were all those open doors. So many open doors. Why were there so many open doors? Why?

Nowhere Cool

Kinna (of five years old): Mama, Mama, why do you look so quiet?
AAA: Hmm . . . I am thinking
Kinna: Are you thinking again?
AAA: Yes.
Kinna: Mama, do people have to think all the time?
AAA: Yes, child, it looks like we have to. All the time!

"THERE WERE areas in our secondary school education at home that I could never understand or cope with. Like English Literature. While the sun blazed outside the classrooms, its heat strong enough to warm great grandmother's bath water, we read about carriages getting stuck in the snow. All that always made me feel sleepy. But I didn't dare sleep. So I would just sit like a stone, my eyes wide open but staring at nothing, while my thoughts wandered around familiar things that were
being chased away by the demands of the culture of our conquerors . . .

"A penny for your thoughts, Sarah." That was the voice of Miss Jones. The command always achieved its intended effect. I was jolted awake and my mind returned to the classroom and mad women locked away in cold attics. "A penny for my thoughts?" I have always wondered why. Why would anyone want another person's thoughts for a penny? Surely, there can never be moderately-priced thoughts? Since our thoughts are either so useless they aren't worth anyone else's dime, or they are so precious, we wouldn't want to sell them for anything at all?"

She would always remember the jokes her male colleagues loved to tell about the position of women in traditional society. For instance, about how a man usually walked to the farm behind his wife: just in case there was danger ahead. "With just a matchet under his arm, while the woman carried the day's load on her head, and a child on her back . . ." A gender joke. Of course, like racial jokes, class jokes and other products of humour built on inner unpeace, the teller always hopes his listeners would take his ability to be so openly nasty as a sign of his freedom from privilege. Allah, how little we know ourselves as groups and how much less as individuals!

What she had come to learn is that being female has never been fun. Yes, ultimate pleasure is ours. But then, so is the last pain.

She knew she would always admit, and be grateful for Kobla's support. The long hours of patient discussions they had had over their dilemmas. The concentration he had given to each possible solution that had presented itself.

"But there are workable compromises." And Sissie sees clearly the face of her father relaxed, his whiskey in hand after the morning service, on Sunday. Pensioned home from Eastern Nigeria where, for a native, he had been fairly senior in the colonial civil service, Papa certainly must have known about "workable compromises".

Meanwhile, there was the going itself. For three years. Away from Kobla . . . What a risk! "These days, we are all so desperate, a sister would snatch up your man while you are away changing the baby's diaper."

"Those forever unattached ones are a particular menace . . . Even decently married friends can be quite dangerous too . . ." said Bibi. Said Mariama.

Thinking of those two in particular, she realized with some shock that it was really true. They were always so quick to tell her how lucky she was, married to Kobla, who was "not only handsome, but you know, such a good conversationalist too, very different, research officer . . . " such things. Oh yes, they definitely made you feel that they would welcome a husband-swapping any day. Yet you would have thought that belonging already to the club of the saved was enough. So she couldn't help thinking too that there must be something in the belief that no human being is ever fully satisfied with her lot in life.

As for asking her mother-in-law to move in to look after the house, the children and Kobla, that too was another problem. "Hei, it never works out." Again, "except for one or two blessed people. Much of the time, the old lady bustles around, cooking her son all his favourite
dish, while dropping a few hints here and there about how much better off she always knew he would have been with one of the simple unspoil girls from the village . . .”

“My dear sister, there have been cases where the missus came back with her degrees and diplomas to find a brand new wife installed by the husband’s family.”

“Nowhere cool, sister, ain’t nowhere cool.”

Therefore, let me hide here among the thorns, while I dine on wild desert grain And if they should ask you of me tell them the name of the game was Life, and I never learnt the rules.

Anyhow, to abandon her own life unlife: to say no to bits of good offers thrown in her way because taking them up might mean losing him, seemed plainly to her like a risky bet. “And anyway, what woman has succeeded in holding a man who really wanted to go away from her . . . ?

