well (though very old) and he was sleek and fat, and his skin

had browned a bit under the African sun, and he spoke the language of the village as if it were his own, and he had never returned to the land of his birth. Once a year, Father MacGregor opened the rotting liquor cabinet and poured himself a single whiskey, and he raised the glass to the memory of the white people—his own kin—who had lived in this place in Africa so long ago, and who had never learned the local language, but whose bones all rested in Africa now.

Even though Father MacGregor now spoke the language of the village, Yusef's father had asked Father MacGregor to teach Yusef and Khalid English. Yusef's father said that their own language was spoken only in a few villages, and Yusef and Khalid must learn to speak other languages.

Yusef thought that this was very strange, indeed. How could anyone not speak this easy language of his village? All of the good songs were in this language, all of the words for everything important: the words for love, for family. Mother. Father. Sister. Brother.

Words that went straight to the very marrow of your own bones: Birth. Death. Hope.

If you spoke any other language, how could you say the important things of life?

And how would you understand the ancient songs of heroes when they were sung in the evenings and in the mornings in the village?

But Yusef's father had said that his sons must learn the tongues of the wider world, and so Father MacGregor was teaching English and French to Yusef and Khalid. Today, Father MacGregor was speaking English. He was talking with Yusef and Khalid and all of the imam's children. Imam Reza was there, too. Khalid fidgeted in his chair, and scratched at the itchy robe that covered his body. Yusef knew that his brother would far rather be

hunting in the hills, clad only in his loincloth. Yusef's own skin itched under the robe, but he sat still to hear the lessons, his big hands folded neatly on his little desk.

There was a map of the world on the wall at the front of the room.

"This is a very old map," Father MacGregor said. "Some of the countries are gone now."

Imam Reza's daughters giggled. Fatima—the prettiest of them all—asked, "How can a country go away?"

"Ah, Lassie," Father MacGregor said, "All things pass away, heaven and earth and all things under heaven and upon the earth. A mere country can pass away as easily as young master Yusef here might fall off a log."

Father MacGregor swept his hand across a huge area at the top of the map. "See here," Father MacGregor said. "It says Russia, and it says Turkmenistan and it says Manchuria and it says all these other names, but Russia went away, don't you see, with all the others, and then there was the Soviet Union."

"Where are we on the map?" Khalid asked.

"Who among you knows?" Father MacGregor asked his little class.

No one answered. Yusef cast his eyes down, but Father MacGregor called him to the front of the room, anyway. Father MacGregor was always making Yusef answer questions in class.

"Show us, won't you now, young master?" Father MacGregor asked Yusef.

Yusef pointed with his finger to the map. He was shy in front of others, especially when there were girls around, and he spoke quietly. "This is the Nile River," Yusef said, and he ran his finger up the map, all along the Nile from south to north. Then he ran his finger down again from north to south, and he pointed to a place along the Nile to a spot on the map where all the

ink had been worn off, right down to bare paper and where a hole was starting in the map, it was so old and worn.

"Here we are," Yusef said.

"Where is Mecca?" Imam Reza's daughter asked. It was Fatima, the prettiest of the imam's daughters, asking another question. Yusef glanced at her shyly. He felt his heart flutter in his chest.

Imam Reza went to the map. He pointed three times. "Here is Mecca," he said. "And here is Medina. Here is Jerusalem."

"Perhaps," Father MacGregor suggested, "we should talk about history now."

Imam Reza was a tall, gaunt man with a sharp nose and eyes that were black and deep, and they burned with a hunger that would make your soul tremble. Imam Reza looked like a hunting hawk. His voice was deep and dry as gravel at the bottom of a wadi. Imam Reza was dressed in thick, long robes, even in the heat of the day, and Yusef, sitting and sweltering in his thin borrowed robe, wondered how the man could tolerate wearing robes all the time.

Imam Reza pointed at the map, and he taught the history lesson. He was speaking Arabic now, and Yusef loved that language: Arabic sounded almost like music, even in the rough, dry voice of Imam Reza. Imam Reza spoke slowly so that Yusef and Khalid could understand. Imam Reza told about a great man, Abraham, who had lived long ago, whose children had spread about the world and had started many nations—nations that had come and gone, and come again. Imam Reza told the stories of Alexander, and Cyrus, and the Caesars, and he told of Persia, and the glory of Greece and the grandeur of Rome—gleaming upon seven sacred hills, and Imam

Reza's dark hawk-eyes burned bright with passion. Imam Reza told of heroes, and battles, and battlefields littered with the dead, and rivers that ran red with blood.

Fatima raised her hand politely.

"With respect, my father," Fatima began. Her eyes were deep and dark as her father's, but Fatima's eyes frightened Yusef only a little, for her voice was high and sweet and clear, and her Arabic fell on Yusef's ears as the songs of angels. Fatima sat near him, and as she spoke, Yusef could smell her breath. It had the sweet lemony scent of cardamom, for Imam Reza's wives cooked with many wonderful spices.

"With respect, my father," Fatima repeated, "Why are these great men? It seems to me that all they did was kill people, and build their shining cities upon the shattered bones of the dead. Please help me to understand why they were great."

Yusef had wondered the same thing. He was glad that Fatima had asked. And Yusef thought her words were sweet-breathed poetry.

"They won, my child," Imam Reza told his daughter, Fatima. Imam Reza's black eyes bored into Fatima, and she gazed back at him with eyes that were darkling mirrors of his own. "They won, so they got to write the history books."

"It is not fair," Yusef blurted out. "With respect, Imam," he added, "it is not fair at all."

And Fatima turned her dark eyes toward Yusef, and she smiled and blushed, and then she asked—very respectfully—her father another dozen questions that had been in Yusef's own mind, so that it seemed to Yusef that Fatima had gazed with those gentle dark eyes into his very soul.

Later, still talking about history, Imam Reza told of the civilizations that had ringed the Mediterranean Sea like jewels upon a necklace. Imam Reza stepped to the old, worn map of the world and pointed to an island in the Mediterranean Sea. Imam Reza said the island was called Crete. Imam Reza pulled opened a book and showed a picture of a young boy, with skin the color of bronze, dancing into a somersault over the back of a charging bull that looked so much like Yusef's bull it might have been his bull's own twin, thousands of years before. The bronze-skinned boy was tumbling lightly in the air above the bull, delicate as a feather upon the breeze.

"My brother can do that," Yusef blurted out.

Imam Reza stared at Yusef with his dark eyes. It was the second time today that Yusef had been rude in class.

"Pardon me, Imam," Yusef said. "But it is true." Yusef looked toward his brother with pride. Then Yusef told the story of the charging bull and how Khalid had danced upon the bull's head.

"And that bull—my bull—is the biggest, fiercest bull anyone has ever seen," Yusef said. "My bull was charging right at Khalid, but Khalid just laughed, and he—" and Yusef's voice trailed off, because he could see that Fatima was now staring at Khalid in a way she had never looked at Khalid—or Yusef—before, and Fatima's cheeks flushed pink, and she sighed a cardamom-sweet sigh.

"Well, anyway," Yusef added, "my brother wound up high in a thorn tree. It took him an hour to climb down, and he was bleeding from a thousand thorn-pricks."

Fatima giggled then, and Yusef felt better.

Class ended. Khalid bolted from the classroom, shedding his itchy robe as he ran. Yusef wondered how he and his twin brother could be so different. They were

from one seed, their hearts beat as one within their mother's womb, and they were born within moments of each other—their lives being saved by Imam Reza's older wife—so that Yusef and Khalid were named for the imam's own brothers, who had died in a holy war in Persia. Yusef and Khalid were named after these *ghazis*, as Imam Reza called his brothers, for the word *ghazi* means hero.

A brother who dies in a holy war is always a *ghazi*.

Khalid ran off to go hunting in the hills, and Yusef went to talk with Imam Reza and Father MacGregor. He crossed the courtyard, and doves fluttered up from the ground and landed in the pomegranate trees. He entered one of the rooms of the ruined mansion.

Father MacGregor and Imam Reza sat at a table across from each other, in this cool dark room lined with stones. Behind one stone wall of this room Father MacGregor's own kin were buried. Father MacGregor said the dead are always close to us. Just on the other side of the stone wall lay the dead British children and their mother, who had gone mad with grief and had taken her own life. The father of the children was not with them, for he had sealed their bodies behind the wall before he went down to the banks of the Nile to feed his own flesh to the crocodiles.

You could see chinks in the wall, and Yusef thought the spirits of the dead British children might wander out through the chinks in the wall at night, looking for their father. You always had to treat the dead with respect, and say kind words to them. Yusef gazed at the wall and murmured a few words of his own language; he told the young British children that he was sorry that the fevers of the river had found their way into their bodies. He told the British mother that he hoped she had found peace.

He told them all that he was grateful to them for letting him use the books from their library.

Father MacGregor and Imam Reza were playing chess and drinking coffee. This room was their favorite place for doing this. It was cool and quiet there, next to the dead British.

They both looked up when Yusef finished murmuring his words of respect for the dead.

"I see you," Father MacGregor said, in the language of the village.

Imam Reza said nothing, but nodded at Yusef. Imam Reza did not like speaking the language of the village.

"I am here," Yusef answered. "Are you comfortably cool this hot afternoon?"

"I am well," Father MacGregor said, though he wheezed a bit when he said it. His nose was red and bulbous and covered in veins that looked like tangled purple snakes.

"Sit down, Yusef," Imam Reza said. "Shall we all speak English now?"

Father MacGregor nodded. Arabic was difficult for him, and the imam did not speak the language of the village well, so the best choices were always either English or French.

Yusef sat down and studied the chessboard carefully. It looked to Yusef as though Imam Reza were going to mate in three moves, and it looked as though Father MacGregor didn't see it coming.

Imam Reza was a far better chess player than Father MacGregor was. Imam Reza had taught Yusef to play chess, and he had tried to teach Khalid, but Khalid had no interest. This had saddened Imam Reza, for Khalid had been named for his own favorite *ghazi* brother, dead in a glorious holy war. Father MacGregor had let Yusef study chess books from the old library. Yusef had played

chess with Imam Reza until Yusef could beat the imam, and then Yusef had stopped playing chess, because beating Imam Reza was disrespectful, and losing on purpose would not be honest.

"Khalid and I like coming to school here very much," Yusef said. It was partly true: Yusef loved coming to school, even if he did have to sit in an itchy robe, but Khalid would far rather be out hunting.

"This is hardly a proper school," Father MacGregor said. "We just have a little place. We are lucky to have the library full of books salvaged from the old mansion, of course, and the maps. Imam Reza and I are not proper schoolteachers. And for our class, we have only the imam's daughters and you. And your brother, the few times he attends." Father MacGregor touched his queen's rook and started to move it, then changed his mind.

"Of course you are proper teachers," Yusef said, and he cast his eyes down for contradicting an elder. And he added, "With respect, Father MacGregor. You are the only teachers within many days' journey."