“Aaw, my mother’s daughter, you are a child . . . Because when a man wants to go, he does. And it doesn’t have to be another woman that takes him away from you. Anything can. Most things do. A man friend. A


“Say it and say it again, my child. You don’t have to go swimming in the ocean to get drowned.”

“No, you can drown in your bath. They say it has happened to people with a pail of water in a bamboo outhouse! Otherwise would any devoted housewife who refused to go out of her house to work or play lose her man?”

What shook Sissie up was the thought of leaving the children for all that time. Two years definitely, possibly three. And the last-born under a year?

“Other women have done it.”
“Does that make it okay?”

And the horror tales are told:

Of children sent like cargo on strange airlines with their stranger hostesses. And the children arriving at airports to no relatives waiting because telegrams do not always arrive when we hope they would . . . phones do not always work . . . telex machines break down . . . “ And where some of us live, no one has heard of the fax yet! . . . Not always a bad sign . . . but . . .” Of children wasting away in towns and villages even though grannies spoil us so and aunties, uncles and daddy and mummy’s friends treat us like their own that we are. But “mother is gold and mother is silk: and only an orphan finds comfort in the promise that if one father is dead, there are several still living . . .”

Yet go she also knew she must. Pushed by so many forces whose sources she could not fathom.
As the plane nosed its way up into the San-Some-
thing—or-Other Valley across the immense American skies, she was doing her best not to keep on thinking of home,
when the quiet but clearly exasperated voice broke into her consciousness:

"Please darling, sit still, please dear?"

She had to turn round and look. Of course, it came from just the seat next to hers, a white woman and her two children, a girl of about five years old and a baby of less than two, whose sex was obviously of no interest to anybody yet; concealed as it was under some unisex anybody-can-wear clothes. The baby was straining across mother’s lap to get to those skies, so beautiful with the golden streaks of a day’s ending. And it couldn’t have
known that the window through which it wanted to fly was permanently closed. Mother was having a hard time stopping it though. And as if that was not enough, big sister was scampering across the aisle and all over their section of the plane touching other passengers and asking them questions.

Then the dinner came. Two trays. One for the mother, one for the big girl, with some mushy-looking stuff for the baby. Exasperation deepened on the mother’s face. How on earth was she going to manage? Soon they brought another for Sissie.

Back home in Africa, the mother would have felt sure that Sissie would want to help out. She would have dumped baby, food and all on her neighbour’s lap and expected her to feed the child. And not just that. But love doing it too. Feel complimented by the obligation! And here? Sissie decided to mind her own business. Because for all she knew the woman was probably feeling uncomfortable in her seat, on top of all her own troubles, because she was sitting next to a black person . . .

At the surprise party which Kobla had organized at some ‘friends’ for her — how had she managed to acquire this husband? — there had been quite a few speeches . . . How much we appear to want to say, especially when there is nothing much to say. Everyone had congratulated her on winning the fellowship award, and for the courage with which she had faced the prospect of leaving her husband and children behind.

No one had voiced out what she knew was in all their minds. That if the opportunity had come to Kobla, then he and all the wellwishers would have assumed that she would forget about her job, pack up the house, pack up the kids, and gone with him. It would have been so natural. Other women would have envied her. Yet there they were, telling her how brave she was, how brave some women can be . . .

It was almost the same at the cocktail party in New York. Her host family had met her at the JFK and driven her through a maze of streets to a hotel, one of several, east of what she was later to identify as Central Park. They had seen to it that all was somehow well there.

"You can’t take too many chances: see, all black women ain’t whores."

Then they had suggested that she had better go straight to bed. “You have to make up for the ‘jet lag’.

Jet-lag? What new beast is that? A peculiar disease of 20th century origin. Caused by flying, it attacks the
central nervous system, effecting a disconnection between the mind and body. So that the patient spends several hours coaxing her mind to come and join her body from wherever she had originally boarded the plane to where she finally disembarked. Naturally, the longer the flight, the more serious the ailment.