Yusef knew the story of Father MacGregor's arrival at the mansion so many years ago. After Yusef's grandfather had nursed Father MacGregor back to health, Father MacGregor had moved into the ruin of the old mansion, and set up housekeeping. He had found carpenter's tools in the old ruin, and he had built a tiny church among the old stone walls outside the mansion, in a stable where once the wealthy British had kept their horses. Some of the villagers joined the church, and came to Mass in this new church among the ruins of the old mansion one day out of seven. These villagers sometimes sang songs in an ancient, strange language called Latin, that had some words in it like those in English and in French.

Some years after Father MacGregor had arrived, Imam Reza had journeyed up the Nile in a boat. He had climbed the path along the cliff leading a donkey. The donkey carried the imam's young wife. They were fleeing a war that killed their families. It was the rainy season, and the monsoons were pouring sheets of rain down, and the path was slick with mud so that the poor little donkey could hardly walk. Imam Reza's young wife was soaked and exhausted, and very, very pregnant, and Father MacGregor had taken them in, sheltering them in the little church he had built from a stable. Father MacGregor had carried out of his church the sacred crucifix and all the dusty icons of his beloved saints, for these graven images were all forbidden by the imam's faith, and they were hateful to the imam and to his young wife. And the imam's wife had given birth to their firstborn daughter there in the old stable, with the help of Yusef's grandmother. And then Father MacGregor and Imam Reza had worked together to build a new roof over some of the rooms in the crumbling old mansion, and the wife of the imam and their firstborn daughter moved into these rooms, and Father MacGregor collected his crucifix and icons and set them up again in his little church-stable.

Many seasons, wet and dry, had passed since those days.

Only a few villagers attended the Mass by Father MacGregor one day out of seven, and even fewer villagers came to pray with Imam Reza five times a day. Some of the villagers went to Father MacGregor sometimes, and to Imam Reza sometimes, but most of the villagers still honored their old gods and made sacrifices to them, the gods of the river and the gods of the forest, and the gods of the hills, and the gods of all the animals of the river and hills and forest.

But all of the villagers wore clothes now; in the olden days, before Father MacGregor came, the villagers often went about naked, and in those olden days, children always went about naked. But they wore clothing now, even the children, out of respect for Father MacGregor and Imam Reza, who had taught them that nakedness was shameful.

Yusef and Khalid had worn loincloths since they were very, very young. Except for the robes that Yusef and Khalid wore when they visited at the old mansion, loincloths were still their only clothing: no shirts, no shoes, just a bright cloth with big geometric reds and saffrons, tied about their waists. And, of course, they had been barefoot all their lives.

No one in the village made beer or got drunk, either, as they had in the olden days, out of respect for the imam.

"Of course you are proper teachers," Yusef repeated. "And I am grateful for all the books in the library that the British family left behind." Yusef glanced again at the stone wall that separated him from the dead, and murmured another few words of respect in his own language.

Yusef continued in English: "But other children in the village need to go to school, too. My father says the world is changing, and that the old ways will die, and we must all learn more about the ways of the wide world. We should have a school for the whole village."

Imam Reza and Father MacGregor looked at each other.

"Many years ago," Father MacGregor said, "I did try to start a school, but the children would not come. Their parents said that the boys had to tend the herds, and the girls had to carry water and weed the gardens."

Father MacGregor moved the queen's rook that he had been considering. Yusef saw that Father MacGregor's king was now doomed.

"And after I came to this place with my primary wife," Imam Reza said casually, moving his queen's bishop as if it were not poised to slay Father MacGregor's king, "we tried to start a school with our great friend, Father MacGregor. But still the children would not come. And my secondary wife was a teacher before we married, and she wished to start a school here, but still the boys and girls stayed home to tend the herds and gardens and carry water. And now she has become too ill to teach."

"So now we teach the daughters of Imam Reza," Father MacGregor said. He moved his king's knight, and Yusef knew that Imam Reza was about to mate. Imam Reza's hungry hawk eyes burnt black deep in their sockets.

Father MacGregor continued, all unaware of his doom. "And you, of course, because you want to learn. But the other children of the village will not come, though we have both prayed for this."

"My brother, Khalid," Yusef said, "will be headman of our village one day. All my cousins and all the children of the village look up to him now, and they listen to him when he speaks. I shall ask my brother to tell my cousins and all the children of the village to come to school."

"Khalid himself does not care so much for school," Imam Reza said. He moved his queen along an open long diagonal all the way across the board.

"Checkmate, Father," Imam Reza said. He picked up his coffee and drank it down.

Father MacGregor assessed the board sadly. He reached out and laid his king on its side.

"If you can bring your cousins and the other children from the village," Imam Reza said, "Father MacGregor and I will teach them. We will ask your help in the teaching."

"But I am merely a student," Yusef said.

"You are merely a student," Father MacGregor said, "in the same way that a lion is merely a cat."

So Yusef went to work recruiting students for the new school.

It was easiest to get the girls interested. "Everyone will be there, all at once," Yusef said to them. "You will not be in the garden, pulling weeds with just your sisters. Before class begins, you will have a chance to talk with everyone. You will get to see what everyone is wearing. And if you know an answer, the teacher will want to hear from you, not just from the boys. But the most important thing is that school will help us all get ready for the world that is changing."

And if the girls still looked in doubt, Yusef would add, "And all the boys will be there." And then Yusef would mention the names of the handsomest boys in the village.

To the boys, Yusef would say, "Instead of tending cattle in the heat under the thorn trees all day, you will have a chance to sit in the cool stone rooms during the hottest part of the day. You will sit in the cool room and hear stories about great heroes and ancient battles where thousand of great warriors won great victories or lost their lives, or both. After class, when the air begins to cool, there will be soccer. Perhaps you will learn to be a great soccer player, and you will become very rich and famous and travel all over the world, like Pelé. But the most important thing is that school will help us all get ready for the world that is changing."

And if the boys still looked in doubt, Yusef would add, "And all the girls will be there. And the daughters of Imam Reza will be there, too."

"Will Fatima be there?" some of the boys would ask

"Yes," Yusef would admit, feeling a twinge of regret that the other boys would spend time near the most beautiful girl in all the world.

Yusef didn't mention the itchy robes they would have to wear.

Yusef's cousins and the other children in the village said they couldn't attend.

"My parents will not allow me to be away from the cattle all day for school," the boys said.

Yusef went to the parents of the boys. "School will last only half a day," Yusef said to those parents.

"But our herds will suffer if they cannot graze all day," the parents said. "The grass is thin and dry and barely fills their bellies, and the little milk they give is already thin as water and as blue as the sky."

"If your children really want to go to school," Yusef said, "they can get up before dawn, as I do, and lead the herd to good grass. Your children can study as the herd grazes in the cool of the morning when the grass is cool and moist and sweet. Do you see my cattle, my father's cattle, my brother's cattle? I do this every morning, and our cattle are the fattest in the village." Here, Yusef dropped his eyes for saying something so immodest, so prideful, to an elder. But it was true: his family's cattle were the fattest, and they always gave the richest milk, too, even in the dry season.

And so the village boys were sent to school.

"But our daughters must stay at home," the villagers said to Yusef. "Our daughters must feed the chickens and tend the guinea fowl and weed the gardens and carry the water and gather the wood for our cooking

fires. They have many things to do." And the village parents would say these things, and then they would add, "Besides, of what use is this education for our daughters? For all their lives, they will always have to feed the chickens and tend the guinea fowl and weed the gardens and carry the water and gather the wood for our cooking fires."

"In the books of Father MacGregor," Yusef said, "I have read about a way to raise water from the well. It is called an Archimedes' screw, and it can be turned by the power of wind. We could run water from the well by bamboo tubes. If your daughters do not have to carry water, they will have the extra hours for school."

And the adults would think about this, and they would think about how lush their gardens would be with more water, and how fat their cattle and goats would grow, and they would say, "Yes, Yusef. If you will show us this Archimedes' screw and if your father will allow us to cut his bamboo to make tubes to carry water, we will send our daughters to your school."

And Yusef went to his father, and asked for the bamboo, which Yusef's father had planted many years before.

Father MacGregor and Imam Reza built the Archimedes' screw using the tools Father MacGregor had found in the old mansion many years before, the same tools he and Imam Reza had used to build a shelter for the imam's new family so long ago. In just a week, water was flowing where it had been carried by hand, by labor, and by sweat for a thousand years.

The boys and girls from the village—Yusef's sisters and cousins and all the other children who were old enough—all attended class. The boys wore the itchy robes. The girls wore dresses of saffron or of bright red, and they wore scarves upon their heads out of respect for

the imam. They came to class six days a week, and they learned arithmetic, and Arabic, and history, and all of the other things that they might need in the wide world. And the boys played soccer, and pretended they were Pelé, the Black Pearl.

On the seventh day, some of them came to go to Mass with Father MacGregor. Every day, some of the students prayed with Imam Reza as he prayed his five times a day.

Imam Reza was happy—and his dark eyes glowed—because in all the long years that he had lived here, no more than a dozen of the villagers had come to pray with him.

Father MacGregor was happy—and he chuckled and he wheezed and his fat nose throbbed red and the purple tangle of snakes on his nose writhed—because Father MacGregor had been in the village even longer, and still only a few people came to Mass.

Father MacGregor and Imam Reza told their students that all over the world, there were wars about religion. Yusef already knew this, for history was his favorite subject. Yusef knew about the conquest of the entire Arab world by Muslims, and he knew about the Crusades. Yusef knew that—in 1683, by Father MacGregor's time, but a different year as Imam Reza accounted time—Islam had nearly conquered all of Europe but had lost a bloody battle at Vienna.

Yusef had now read every history book in the library of the dead British family—most of them in English, but some in French—and now Yusef was reading all of Imam Reza's history books, all written in Arabic, or in Farsi, which was the language the imam and his family spoke among themselves, the language Fatima would speak to him sometimes between classes.

Reading about the same events in different history books was like reading about entirely different events, perhaps events that had unfolded on different planets.

Heroes in one story were villains in the other story. Clever plans became the actions of cowards. Brilliant victories in one history turned into merciless slaughters in the other history.

Yusef read all four volumes of Winston Churchill's *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* by the light of a little dung fire in his grass hut. In these books, the British were mostly heroes, but in some of the French history books and in the books of Imam Reza, the same British were irredeemably evil.

"What is truth?" Yusef asked Father MacGregor and Imam Reza one day after class. Father MacGregor and Imam Reza were seated in the cool room with the stone walls that separated them from the bones of the dead British who had once ruled here. Father MacGregor and Imam Reza were playing chess together as they always did at this time of day, when the hot African sun blazed outside the cool stone walls. They drank coffee from small cups that Imam Reza's primary wife had brought with her—fleeing from a war, all the way from Persia. The cups had been packed in a little box that finally made it up a slippery, muddy trail, swaying on the back of a donkey while the first waves of pain had seized the young woman's swollen belly.

Yusef explained the problem he was having understanding the meaning of history when the authors of the books disagreed about so much. "What is truth," Yusef asked again, "and how do you know it?"

Father MacGregor and Imam Reza pushed their chairs back and stopped their game, something they almost never did.

Imam Reza said that truth was written in the Koran. Father MacGregor said that truth was written in the Koran and in many other sacred texts.

"But truth is written in nature, too," Father MacGregor added. "It is written in the stars that you see at night, and it is written in the stones that this room is made of."

Yusef thought about that. Father MacGregor had told Yusef that the limestone of these walls and floor had once been billions and trillions of living creatures in an ocean hundreds of millions of years ago, and that our ancestors had once been sea-creatures, too. But this conflicted with the story in the Bible that Father MacGregor said was also true.

"Truth is also written in the human mind and soul and heart," Father MacGregor continued. "But your heart and soul and mind need to work together, and discover what is written in God's Word and in God's World."

"God's Word is never in error," Imam Reza said. He folded his arms and looked very stern.

"No," Father MacGregor said. "God's Word is never in error. But our interpretation is frequently wrong. My own church taught that the Earth is flat. My own church excommunicated Galileo for saying that the Earth moves around the sun."

"I know the Earth revolves around the sun," Yusef said. "And now that I have put away my childish ideas, I know that the old stories of my people about the stars are just that, stories and childish ideas. It makes me sad, though, because I like the idea of Mbaka throwing ashes into the sky to make the Milky Way. And I want there to be a Nile River in the sky, with a star that is a hippopotamus."

"You cannot equate Holy Word and the tales of savages and infidels and heathen children," Imam Reza said. His eyes turned black as thunderheads.

Father MacGregor reached out his right hand and touched Imam Reza's arm gently.

"We are all savages," Father MacGregor said. "When it comes to that, we are all children. We are just beginning our journey."

Imam Reza's angry eyes softened, but only just a bit.

Yusef thought about this.

Father MacGregor and Imam Reza were learned men, and yet they could not even agree on some simple things—simple things that wars had been fought over, simple ideas that had caused the slaughter of millions. But these two men played chess together and drank coffee together and argued together and built an irrigation system together to make cool sweet water flow where it had been carried by hand and labor and sweat for a thousand years. One of these men had sheltered the other man's new family in the rainy season. That man's wife had saved the lives of Yusef and Khalid when they were born, and had named them after the man's two brothers who had been slain in a holy war.

It seemed impossible that these wise, kind, and learned men would ever allow a war would break out here. If all men were so wise and kind and learned, there would be no wars, ever.

Learning would be the key to peace.

"I am glad that we have started this school," Yusef said.

Chapter 3

Once upon a time, a child helped to plant a forest. This is the story of how the forest came to be planted, and why it was planted, and what happened next.

Yusef kept busy with school and tending the cattle and the goats. Khalid spent most of his days out on the plains and in the hills, carrying his bow and arrows, hunting for antelope. Khalid seemed to have forgotten—for a little while, at least—his plan to build a herd to pay the bride-price for a girl from Kameri or from any other village.

The little bull calf that had been Yusef's—and then Khalid's, and was now Yusef's again—Yusef's little calf had grown into a massive, handsome bull, and this massive, handsome bull had sired many fine calves, and the family's herd was growing fast, and the leather bag that Yusef kept hidden under the old baobab tree was nearly filled with silver coins. Every morning before dawn, Yusef would open the gates of the kraal and lead the cattle and the goats to where the grass grew green and sweet, and—as the sun rose, blistering hot from the very moment it cleared the horizon—Yusef would find shade and spread open his books and read while the animals grazed and browsed. By the time the sun was high in the sky, Yusef's father would come along with a calabash of water and some honeyed maize cakes and bananas and a bit of goat meat and roasted pumpkin, and the two of them would share their small meal in the warm shade of the thorn trees.

"And where is your brother today?" Yusef's father would always ask.

"Off hunting," Yusef always had to answer.

And then Yusef and his father would talk about the herd and the garden, and about school, and the world and about plans for the future.

One day, Yusef's father announced big new plans for the future.

"You will go to university," Yusef's father said.

Yusef laughed. He thought his father was making a joke. Yusef's father and Yusef's mother had never ever learned to read, or even to write their own names, and no one in Yusef's family had ever gone to school until Yusef and his brother had started taking lessons from Father MacGregor and Imam Reza. Yusef knew what a university was, and Yusef knew what a college was, but Yusef also knew what the moon and the sun and the stars were, and he knew that he was never going to go to any of those places, either.

So Yusef laughed out loud at this fine joke.

"Do not laugh," Yusef's father said, very seriously. "This morning I sold two cattle. I have purchased thousands of tree seeds to plant and build a forest at the edge of our farm. There will be eucalyptus trees that will grow fast, and I can sell some of these trees to pay for university. Other trees I shall leave to grow tall and thick. They will block the winds that carry the desert farther south every year."

"There is no university near here," Yusef said.

"You will go to Oxford, in England," Yusef's father said. "Your mother has decided, and we have both set our hearts on this course. You will study hard now, and you will learn all that you can from Father MacGregor and Imam Reza. I shall grow the eucalyptus trees, and we will sell most of our cattle, and we will send you to Oxford. When you graduate, you can work and send for your sisters, and they can go to school there, too. I am planting olive trees, too. They are slow to grow, but they

will bear fruit for a thousand years, for two thousand years, and for longer than that."

Yusef sat in the thin hot shade of the thorn tree and drank the cool water and watched the cattle and the goats. He looked at his books, open on the hard ground: the books were old, and worn, and tattered. Yusef thought of the map on the wall at Imam Reza's house: this village a worn-through hole, faraway England a pink ragged-edged island off the mainland of Europe. England and Oxford indeed might as well be as far away as the moon or the stars. The people who went to university at Oxford, in England, were the same sort of people who flew in the tiny silver points of light that made long thin clouds high in the sky—spears hurled by gods across the heavens—people of unimaginable wealth and power, people who would laugh at a poor boy like himself. Yusef knew these things because he had been to school. His poor, ignorant father had not been to school, so his poor, ignorant father could not know that all of these dreams were impossible.

"Yes, father," Yusef promised. "One day, I shall go to Oxford."

"The eucalyptus trees," Yusef's father said, "the ones that I do not cut to sell to pay for you to go to Oxford University, in England, these remaining eucalyptus trees will form a dense forest. The forest will stop the desert from covering our farm and our village for a few more years. It will give our family enough time so that you can help to save us."

Yusef thought about this. He knew that the desert moved a little closer every year. He knew that the rains came a little later every year—all the old people in the village said so—and he knew that within his own lifetime, his little village might well be smothered by the dry desert sands, the sands of ten-thousand years. Yusef

knew that his father and his mother were depending upon him—Yusef—to save the family. It did not seem fair. Yusef was still a child, and now he was expected to save his whole family.

It was impossible for him to save his family. It was impossible even for him to dream of ever going to Oxford. And now he had made a promise to his father to do precisely that.

"What about Khalid?" Yusef asked. "Khalid is far stronger and braver than I can ever hope to be. He should save our family."

"Khalid will have to find his own path," Yusef's father said. "When you go off to university, Khalid will have to take care of the cattle and do all the work you are doing now."

"I shall bring Khalid to England, too," Yusef said. "He is my brother. He is half my soul."

Yusef's father said nothing. He finished eating his share of the small meal, and he drank his share of the calabash of cool water, and he stared off toward the north, where the brown desert lay, slowly devouring the good green earth.

The next morning, Yusef's father woke Yusef hours before dawn. Together they walked past the northern edge of the village and out into open country in the bright light of a full moon and a sky filled with stars—the Milky Way, the Great Lion, and the Star-River that was supposed to be the Nile of the sky. Yusef saw that the Archer—he who had slain the lion in the old stories—had his arrow aimed straight at Scorpion's crimson heart.

Yusef's father stopped. "This is the place," Yusef's father said.

It was here in the open country that Yusef's father had decided to make his stand against the desert, growing like a brown cancer in the good green world.

Yusef's father had brought two digging-sticks and four bags of seeds. He put these down on the ground.

Yusef thought the two digging-sticks and four bags of seeds looked like pitiful weapons against even the idea of a growing desert, but he respected his father too much to say so.

Yusef's father showed Yusef how to dig and loosen the soil and make a hole for the seeds.

Yusef's father reached into one of the bags and held out his open hand.

"This is the eucalyptus seedpod," Yusef's father said.

Yusef took the seedpod. It was in the shape of a star, and it was silvery in the starlight and the moonlight. Yusef turned the seedpod this way and that. It was hard, but Yusef's hands were strong: he crushed it in his hand, and the chaff sprinkled out between his fingers like sand. There were five seeds left in his hand—from the arms of the star-shaped seedpod.

"Now," Yusef's father said, "Now, we begin to save our family."

Yusef and his father worked for hours in the moonlight and the starlight, digging holes and planting seeds, stopping at every fifth hole to crush another star-shaped seedpod and scatter the chaff.

Pink dawn rose as the stars faded and the moon set.

Yusef stood up straight, and he groaned. He was hungry and thirsty, and already his back hurt, and only half of the first bag of seeds was planted. The rising sun's warmth felt good on his skin.

"I must take the herd to graze, Father," Yusef said.

"Your mother will wake Khalid and send him to tend the herd," Yusef's father said.

"Khalid will want to go hunting," Yusef said.

"If Khalid wishes to go hunting," Yusef's father said, "he will first feel your mother's leather strop."

Yusef laughed. He thought about how the leopard had fled, as his mother had swung the leather strop above her head—Whoosh! Whoosh! Yusef laughed again. Khalid might fear nothing, but he would not enjoy a good stropping from their strong, stout mother.

A little after dawn, Yusef saw Father MacGregor walking toward them. Father MacGregor carried a large pack upon his back, and he was breathing hard when he arrived, for Father MacGregor was old and fat, and he wheezed when he walked, even when he was walking on the flat and not carrying a heavy pack.

But—even old and fat and white and tired and wheezing as he was—Father MacGregor knew the polite way to greet people.

Father MacGregor mopped his brow, and he caught his breath, and he looked at Yusef's father and then he looked at Yusef. He looked at them with respect, even though he was the elder among them.

Father MacGregor spoke in the language of the village.

"I see you," Father MacGregor said to Yusef's father and to Yusef.

"I am here," Yusef's father said.

"I am here," Yusef said.

"Did you sleep well, Uncle?" Yusef's father said. Of all the people in the village, only Yusef's father called Father MacGregor 'Uncle' for it was Yusef's grandfather who had nursed the young priest back from the brink of yellow death those many years ago. Yusef's grandfather had carried off the priest's dark urine and had wiped the

stinking *la-ka* from the priest's pale white buttocks, and had fed him soup cooked from the flesh of fat goats when the young priest was too weak to lift a spoon to his mouth.

All these things Yusef's grandfather had done, long before Yusef's father was born.

"I slept well indeed, my friend," old Father MacGregor said to Yusef's father. "Did you rest well, also?"

And so the greeting went, in a world where there was time for people to be polite, even if they were busy defending the good green heart of the world.

When the greetings were over, Father MacGregor laid his pack down upon the ground. He opened the pack and handed Yusef's father a canteen of water, and he handed Yusef a banana and a mango.

"For breakfast," Father MacGregor said, and he handed Yusef's father two maize cakes and some dates.

Yusef's father took the food and thanked Father MacGregor. He gave half to Yusef.

"I asked Uncle—" Yusef's father told Yusef, "—I asked Father MacGregor to come to bless our new forest."