In the evening, they had come to take her to the party. Quite a few people were there. Black black to white white with several shades in-between. Again later, she was able to identify the area as somewhere on Riverside Drive. She had set out determined to have fun. She was refreshed by the nap and excited at the prospect of unknown times ahead, masses of new people to meet.

She was never able to learn the name of who had thrown the party. Nobody else had seemed to know or care, anyway. But it had been a great evening. People dancing, drinking, smoking and openly touching as though they had just woken up to one another, and didn’t expect this world to continue to exist beyond the next morning.

The party had gone on far into the night. No one had seemed over-anxious to go home, wherever that was. Instead, they had shown their tiredness by withdrawing into small groups. Again, as if everyone knew what the next phase should be. Eating, smoking, openly touching and now talking in exchange for dancing. So it was natural that she would find herself among a group of four young women. The sisters looked so charming and so roguish, their earlobes weighed down by unbelievably large earrings: circular, triangular, rectangular. And the sisters themselves, where had they come from? This round-faced Yoruba? That sloe-eyed Fulani? A long-limbed Kalenjin? And the black-lipped Wolof? And her heart warmed at the various beauty of a continent reflected unexpectedly, in a far-off-place. Her hand had gone up to her own head. She had known some embarrassment then . . . about her own straightened hair.

The sisters had rapped, suddenly serious because they had learnt she was from “The Mother Continent”. For until things are properly ironed out, pleasure, unalloyed pleasure for so many of us cannot ever last through any twenty-four hour day . . . They had asked her many questions. She had also asked them a few. Intimacy born as the morning broke. And by the lights of a brand new day, seeing the tallest buildings she had ever come across in all her life. Manhattan, New York.

Her new friends had looked a little tired and quite sleepy. But they couldn’t get over the fact that she had left her children way out there on the other side of the Atlantic to come and study for two years or more. W-h-a-a-at! Each of them had been sure that in her place, they wouldn’t have found the nerve. She in her turn had struggled to let them understand. That she was not different from anybody else. That no human being is born to be brave. We learn to be, when we are forced to.

“Yes,” agreed the sisters, who had then recalled some decisions of their own which they had found themselves making at some time or other to their own surprise. Not anything significant or earth-shaking. Like what their mothers had had to cope with. Or their grandmothers, on whom time and circumstances had forced harrowing painful choices.

“And consider this, huh, under slavery, black women,
... so many too... not just an isolated case or two.  
... yeah... it's said they had recipes passed down the 
generations... so each woman knew it... part of the 
business that prepared you for seeing your first blood 
... Therefore, the choice was open to you from your early 
teens to menopause. G-a-a-a-d, what a hellishly long time 
too, to carry such a burden!” Oh, cosy private hell.

“So you mean?” asked Sissie with her English-as-a-
Second-Language accent, which so many Americans were 
going to say was charming. “You mean they sometimes 
poisoned their own babies rather? . . .”

“Sure!”

“Or smother them in their cradle-sheets or choke 
them?”

“Sure!”

“Jesus.”

And of course, if you’ve seen a fatal accident before, 
no one needs tell you how frail we are at twenty, thirty 
... forty years. So how strong do you think anybody 
is, at a week, a day, a few hours old?

Just a belated abortion, and that’s another very big 
issue. The mother must have managed. They always do 
or nearly always do. Yes, the mother must have managed. 
Sufficiently to have had time to say to Sissie:

“You sure you don’t want to least taste the food before 
they come for the tray?”

She had had to wake up and take note of the contents 
of the tray. She tasted a bit of this and a bit of that, and 
decided to keep the free 8 oz bottle of pink wine, provided 
to chic up the otherwise celluloid meal. As the trays were 
being removed, a voice came over the public address 
system, warning them of a few air-pockets ahead. They

immediately tumbled into three in quick succession. The 
rest of the speaker’s words trailed away in her own and 
other people’s nervousness.

“Please darling, keep still. Please darling?”