Yusef stared at his father for a moment, then dropped his eyes respectfully. Yusef knew that his father worshipped all the old gods. He would never call himself a Christian. What could a Christian blessing mean to him?

For that matter, what did a Christian blessing mean to Yusef? Yusef had seen his father's animism, and witnessed blood sacrifices, and he had heard all the silly, childish tales of spirits and stars, of Mbaka and the Creator and the first baobab tree, and he had believed these childish tales when he was a child. But now he had put away these foolish, childish things. And Yusef had seen Imam Reza's Islam and he had seen Father MacGregor's Christianity, and he knew that many, many

innocents had been slain in the name of their merciful God.

Father MacGregor smiled at Yusef. It seemed to Yusef that Father MacGregor could read his mind, hear his thoughts, his doubts.

"And what can a little blessing be hurting, Laddie?" Father MacGregor said. "Your father is a far wiser man than you yet know."

Father MacGregor pulled out of his backpack two big bags and small vial.

Father MacGregor held up the vial for Yusef and his father to see. He held it up high.

"Holy Water," Father MacGregor said. "For the blessing. But that comes later, laddies."

Father MacGregor stuck the vial into his pocket, and he opened one of the bags. In it were tree seeds.

"Acacia seeds," Father MacGregor said, and he held one seed up just as high he had held up the vial of Holy Water.

"I shall plant the acacia seeds among your eucalyptus," Father MacGregor said. "The acacia trees will grow, and they will help the eucalyptus grow even faster and stronger. The acacia are nitrogen-fixers, they—" and here Father MacGregor turned to Yusef's father, who probably had never heard of nitrogen, even though the air he had breathed every day of his life was mostly nitrogen. Father MacGregor stopped.

"I have read about this, my father," Yusef said to his father, and he dropped his eyes respectfully. Yusef thought about what he had read about chemistry and biology in the books of Father MacGregor, things that Yusef's father had never heard of.

Yusef said to his father, "Part of the air we breathe—it is called oxygen, Father—this part of the air helps to stoke the fires that burn within our bodies. And another

part of the air can become flesh. The part that becomes flesh is called nitrogen, and some plants can take nitrogen from the air at their roots and put it into the earth to make the earth richer."

"I understand," Yusef's father said patiently, as a father should speak to a son. "Wind and sun and grass and antelope. And the lion that is the spirit of all Africa. And us, as well."

"Yes," Father MacGregor said gently to Yusef's father. "You understood all of these things long before ever I came to this good place. It is my own people who have come only slowly to understanding."

Without saying another word, Father MacGregor pulled a small trowel from his backpack, and he began planting acacia seeds among the little piles of loosened dirt where the eucalyptus seeds were already waiting to sprout and reach toward the sky, and defend the good green world against the growing desert and send Yusef all the way to Oxford University, in England.

The three of them worked all morning long. The sun grew hot, and they were all covered with sweat, especially Father MacGregor. His shirt was soaked, his hat was rimmed in sweat, and he was panting and wheezing hard in the hot African sun.

"My people were not built for this climate," Father MacGregor said, standing up and rubbing at his back. Sweat was dripping off his chin, his earlobes, his elbows, and his red bulbous nose.

"I feel," Father MacGregor added, "as if the whole 'Work to the sweat of thy brow' curse has come down entirely upon me this day."

"Enough planting for one day," Yusef's father said. "We are all tired. I think it is time for the blessing, if that pleases you, Uncle."

"Aye," Father MacGregor said, switching now to English. "That would be a blessing in itself."

Father MacGregor pulled the vial from his pocket.

Father MacGregor crossed himself, and Yusef saw his own father make the sign of the cross, too, out of respect.

Father MacGregor shook all of the Holy Water from the vial. The drops fell to the earth, and the earth swallowed up the drops and was dry as dust again in moments. Father MacGregor lifted up his eyes to the hills, and to the sky. "Lord," Father MacGregor said, in English, "let this Holy Water mix with the rains from your own heavens. Let these twin sacred waters mingle and awaken the seeds, which we have planted by the sweat of our brows. And there was a fair lot of sweat, Lord. Let the trees grow toward heaven, and let them be adorned with graceful flowers and sweet fragrance in the springtime. I mean, in the rainy season, Lord. Let the trees be adorned with graceful flowers and sweet fragrance in the rainy season, so that the birds of the sky may come to dwell in them."

"Thank you," Yusef's father said in English to Father MacGregor. And then Yusef's father switched back to the language of their village.

"Go well, Uncle," Yusef's father said.

"Go well, Grandfather," Yusef said, for a person may call an old person grandfather, or grandmother, even if they are not of his own tribe, if he loves them.

"Stay well, my friends," Father MacGregor said. "Stay well, my son, and stay well, son of my son."

Father MacGregor gathered his trowel and his pack, and he left. When Father MacGregor was gone, Yusef's father took a knife, and made a cut in his own palm, and he let his blood be shed upon the earth where the Holy Water had been poured.

"Now," Yusef's father said in the language of their village, "we will let Father MacGregor's God, and your science—oxygen and nitrogen, did you call those things?—and all of my gods, work together." And he put his bloodied hand on Yusef's bare shoulder, and the two of them walked south together, toward their little village in the good green heart of the world.

Chapter 4

Once upon a time, a child killed a lion. This is the story of how the child and his brother found the lion, and what happened next.

Yusef and his father planted bags and bags of eucalyptus seeds—and acacia seeds, too—over the next few days, and then they set to work again and planted twice as many olive trees. It was hot, hard work that lasted from before dawn, through the searing mid-day sun, and well past sunset, and Yusef's muscles ached, and his hands were blistered and pierced by splinters from his digging-stick, and there were times when he wished that his father had never heard of Oxford University, in England.

And now and then the gods would hurl a silver-tipped spear across the sky, and Yusef would glance up from his work, and his father would tell him to get back to digging, that he had many, many trees to plant before he got to ride in a silver cart to Oxford University, in England.

"Besides," Father said, "I am not just raising trees here."

"I know, Father," Yusef groaned. "You are raising sons."

Khalid tended the cattle and had to feel his mother's strop only once.

The rainy season began just as Yusef and his father planted the last of the olive trees. Clouds rolled in on gentle breezes as Yusef and his father picked up their tools and empty seed-bags with their blistered hands. The gentle breezes grew into heavy winds as Yusef and his father raced toward their village. The heavy winds grew into gales as Khalid brought the herd down from the hills to keep them safe from lightning. The gales

stacked clouds on clouds on clouds that built into mountains of gray and black, and then—just as Yusef and his father met Khalid and the herd at the kraal, lightning flashed and thunder crashed and the heavens opened up as if in the story of Noah in the Bible.

The three of them were soaked by the time they closed the nervous cattle into the kraal, and they ran to cover the well, so that mud and *la-ka* from the kraal would not run in and spoil the good clean water. It may seem strange that it is when the rains come, that is the time you have to work the hardest to protect your water, but that is one of the many strange ways of the world.

Yusef's mother and his sisters covered the tender young plants in the garden with banana leaves. The goats were smart enough to have come home to the kraal on their own, and they were munching happily on branches that had blown down in the winds and the gales, and they grew wetter and wetter and smellier and smellier.

It rained for days and nights and days and nights and days and nights on end. Yusef's blistered hands healed, and his mother pulled out all the splinters, and Yusef and Khalid played sow-and-capture—which you may know as mancala—with their sisters and cousins while all the water in the world poured down on their little village.

Then God and all the gods took mercy on the world, and the rains gentled down to a drizzle that came every night, while the sun broke out in the day.

The rain and the sun awakened seeds in the earth. The eucalyptus trees and the acacia trees sprouted through the ground. Whether because of the nitrogen fixed by the acacia trees, or because of the blessing and the Holy Water of Father MacGregor, or because of Yusef's father's blood sacrifice to the old gods, the

eucalyptus trees all grew fast and straight, and they rose toward heaven like twice-ten-thousand prayers.

Yusef studied even harder, because the trees were growing, and the herd of cattle was growing, and now Yusef was sure that it was really true: the desert would be stopped, his family and his little village would be saved, and—most of all—he, Yusef, was going to go to university at Oxford.

Yusef was learning to speak Farsi, the language of Persia. Farsi—also called Persian—was a beautiful language, and it was the language Imam Reza spoke at home with his two wives and his seven children. It was a beautiful language, this Farsi, or Persian, but it was not just because it was beautiful that Yusef wanted to learn to speak.

"I am going to marry you," Yusef whispered to Fatima. He said this in Farsi, because he wanted to speak to Fatima's heart.

Fatima blushed and cast her eyes down.

Yusef whispered because they were sitting in class. Yusef knew that Fatima would never be in the presence of a boy her own age without her father nearby until the day she married.

Fatima had not answered, but she had not said no, and Yusef's heart was pounding in his chest.

But, of course, it was not Fatima's to say no, or yes, or any other answer. That would be for Imam Reza alone to say. Yusef was very, very glad that he had stopped playing chess with Imam Reza.

Class went on, but Yusef heard nothing but the roar of blood in his own ears.

Yusef imagined himself, years from today, a diplomat, making peace in the world. He pictured himself flying in a great jet plane, sitting inside of a bright point of silver high in the sky, traveling from war to war, and making

peace among the people of the world. Yusef imagined himself making peace and then flying home—at the silver tip of a white spear hurled by gods across the heavens—flying home to his wife, the beautiful Fatima. He imagined himself and Fatima, surrounded by their own children—four boys and four girls. His parents would live with them, of course, and his parents would be healthy and happy, and his mother would not have to work so very hard every day, and not have to carry around that heavy leather strop, either. His children—Fatima's children—would all be perfect.

Imam Reza would have to say yes to a man who was a diplomat, a peacemaker who flew in jets from war to war. A man who had gone to Oxford University, in England.

Many weeks passed, and the rains ended. The sun blazed by day, and the moon ruled clear skies by night, and the green grass—which had grown as high as the shoulders of a tall man—turned brown, and rustled in the dry wind.

The eucalyptus trees had sent down long roots to get water deep under the dry earth, and they continued to grow. The new olive trees had grown, but only by a tiny bit. It didn't matter, though, that the olive trees seemed so slow by human measure: these were trees that would send down their roots deep into each and every crack in the ancient limestone hills, and then bear fruit for a thousand years, for two thousand years, and feed a hundred human generations, and more.

Yusef looked out over the growing eucalyptus forest and groves of olive trees, and he told Khalid of his plans for life, of university, of riding a silver streak across the sky, of peacemaking, and of Fatima.

Khalid laughed.

"You will never leave our little village," Khalid told Yusef. "I leave our little village every day. I walk and run far and wide. I hunt, or I visit with our Uncle Njuko, in Kameri. You sit at home all day like an old woman."

"I am not sitting at home all day," Yusef said. "I am tending to the herd—including your cattle, too. And I go to school, where you should be, as well. You almost never go to school."

But Yusef thought about it. Sometimes school did get to be boring, learning about places so far away, or about people who had lived and died so very long ago. And mathematics was so hard that sometimes it made his head hurt. Besides, now that all the children in the village came to class, the room would grow hot and stuffy, and inside his robe he would itch, but not want to be rude and scratch the places where it itched the most. Many times, Yusef would wish that he could be out hunting with Khalid, running free in the hills wearing a comfortable loincloth, stalking in the cool shadows of the forests, with no mathematics and no history, and no French verbs, either.

Hunting and roaming were never going to save their family from the encroaching desert, though. Neither was visiting the poor little village of Kameri, either.

And Fatima—Fatima and the future, and the path to Oxford University, in England—could be found only in that dull, hot, stuffy crowded classroom.

Now the dry season had come in all its sere strength, and the earth had turned to dust again. The eucalyptus trees kept on growing, though, exactly as his father had promised. The eucalyptus trees really would slow the desert's march. The olive trees really would live to bear fruit for thousands of years. And if you took the long view, the thousand-year view, what difference would it make if Yusef skipped school for one day?

What was the worst that could happen?

"I shall make a deal with you," Yusef told Khalid, "I shall go hunting with you tomorrow, if you will go to school with me the next day."

Late the next morning, when Yusef finished tending the cattle, he and Khalid drank from the well as much cool water as their bellies could hold, then left the village. Khalid tucked his knife inside the thong that held up his loincloth, and he carried his bow in one hand and his arrows in his other hand. Yusef wore his loincloth, and carried nothing. The two boys trotted barefoot along the path up a long slope into the hills far above. Yusef was already breathing hard. Khalid was a much stronger runner than Yusef. It seemed to Yusef that Khalid could run for days without tiring. Khalid ran along, carrying his bow and his arrows. He ran farther and farther ahead of Yusef.

Yusef was drenched in sweat. Pain pierced his side like a lance. He slowed to a walk.

Khalid kept on running, farther and farther ahead, so that he became a small black dot on the sandy trail that led up into the hills above. Yusef could see tiny puffs of dust rising from beneath Khalid's pounding feet. How could anyone run so long and strong?

Yusef walked now, holding his side in pain.

Yusef walked past tall termite mounds, higher than a house. He walked past a dead baobab tree that was all abuzz in wild bees making a new hive. Yusef knew that Khalid would tell their Uncle Njuko about the hive, so that Uncle Njuko could gather honey for his family.

Yusef, still holding his side in lancinating pain, walked past bushes filled with thorns as long as a man's finger and as sharp as the fangs of a cobra. Little brown birds nested in the bushes, and they fluttered up as Yusef

passed. They flitted in and out of the thorn-bushes, and never seemed to hurt themselves on the sharp thorns.

Yusef was still breathing hard, and his chest still felt as if there were a fire inside. His throat felt as dry as the dust on the trail.

Khalid was long out of sight. Yusef followed the trail, followed Khalid's tracks. Soon Khalid's tracks were not alone: there were many tracks of cloven-hoofed beasts, tracks like those of giant goats, but there were no goats here in the hills. Khalid must be following the tracks of antelope!

Yusef grew excited now. Antelope were seldom seen here anymore. The old people in the village told of ancient days when great herds of all sorts of antelope roamed everywhere across Africa, but those days and the great herds of the graceful antelope were gone.

There were many kinds of antelope: There were antelope as huge as bulls, with long straight horns. There were tiny antelope, small as dogs, with tiny curved horns and hooves the size of your thumbs. There were antelope that could leap straight up into the air, leap as high as a termite mound, leap higher than a house. And every kind of antelope had its own name.

Yusef didn't know the names of any of the kinds of antelope. Uncle Njuko knew the names of all the kinds of antelope, and Khalid had learned the names of all the antelope from Uncle Njuko, who loved to kill antelope. But Yusef thought that there were not enough antelope around anymore to be worth learning their names. His head was already full of algebra and French verbs, anyway. And even Uncle Njuko, the great hunter, was branching out. It was said that Uncle Njuko often traveled many days to Juba, or to Nimule, to trade in ivory and in guns. But Uncle Njuko always returned home, because no one in the cities could brew beer the

way he liked it. And because there were still a few antelope to kill.

Yusef held his aching side, and he thought of his Uncle Njuko and the story of Archer, who had tried to kill all of the Creator's animals, down to the last lion. Yusef swallowed hard in his dry, parched throat, but the swallow didn't even go down, his throat was so dry. Yusef took a deep breath into his burning chest.

Yusef studied the tracks of the antelope: they were nearly as broad as his hand, so these antelope must be very big, indeed. Yusef thought he ought to see these big antelope before they all disappeared from Africa, before Uncle Njuko and the other hunters finished them all off.

Yusef held his aching side and ran.

And ran.

Yusef ran as hard as he could. The pain in his side was terrible. Sweat poured off his forehead and burned his eyes. He felt dizzy. He had a vision of himself, many years from today, telling his children—beautiful Fatima's perfect children—that he had once run for a day under the scorching African sun, behind his brother, in pursuit of antelope. And then he would put on his shoes and take Fatima and their perfect children to the London Zoo, and show them the antelope, and the elephants, and the lions, and all the graceful, mighty, and fearsome beasts that had once roamed free in the heart of the world.

And this vision sustained him.

Yusef—running and thinking about that far-away someday—was not looking the trail, and he stepped on a huge thorn.

Yow! The pain was like fire, and shot right up his leg. Yusef bent down and pulled the huge thorn from the sole of his foot. It was the longest, sharpest thorn Yusef had ever seen, and when Yusef pulled it out, blood gushed out of his wounded foot. When the gushing blood slowed,

Yusef squeezed his foot and squeezed more blood out, because the old women in the village said that flowing blood would wash away the poison that could kill you.

The old people said the poison was worse if there was *la-ka* on the ground when you got stuck with a thorn. The old people called the sickness 'the death of the rigid smile,' because your jaws shut so tight you could not open your mouth at all, and it looked like you were grinning, right up to the moment you died, and the smile stayed on your dead face even after you were dead. And the old people also called the sickness 'the blackbird,' because the sickness would fly away with your life as easily as a little bird flies away with a scrap of food.

Yusef squeezed and squeezed and squeezed the blood out of his foot. He didn't want to die like that, not at all.

After Yusef had squeezed out all the blood that would come out of his wounded foot, he limped along the trail, trying not to step in any *la-ka*. The pain grew worse with every step, and finally he stopped.

Yusef turned, and looked back at the trail he had run up. Off to his right, on the plain, stood a thin cloud of dust. In the cloud of dust were a thousand beasts—perhaps more—all gleaming golden in the sunlight. They had slender legs, and graceful necks, and long curving horns like scimitars in a picture of ancient warriors in one of Imam Reza's books.

Antelope.

A great herd of antelope graced the plain. It was a vision that Yusef had never expected to see in his lifetime.

The herd moved together, calm and languid, all facing toward where the sun would set. Each animal would take a single step and bend to graze a moment upon the long dry grass that was the last of the grass left over from the rainy season. The grass was made of sunlight, and of air,

and of the good African earth, and the grass was being turned into the heart and flesh and nerve and sinew of these most beautiful beasts. Yusef wondered why there were no stars in the African skies for the antelope. He thought he would have to ask his father when he returned home.

As he watched, something tawny moved in the grass—too far away for Yusef to see it clearly—and the lazy herd erupted into flight. In a moment, they fled as fast as a storm might sweep across the savanna, and Yusef could feel in his feet the thundering hooves so very far away. The herd raised a thicker cloud of dust, so that whatever tawny thing had set them off was now lost in the blinding haze. Only the lead antelope were visible now, and they led the herd over a hill, and they were gone. The dust settled down, and it was if the great herd had been but a dream.

With regret—for he might never see such a thing again, no matter how long he might live—Yusef turned his eyes from where the herd had disappeared. He set off running—still in pain in his foot and his side—up the hill to find his brother.

In a few minutes, he met Khalid running back down the hill. Khalid's eyes were wide with excitement. He had an arrow already nocked and ready to shoot.

"Did you see the herd of antelope?" Yusef asked.

"Yes, younger brother," Khalid said. "I have seen them. But hurry. I have something else to show you."

"Let us go slowly, elder brother," Yusef said, and he stopped to show Khalid his wounded foot. There was already redness and swelling around the hole in the bottom of Yusef's foot.

"Sit, younger brother," Khalid commanded. "Take my bow and my arrows. Wait here, but keep an arrow nocked, and keep your eyes open all around you."

"I'm not going to shoot an antelope," Yusef said.

"I wasn't thinking about antelope, younger brother," Khalid said, over his shoulder, as he trotted off into a dry wadi below the trail, keeping one hand firmly gripped on the knife at his waist.

Khalid was gone just a short time. Yusef's breath slowed to normal, and his side no longer ached, but his foot was throbbing in pain. The pain gnawed into the bone of his heel and then up his leg. The pain climbed higher—toward his heart—and it throbbed with every heartbeat. Yusef looked: the sole of his foot was fiery red, and pink slime oozed from the gaping thorn hole.

Khalid returned, carrying a handful of dark green leaves. They looked like the leaves of the *nyalela* bush—where the glue for fletching arrows came from—only darker.

Khalid ground the dark green leaves between two stones, and turned them into a thick paste, even stickier than *nyalela* glue.

"Hold my knife, younger brother," Khalid ordered, and passed the knife to Yusef.

Then Khalid tore off his own loincloth, and he ripped his loincloth into strips, and he smeared the thick, sticky paste onto the strips of cloth. Khalid picked up Yusef's foot and wrapped it with these bandages. He tied up the bandages good and tight using the leather thong that had once held up his own loincloth.

"Wait now," Khalid said.

Yusef waited. In only a short while, the throbbing pain ceased.

"It feels like I can walk on it," Yusef said. "I do not think that I shall get the sickness of the rigid smile, the blackbird. How did you know what to do for this wound?"

"What do you think I do with my time while you are studying French verbs?" Khalid asked. "But give me my bow and my arrows, younger brother, and keep my knife gripped tight, for you may need it. I have something to show you."

They walked higher into the hills. Khalid was naked now. He carried his bow with an arrow nocked. Yusef wore on his wounded foot the bandages that Khalid had fashioned from his own loincloth, and Yusef carried Khalid's knife.

Underneath the bandages, the sticky goo was cool and soothing. Yusef's foot only hurt a little now, and Khalid slowed his walking pace for Yusef.

After a short walk, Yusef and Khalid crested a rise in the trail. Three vultures were bent down with their necks stretched out, their heads buried deep inside a brown heap upon the ground. Khalid shouted at them, and the vultures pulled their heads out: wrinkled red-skinned heads covered in brown slime. The vultures blinked the brown slime from their beady evil eyes, and they shrieked and flapped their wings and rose into the sky, shedding slimy feathers and bits of putrid gore that fell to earth like rancid rain.

The smell of carrion was thick.

Yusef looked at the brown heap of fur and flesh.

"What was it?" Yusef asked.

"That is what I wanted to show you, younger brother," Khalid said.

Khalid poked at the heap with the end of his bow. A few flies flew up from the brown fur. A bit of bone stuck out. Khalid lifted a stiff sheet of the hide to expose a set of massive horns.

"Oh," Yusef said. "I see. It was an antelope." Yusef saw that the horns were the same as the scimitar-horns he

had seen in the great herd. Antelope were far more beautiful in life than in death.

Khalid pointed to tracks on the ground. There were the cloven-hoofed tracks of antelope. Beside the antelope tracks there were huge round footprints, too, twice as long as Yusef's feet.

"A lion killed the antelope," Khalid said. Khalid picked up a shredded mass of fluffy pink stuff that one of the vultures had dropped. "The antelope's lung," Khalid said. "Not very good to eat. The lions usually leave the lungs for last, our Uncle Njuko has told me."

Yusef swallowed hard. There seemed to be a big dry lump in his throat. "Will the lion come back to eat the lungs?" Yusef asked.

"I hope so," Khalid said. "I'm going to kill it."

"You can't kill a lion with that little bow and arrow," Yusef said, pointing.

"Don't you know about our cousins, the Masai?" Khalid asked.

Khalid had gone mad, Yusef decided, after Khalid had told him his plan.

Khalid led Yusef into the dry wadi beside the trail. At the bottom of the wadi, Khalid found a long, straight tree trunk that had washed down from the hills above. The tree trunk was twice as tall as Khalid and Yusef together, and it was as thick as a man's wrist. The tree had been stripped and tumbled smooth by the raging waters of a dozen rainy seasons, and the wood was tempered hard as iron from the blazing sun of another dozen dry seasons.

"You can't kill a lion," Yusef kept telling Khalid, "You just can't. Our father says the lion is the spirit of Africa. There is a lion that hunts forever among the stars of the

sky. Our songs all tell us that a lion is brave, and strong, and noble above all other creatures."

"Those are just songs," Khalid said. "A lion is mere flesh, and flesh will die. I swear to you, before the sun sets today, I will eat the heart of this lion."

Yusef trembled at this oath, and said nothing.

Khalid grabbed his knife from Yusef, and he carved the hard wood to a long, sharp point. Khalid had made the dead, dried tree into a deadly spear.

"You can go home if you want, younger brother," Khalid said. Khalid tested the point with his finger. When the point did not draw blood, Khalid set to work, sharpening it some more.

"It is not within my heart to leave my brother alone with a hungry lion," Yusef said. "Not even if my brother has gone mad."

Yusef paused. He looked at Khalid. Khalid—standing naked in a dry wadi that split the broad savanna, armed with a knife, a bow, and a few arrows, sharpening a dried-up tree they had found in the wadi, awaiting the return of a hungry lion—Khalid was all strength and courage and confidence.

There was no madness here, surely.

Khalid tested the point again with his finger, and this time he drew blood. Khalid grinned big, and he smeared his blood all over the point of the spear.

"My own blood will soon mix with the blood of the lion," Khalid said, and he smiled happily.

How could Yusef ever leave such a brother?

"What can I do to help?" Yusef asked.

"You can help me carry the spear," Khalid said.

The two brothers picked it up. It was heavy—for the wood was dense and strong—and it took both of them to carry it. They laid the spear beside the carcass of the antelope, taking care not to dull the point.

Yusef stared at the slashed skin and mangled bones and pink lungs. The antelope had once been the most graceful of creatures, as fleet as the wind across the dry savanna. The antelope had once been grass, too. It had been sun, and wind, and rain, and earth. Now it was slain and partly eaten by a lion, and was to become earth, and grass, all over again.

Yusef thought about the power of the lion, to hunt and chase and kill such a creature—a creature made of sun and wind and rain and grass, a creature that ran in herds a thousand strong, fleet as storms across the savanna. Yusef thought about the power of the lion, and he looked at the sharpened spear again. Now it looked to him no more than a pitiful dull twig.

Khalid and Yusef walked back down to the wadi.

Khalid and Yusef carried stones from the dry wadi up to where the carcass of the antelope lay. They dug a hole in the ground and made a little circle of stones around the hole and piled clumps of tall grass onto the stones so that they could hide inside the circle.

So that they could wait for the lion to return to its kill.

"The lion will come back to finish eating soon," Khalid said. "He will be hungry."

"I really, really think we should go home," Yusef said.

"When the lion discovers us at his food, he will become very angry," Khalid said. "A hungry, angry lion will become stupid, and he will charge straight at us, wanting to kill us and eat us, too. I shall raise the point of the spear just off the ground as he charges. You will jam the other end of the spear into the hole as hard as you can. When the lion gets almost to me, he will be charging fast. At the last moment, I shall raise the spear the rest of the way, and the lion will run right on, and the spear will pierce his chest. If you have your end of the spear jammed down in that hole good and solid, the

lion's own speed and strength will drive the point deep into his chest, into his heart, and kill him."

Yusef stared at the spear. When his brave, strong elder brother, Khalid, talked about it, his words made the spear seem bigger and sharper.

"Do you really think this will work?" Yusef asked.

"Our cousins, the Masai, do it all the time," Khalid said. "Don't they teach you anything in school?"

The brothers lay low in the little circle. They smelled the foul rotting antelope. They smelled the sour stench of lion piss that the lion had sprayed on the grass and bushes all around to mark its kill.

"Lions don't smell very good," Yusef said.

"Shhh," Khalid said. "Just keep quiet and wait."

The brothers hunkered down inside the thin grass circle, and breathed the foul and sour smells, and waited.

They did not have long to wait.

They heard the roaring first: deep-throated rumbling low as distant thunder, coming from behind them. They turned, keeping their heads low behind the rocks and grass, and peered out. They saw the lion. The lion had shoulders as wide as the little circle of rocks and grass they had built. The massive body was covered in tawny fur, and muscles rippled under the skin like a surging river. The lion had a golden mane that gleamed like the sun and waved in the African wind like grass upon the savanna.

The lion stood and stared. Yusef imagined what the lion must see: his antelope—his kill—and a little circle of stones and grass where none had been before. And there must be smells, too, for the lion, smells that had not been there before, of two boys who had sweated from all the running—hours of running—and from all the work of

carrying stones up from the wadi, and from digging a hole under the blazing African sun—all this sweat must stink, and there would be the powerful scent of blood from the wound on Yusef's foot, too.

And, Yusef thought, the lion must smell fear. At least the lion must smell Yusef's blood and sweat and fear: Khalid seemed utterly unafraid, only excited, his eyes wide and bright and eager.

The lion paced to left, then to the right, always staring straight at the little circle of stones and grass. The lion's eyes were black and deep as the darkest African night. Yusef could feel the lion staring straight into his trembling soul.

Yusef glanced at the spear. The boys had not known which direction the lion might come from, and the lion had come upon them from behind, so that the spear was pointing exactly the wrong direction. The blunt end was turned toward the lion.

"We should have sharpened both ends of the spear," Yusef whispered to his brother.

"I wish you had thought of that earlier, younger brother," Khalid said. "Instead of just whining about wanting to go home."

Yusef gazed again at the lion. The lion shook his massive head, and his mane blew in the breeze like grass upon the savanna.

The lion roared, and the roar shook the ground and it shook Yusef down to his bones.

Yusef could not suffer a moment longer. He stood and grabbed the heavy spear, all by himself—for the spear seemed to weigh nothing now—and he lifted the spear over his head and he spun the spear around and pointed it straight at the lion.

The lion saw Yusef stand. The lion leapt forward. Nothing so big could move so fast. In a heartbeat, the

lion covered half of the distance to the brothers, and Yusef could feel the ground shake as the lion's feet pounded forward.

"Kill your lion now, brother," Yusef shouted. "Or he will surely kill us!" Yusef dropped the spear into his brother's waiting hands and ran to the butt of the spear.

Khalid hefted the spear, and a smile grew wide across his face. He squatted down to hold the spear a few inches off the ground.

Yusef was not smiling. The lion was huge, and it grew still larger as it thundered toward them. The spear in Khalid's hands—the spear that had looked so solid and had been so heavy that it took both of them to carry it up from the wadi—now looked even less substantial than a twig. Less substantial than smoke.

With all his might, Yusef jammed the butt of the spear into the hole in the ground. He jumped onto the butt of the spear with both feet and he stood on the butt of the spear to hold it down. The thong that bound the bandage on his foot caught on the butt of the spear, but there was no time to free it. Yusef stood firm on the spear-butt, and he willed himself as heavy as he could.

Then lion was upon them, thundering, raising a funnel-cloud of dust behind. At the last moment, Khalid stood and hoisted the point of the spear to the level of the lion's chest. Yusef watched as the needle-sharp tip of the spear pierced the skin, the flesh, the massive muscles. The lion screamed in pain and surprise. He bent his head down now, biting at the tormenting spear, and he turned his head a bit to one side, and Yusef could see that the spear was off center—sticking into the lion's shoulder, not into his chest at all, and the lion stumbled and lurched right at Khalid.

But the spear was buried deep in the lion's shoulder, and the lion kept on coming, and the butt of the spear

was stuck deep into the ground, and Yusef was standing on it, still holding it down. Now the spear—thick as a man's wrist, hard as iron—began to bend.

And bend.

And bend.

The lion started rolling now, still biting at the spear, and spinning up a huge dust cloud. The spear bent still more, and Yusef could feel the vibrations in the spear, bent now like a tightly-drawn bow. Yusef shifted his feet, and the butt of the spear tore through the edge of the hole, and Yusef shot straight up into the air like an arrow. The thong that had bound the bandages on his foot was stripped away.

Yusef flew high into the sky, and time slowed. Yusef watched the bandage that had wrapped his foot uncoil in the breeze and blow away like chaff.

Yusef gazed down at the distant earth. He saw the lion roll in the dust one last time. The lion bit at the tormenting spear again, and this time the lion got the spear tight in its mouth, and the spear snapped like a twig, as the lion kept on rolling in the dust. Yusef saw a huge gleaming lion's fang break from the jaw of the lion and stick in the broken spear. Yusef saw the lion—with the shattered end of half a spear still sticking out of his shoulder—roll right over Khalid as if to crush him.

Now Yusef was falling, and it seemed to him that he was falling ever so slowly. He remembered the story of Icarus and Daedalus. Yusef fell down, down under the blazing African sun.

Yusef—still falling, as Icarus had fallen—watched the lion pick himself up and shake himself off as a wet dog will, and shake off the dust and rattle the broken spear that was still poking from his shoulder.

The lion stared right at Yusef as he fell. Yusef hit the ground so hard that his loincloth was torn right off of his body.

Yusef lay naked upon the ground.

The lion took one step toward Yusef. Yusef froze, held his breath, and turned his face toward the earth. He willed himself invisible. Yusef lay upon the ground for what seemed like an eternity. Again he felt the lion's gaze boring right through his naked, very visible, very flesh-and-blood, body.

Now the lion stepped toward Yusef. Yusef was trembling with fear. He could hear the lion's heavy panting, see saliva dripping from the hungry mouth, see blood pouring from the socket where the lion's fang had been.

Yusef had been holding his breath, but he took a deep breath in now, preparing to run. He knew he could never outrun the lion—Yusef knew he was about to die—but he could not just lie there on the ground and wait to be eaten.

Still the lion strode toward him, taking his time now. The lion was in no hurry, with such easy prey.

The lion was so close that Yusef could smell sour lion-smell, and the foul stink of rotted meat that the lion liked to eat. Yusef hoped he would not die with that smell in his nose.

The lion took another step closer, and Yusef knew he was about to die.

Yusef heard a shout, then a scream: Khalid—still naked, his knife gone, his bow and arrows gone—Khalid was screaming at the lion, and throwing stones at the lion to try to get the lion to turn away from Yusef.

Yusef wondered: Could Khalid even feel fear?

Khalid screamed at the lion again. Khalid screamed at the lion in the language of their village, and Khalid

screamed at the lion in Arabic, and Khalid screamed at the lion in bad English, and Khalid screamed at the lion in very bad French. Khalid screamed at the lion and stamped his feet, and gathered up more stones, and he ran straight at the lion, throwing stones as hard as he could.

The stones bounced off the lion as if they were tiny pebbles. But the lion turned, and roared at Khalid.

Yusef scurried low and fast to the little circle of rocks and lay low again, his bare belly as deep in the dust as he could get it. Yusef watched as the lion now considered Khalid.

Yusef swallowed hard. The lion had been about to kill him, until Khalid had attacked the lion with stones and shouts and screams and very bad French, and Khalid had saved Yusef's life. Now Khalid was about to die, and there seemed nothing Yusef could do about it.

Khalid was still screaming at the lion, picking up more stones and throwing them as hard as he could, right at the lion.

Khalid seemed to know no fear. Yusef wished he could be brave. Yusef wished that he could run between his brother and the lion, and stamp his own feet, and scream his own courage and his hatred at the lion, and throw those futile stones, just as his brave brother had done.

Yusef wanted—Yusef desired with every beat of his trembling heart and with every fiber of his being—to do these brave things. In his mind, and in his heart, Yusef was already out there, standing brave and naked and doomed, between his brother and the lion.

But Yusef's legs and feet betrayed him: they were rooted to that spot as firmly as if they had been ancient baobab trees.

Yusef's voice failed him: he opened his mouth to scream his hatred and his courage at the lion, to save his brother's life, but no words came out.

Yusef knew fear. He trembled with that fear.

Yusef felt a wetness, and he looked down, and he saw that he had already peed upon himself out of fear, and he didn't even remember doing it.

Yusef knew fear.

Yusef also knew his fearless brother's peril.

Yusef moved his hand forward on the ground and found that his hand came to rest on Khalid's bow. There were two arrows there, too. Yusef stood and nocked an arrow and drew it back as far as he could with his trembling arms. He took careful aim—as careful as possible with those shaking arms—at the lion's chest, calculating with his mind where the lion's heart was, and aimed again, and carefully let the arrow fly. The arrow flew and sailed past the ear of the lion, but the hiss of the arrow made the lion turn.

Now the lion faced Yusef again.

Yusef picked up the second arrow. It seemed such a tiny thing—hardly more than a toy. He wondered where he might shoot the lion to make it hurt enough so that it might flee.

Yusef nocked the arrow. His hands still shook in fear.

He aimed at the lion's head. He knew the lion had massive bones in his skull, and this little arrow might bounce off as easily as a drop of gentle rain. Yusef moved his aim over to the lion's chest. He knew the lion's skin was so thick and the flesh beneath so tough that even the spear—thick as a man's wrist, sharp enough to prick a finger—had been turned and snapped like a twig.

It seemed hopeless. Then Yusef remembered the thorn that had nearly crippled him on the long run to this terrible killing-place.

Yusef aimed at the soft pad of the lion's foot. As big as the lion's track had seemed before, the lion's foot was only a tiny target at this distance.

Yusef held his breath and closed one eye, and he aimed carefully and calculated with his mind how the arrow should fly.

Then Yusef's father's words came to him, as clearly as if they were whispered into his ear—in a voice as dry as withered leaves, a voice as ancient as the world, the voice of ancestors—but still his father's words.

Yusef listened to his father's words whispered in that ancient voice, and Yusef opened both eyes, and Yusef let the lion's paw fill his eyes and heart. Yusef felt the wood and sinews of the bow in his hands, and felt the feather of the bird of the air brush against his cheek, and the shaking in his hands and arms ceased, and the bow was steady.

Yusef listened to his own heart, beating with the blood of his ancestors.

Yusef saw the arrow fly—not even knowing when his own hand had released it. Yusef watched the gentle arc of the arrow that his own eyes and arms and hands and heart and all the eyes and arms and hands and hearts of all his ancestors had sent flying.

The arrow flew where the arrow flew.

And where the arrow flew was a true and gentle arc from the sinew and wood of Yusef's living bow to the tawny coat and living flesh of the lion.

The arrow pierced the thick paw of the lion and passed through that great lion-paw as if it were smoke; the arrow had been shot with such force that it might have pierced the toughest armor ever made, armor made of the thick, tough hides of crocodiles, all dried and baked hard as iron in the hot African sun.

The lion roared in pain. Then the lion glared at Khalid and snarled, and Yusef was sure that the lion now blamed Khalid for the pain and would slay him for certain, and Yusef blamed himself and wished his aim had not been so true.

But then the lion turned and limped into the brush on three legs, the broken spear still dragging from one shoulder.

Yusef had saved Khalid, and Khalid had saved Yusef, at least for the moment.

Khalid ran to Yusef. He tore the bow out of Yusef's hand.

"You missed the lion twice, younger brother," Khalid screamed at Yusef. "You are worthless. Your arrow just hit him in the foot by accident the second time."

"We should go home now, elder brother," Yusef said gently.

"The lion will be hunting us," Khalid said.

"We are flesh, and he is angry and he is hungry," Yusef said. "Of course he will be hunting us."

Yusef picked up the half of the broken spear that had not gone off with the lion. It was a little over half the length of the original spear, and the fang—the longest tooth—of the lion was embedded deep in it. Yusef's hands were tough and strong from planting thousands of trees, and he dug the tooth out of the spear with his bare fingers.

Yusef handed the lion's tooth to Khalid.

"Here is your trophy, elder brother," Yusef said. "I hope we live long enough so that I may see you wear it."

Khalid laughed and took the tooth.

"I shall live, and so will you, younger brother," Khalid said. "And I shall carry this tooth until the day I die."

A shiver ran down Yusef's spine.

Khalid carried his bow and the lion's tooth, and he searched about and found a single arrow—it was covered in blood from point to nock, and the feather fletching was torn and matted, for it was the arrow that Yusef had shot clean through the lion's paw. Khalid picked up the arrow and tasted the blood of the lion.

Khalid searched about some more, but all the other arrows were broken or simply gone. Khalid licked the blood off the matted feather fletching of the last arrow and tried to straighten the feather so that the arrow would fly true.

Yusef picked up his torn loincloth and tied it around his waist as best he could. He found Khalid's knife, and he carved both ends of the spear sharp enough to draw blood from his fingers. He smeared his own blood on the spear at both sharpened ends.

"I hope we can get home before I lose any more blood," Yusef told Khalid.

"I still have until sunset to eat the heart of the lion," Khalid said, "if I am fortunate, and he catches up with us. So I must have a sharp knife ready to cut out his heart."

Yusef stared at Khalid. My brother has indeed gone mad, Yusef thought.

Khalid found a smooth rock and sharpened the edge of the knife again. He handed Yusef the knife to carry.

Yusef took the knife and he picked up the spear and began to trot with Khalid along the path on the long, long journey back home.

The boys ran for an hour. It was easy running downhill, and it was fast running with a hungry wounded lion somewhere behind them. The dust on the trail was soft and dry and thin. With every step, a little puff of smoky dust would explode underfoot.

The pain was gone from Yusef's foot, though the bandage had been torn off when he was shot into the air like an arrow.

It felt to Yusef as if they were flying without effort down the long, long hill.

Khalid—still naked, of course—carried the bow and the one remaining arrow, and he carried the lion's tooth, as he had sworn to do for the rest of his life. Yusef carried the short two-pointed spear and the knife. Both boys were covered in sweat and dust.

As they ran, Yusef thought about the lion. It had been the most beautiful, terrible thing his eyes had ever beheld. The lion was stout as a bull, yet swift enough to catch and slay an antelope. The lion was made of antelope, and so it was made of sun and wind and rain and grass and the good earth of Africa.

Their father said the lion was the spirit of Africa.

Yusef murmured a few words of respect and apology to the lion and to the spirit of Africa.

"What?" Khalid said.

"Nothing," Yusef said. "Keep on running, elder brother."

Yusef hoped the lion would not hunt them. He hoped that the lion's wounds would heal, and that the lion would leave them in peace and go back to just hunting antelope out on the savanna.

Yusef did not believe for a moment that those things were going to happen. A hungry, angry, wounded lion was going to hunt and kill and devour the flesh had caused its pain.

On and on the brothers ran, down to the west, and toward the setting sun. Two hands high, above the setting sun, lay a thin crescent moon.

"It seems," Khalid said, "that I shall not eat the lion's heart before sunset on this day."

Yusef looked over his shoulder. There was no sign of the lion, not yet.

"I am sorry, elder brother," Yusef said. "But at least you have his tooth."

"Keep watching for him," Khalid said. "I may yet be lucky." But—for the first time in all his life—Yusef thought he heard a shred of doubt in his brother's voice.

"There will be almost no light from this thin moon to see the lion," Yusef said.

"And the moon will fall soon, too," Khalid said. "We will not reach our village tonight."

Nothing more needed to be said. If they did not reach their village tonight, they might never reach their village at all. Both boys ran faster, and the sun sank lower.

Hyenas howled in the distance.

And the sun set, red as blood.

The crescent moon cast thin light along the trail. In that thin light, the boys ran on, ever harder. Now—even in the cool, cool air of night—they were sweating hard. The brothers ran together in the moonlight, running in step now—left feet down, then right feet down, left, right, left, into the night, feet pounding hard in the dust.

They were breathing in the same heavy rhythm, too.

Deep breath in, deep breath out, fast and hard, but breathing together, running together. There was fire in Yusef's chest.

And hungry hyenas howled all around them.

Yusef tried to remember back before they were born, tried to remember the two of them growing together inside their mother's swollen belly. Yusef knew that in the dark and warm and safe long-ago, even their two hearts had beat as one.

"Khalid," Yusef panted to his brother, "Khalid, my elder brother, I wish a promise from you. An oath. You must swear."

"Anything, my brother," Khalid panted. "But keep on running, please."

"If I should die tonight," Yusef said, "You will name your own firstborn son after me. You will call him Yusef, and you will honor my name all the days of your life."

"You will not die tonight, my brother," Khalid said.

"Swear it," Yusef demanded. "Your son, my name. Swear it."

"I swear," Khalid said. "We are the same blood, you and I. If you die, my firstborn son will be as yours. But run, my younger brother, and you will have your own sons, many of them. And I shall be their beloved uncle who teaches them to hunt and to have adventures, and I shall teach them so well that they will make you sick with worry all the days of your life."

The boys ran. Their feet pounded in time, and their hot breaths panted hard together. Yusef carried the spear on one shoulder and his shoulder ached. Khalid still carried the bow and the single bloodied arrow, and the wood of the arrow clicked against the bow as he ran.

One tip of the crescent moon touched the horizon out ahead of them.

"It will be too dark to run," Khalid called out. "We must make a stand."

The boys stopped. They faced each other in the last light of the dying moon. Yusef remember how furious he had been at his brother when Khalid had taken the little bull calf. It seemed like such a small thing now, if they were going to die together tonight.

They looked around. Behind them, up the long slope, the dusty trail they had run down for hours stretched out in curves like a long silver serpent. Somewhere, above them, was a twice-wounded lion.

There was not a tree on the high plain.

Hyenas howled, closer now.

The boys hacked down a few small shrubs and gathered them in a thin circle. It was not enough to hide them, and the lion could smell them anyway, they knew, but they had to do something, even if it were meaningless.

They sat on the ground, back to back, skin to skin, watching, listening, sniffing for the stink of the lion.

Waiting.

Yusef held the spear across his lap, and Khalid had his last arrow already nocked and ready to draw. The knife lay upon the ground between them, so that either of them might reach the knife when spear and bow and arrow all failed, as they surely must.

Gradually, the boys' breathing slowed. Then they held their breaths at the same time, listening hard.

Night birds called, and there was fluttering of wings about.

"I don't hear the lion," Yusef said.

"Shh," Khalid said.

"I no longer hear the hyenas," Yusef said.

"Of course you no longer hear the hyenas, younger brother," Khalid whispered. "Hyenas are terrified of lions."

"Oh."

They waited, breathing together for a while, then holding their breaths together, listening to the silence.

The stars were out now, high and bright against the black forever night.

Then a roar as loud as thunder split that night. The mighty roar came from all around them, from within their very souls, and from the heavens above, all at once.

Roar! Roar! Roar! Again, and again, and again, now roaring that shook their very bones to gravel, to sand, to dust, to smoke.

Yusef stood up in all of that roaring. He raised the spear straight up, high above his head, and he flexed his arms, and he braced his shoulders and with all his strength, he drove that spear straight down.

Thunk! The spear stabbed deep into the earth and shuddered like a knife thrown into a stout tree.

Yusef listened, waiting in dread—and hope—for another roar.

Roar! It came again, and now Yusef knew the direction from which the roaring had come. Yusef took one step in that direction, and he bent the spear down, just a bit, and pointed the other sharpened end of the spear toward that awful roar.

In the darkness, Yusef felt Khalid turn to face the lion with him. Yusef felt Khalid's shoulder brush against his own shoulder, skin on skin as they must have been within their mother's womb in those safe days of dark and warm together.

Yusef heard wood slide on wood as Khalid drew the arrow. Yusef heard the hum of the tight sinew bowstring.

Khalid spoke to Yusef now, his voice very low, but steady and strong. "If I should die tonight, my brother," Khalid said, "If I should die, and you should live, will your first-born son be named Khalid?"

Yusef heard his brother. Yusef heard, too, the sound of heavy feet thundering toward them.

"Yes, my brother," Yusef said. Yusef heard and felt his own voice, high and thin with fear. He wished he could be as brave in the face of death as Khalid was. He steadied his own voice as much as he could. "Yes, my brother," Yusef repeated. "I do swear it. Upon the blood of all our ancestors, upon the blood that flows in both our hearts, my brother, I do swear."

Khalid's sinew bowstring sang and Yusef heard the whoosh of Khalid's arrow as it flew into the darkness.

Yusef gripped the spear as hard as he could, though his hands did tremble with fear.

The lion's charge thundered on.

Now Yusef felt the very earth shake. Time stretched out so that a moment became an hour. A second became an eternity. And still the thundering grew louder and louder and louder in Yusef's ears, and the thundering shook the ground and then:

The thundering stopped.

Silence.

Silence pure and still and cold and bright as the distant stars in the black forever night. Yusef looked up at the stars of the sky, and he watched them twinkle, twinkle, twinkle, ever so slowly, and he began to relax the grip on his spear in the awful silence of that starry, starry night. He relaxed, and he thought about the stories that his father had told him about how the stars had come to be: how Mbaka, the daughter of the Creator, had gathered up a handful of ashes, and had flung them into the sky, and how the ashes had hung in the sky and had become the Milky Way. Yusef remembered the story of how the Creator had had two sons, Mbono and Mboso, who were friends with lions. And Mbono and Mboso had gone out together hunting with their friends, the lions, and they had found no antelope that day, and the lions had turned on the brothers and had slain them. And then the Creator had gathered up the bodies of His sons and placed them high in the sky: the two brightest stars of the Southern Cross.

Yusef gazed up at the Southern Cross, and at the Milky Way, and at the stars of the Seven Sisters, and he felt at peace.

Then—in that strange and absolute silence—the stars were going out.

One by one, two by two, snuffed out. Then dozens of stars all at once, and hundreds of stars gone in another moment, all blotted out, higher and higher into the sky, blackness ascending like the end of the world, the Milky Way—Mbaka's ashes—all obliterated, annihilated, gone.

Suddenly Yusef knew why the stars were going out.

He gripped the spear as hard as he could, and he found that his hands trembled no more: his hands were steady and strong and hard and true and Yusef aimed the point of his spear just ahead of the horrible rising blackness that was blotting out the stars of the sky, and he held on to the spear and he made himself keep his eyes wide open in the face of the horror and he kept the tip of his spear pointed—he hoped, and he prayed, to all of the gods of Africa—pointed right at the heart of the horror itself.

And for a moment, when Yusef understood what was blotting out the stars, and what was about to come crashing down upon him like a doom, that thing made of antelope and grass and wind and blazing sun and the good African earth, that thing of living flesh that was the spirit of Africa, in that moment, Yusef felt no fear at all.

Yusef felt no fear at all, but only love.

Time sped up again. Now, every star in the sky was blotted out. Yusef held the spear as hard as his steady hands could hold, and he gritted his teeth. His face was pointed up, and his eyes were open, but there were no stars, no light, and the earth and the sky were as empty as death.

Nothing was there but the smell of the lion, somewhere in the sky above him.

The spear trembled in Yusef's hands, but it was not Yusef's hands that trembled: it was the spear itself.

The spear shook. It surged. It heaved. It buckled.

And it shattered.

Yusef was smashed to the ground and knew no more.

Yusef awoke, unable to move, barely able to breathe, for a great weight lay upon him. When he did breathe, the stink of the lion filled his nostrils.

A bit of morning light was beginning to gather—just the tiniest bit of pink above the hills where he and Khalid had only yesterday first hunted the lion—before the lion had hunted them.

Yusef lay on his back, covered by the lion, with only his head free.

Yusef tried to move his right arm. He could move it just a bit, dragging it deep through the dust and the sand. Finally he pulled his hand free, and found that he still had a short chunk of the shattered spear in his grip. He propped up the lion's shoulder with the chunk of shattered spear.

Yusef began to try to wriggle out. It was hard work, and the sun rose and the air grew hot, and soon Yusef was sweating. At last he slid out from under the massive weight of the slain lion.

Yusef stood, naked. Somewhere under the lion lay the knife and his loincloth. Yusef walked around the lion, making sure it was not breathing. The point of the spear rose from the lion's chest, and already flies buzzed around the bloody wound. Yusef knew that the flies would lay their eggs in the lion's flesh, and then would come the worms, and then the worms would feast upon the flesh of the lion, and the lion would go back to being part of the earth.

Just now, though, the lion loomed larger than any creature Yusef had ever seen.

Khalid lay under the lion's massive head. Khalid's face was covered by the thick lion's mane, golden as a field of

dhurra millet. Khalid's face looked like the face of one of Father MacGregor's saints, complete with a golden halo.

"I pray," Yusef said aloud, "I pray by the gods of my father, I pray by the spirit of the lion that is Africa, I pray by the God of Imam Reza and of Father MacGregor. I pray by all of them, I pray that my brother lives. If my brother lives, I will give my life for whatever God and all the gods and the spirit of Africa may choose for me."

Yusef bent down. He held his breath. He touched his brother's cheek. It was cool, but it was not cold. Still Yusef held his breath, and he bent his face to his brother. Now he felt the warm familiar breath of his brother on his own cheek, and joy filled his heart.

Khalid opened his eyes.

"Did I slay the lion?" Khalid asked.

"Yes, elder brother," Yusef said quietly. "You have slain the lion. And it seems that we will each have to do the naming of our own children after all."

Khalid laughed. "Help me out from under my lion, younger brother," Khalid said.

"Just a moment, elder brother," Yusef said.

Yusef walked half way around the lion again. There, in the dirt, was the arrow that Khalid had sent flying into the night as the brothers had stood shoulder to shoulder, skin to skin, breath to breath. The arrow lay dry—no fresh blood on it at all—in the dust.

Yusef picked up the arrow. He went to the lion's chest and gripped his shattered spear and pulled it out of the lion's chest. Yusef threw the spear as far as he could, into the brush. Yusef took the arrow—all dry and dusty—and he plunged it deep into the lion's chest. He dipped his hands into the blood on the chest of the lion, and he smeared the blood all over the arrow.

Then Yusef dried his hands in the dust and ran around to the dead lion's head.

"I wanted to check for hyenas," Yusef said to Khalid. "I saw some hyenas at the edge of the brush. They look hungry, and soon they will come to understand that they have nothing to fear from this lion. We need to leave now."

"Pull me out, then, younger brother." Khalid said irritably. "I have already told you to do this."

Yusef grabbed Khalid's wrists, and Khalid grabbed Yusef's wrists—as best he could, for Khalid was still clutching his lion's tooth—and Yusef pulled and tugged and finally managed to drag Khalid out from under the lion's head.

"Now we run for home," Yusef said.

"I want to see my arrow that killed my lion," Khalid said.

"You can see it from here," Yusef said, pointing at the arrow. "And you already have the lion tooth for a trophy. I shall fashion for you a necklace for that tooth if only you will run with me. But let us run now. There is great honor for you in slaying a lion and wearing its tooth at your own throat. There is no honor at all for us in being eaten by hyenas."

Khalid stared at the arrow for a moment. From this angle, Yusef saw, it looked like the arrow must have killed the lion. In his lifetime, Khalid would never know his arrow had missed the lion in the night. Nor would anyone else ever know, not from Yusef's lips. In all his long life—and Yusef lived many, many years, before his own bones went back to being part of the good earth of Africa again—in all his long, long life, Yusef never told another living soul that one night, in the heart of Africa, that he had slain a lion. And—in all his long, long life—Yusef never told another living soul that in that last moment, when the great terrible beast had blotted out

the sky and the stars and all the world, that he, Yusef, had felt no fear, but only love for the lion.

All of these things Yusef kept in his heart forever.

Yusef and Khalid stared at the lion and at the arrow in its chest for just a moment longer.

Khalid grasped the lion tooth firmly in his hand.

"Run, now, elder brother," Yusef said. "We shall run to our home and to our parents and to our sisters, and I shall run behind you, at your heel as ever, elder brother, great dancer of bulls and slayer of lions."

Action/adventure set in Africa, with powerful moral lessons

ONCE UPON A TIME, A CHILD: YUSEF'S STORY