This time, the little girl caught some fear from her 
mother’s voice and started wailing as the plane kept 
lurching about, rather dangerously. Sissie drew up the 
midget curtains from the porthole and stared out. Grey 
and starless. Yet her watch read four o’clock. In the 
afternoon. Although she knew enough about changing 
seasons and their effects on daylight, she was still quite 
confused about time in this country where time changed 
from state to state. She put her watch to her ear and 
listened. She couldn’t hear a thing. Reluctantly, she asked 
her neighbour for the time of the day.

“It’s nine. But that’s for New York. We are already 
in Southern California and it’s only six o’clock here.”

“I see,” said Sissie surprised and doubting.

“How can it be so dark outside then?”

“Sure? . . . mm . . . maybe we are going to get some 
rain.”

“We are meeting a storm, ladies and gentlemen,” a male 
voice full of strength came out on the address system. 
“Please fasten your seat belts and put out all lighted 
cigarettes.”

one actually hear raindrops pelting the roof of a plane? 
Or was it her imagination? The next few minutes 
were something else. No language or words can ever 
bring this type of experience to anyone. You go 
through it and know you’ve been there where life
and death meet. Only other travellers who have also been to these zero points and returned know. Not necessarily on a plane flight. But also at some critical point in an illness or face to face with some other kinds of danger. A real beast as in lion, or some assailant on a lonely road: a weapon in hand, and eyes gleaming maniacally: hungry for sex, hungry for money that can buy food... Ave Maria, Holy Mother of God, and even the sign of the cross might not always save us... My brother, there is a special jet-age horror to suffer if you are encased in a plane that is floundering in space threatening any minute to crash.

"Please sweethearts, it should be all right in a little while."

The baby had joined its sister, so that now the two of them were bawling their lungs out as though in another second, weeping would go straight out of fashion. Meanwhile, it was clear the noise of the crying children was not doing the nerves of the people in their section of the plane any good. So they were turning their heads this way and that, with general discomfort and immediate disapproval. Sissie knew that like everybody else, there was nothing she could do but sit and wait.

She had never before taken time to contemplate what she would look like at her end. What she felt vaguely unhappy about was when she thought someone would dream of dolling her up in a blond wig and some such fineries, the choosing of which would be done without her participation or approval. And now here, she was amused, as she contemplated her own lifeless body, lying there for people to come and gawk at... Lord, any way you look at it, death is so undignified. But then luckily for air-crash victims, very often, there isn't much of anything to put on view. Other funny images chased one another across her mind. And long after it was all over, she was to feel some shame that in actual fact, at no point during the crisis had she thought seriously about her children, their future and all that could have happened to them had the plane crashed among those alien mountains and she had died in it as everyone on board would most certainly have done.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but you wouldn't mind holding on to him while I calmed her?"

She woke up suddenly, surprised. "Oh, yes," she said. So the little one was a boy?

"I am very sorry about the imposition but I can't cope alone."

That was the mother again.

Sissie was already bending down to stand her bag on the floor to make room for the child. She noticed the top of its scalp first, like the center of a circular crochet work or the base of a raffia basket. And she knew it was the closest she had ever got to the roots of a white head or indeed, of any non-African hair... Kweli, what do you know? So many kinds of God's children...

She saw the label then. In clear type and pinned on the crossroads of his braces, next to the centre of his backbone:

Allen Peters Jr
Aged 17 Months
C/o Allen Peters
woman was anxious, as if she, the mother, felt cross-examined, or accused of being something less than normal. And yet, Sissie didn’t know how to put across what she had thought was a genuine curiosity, a plain desire to understand. She wished she could bite her tongue. But the mother was speaking on, anyway.

"Well, see, one just never knows what can happen. I’ve always done it. Since my little girl was a baby. I figured it will make identification easier in case of trouble.”

“Oh . . . oh . . . h . . . yes, of course,” Sissie agreed, while her mind secretly echoed a recognition.

“And air crash victims don’t normally offer much as pieces of meat: do they?”

She shivered: though the mother’s voice now moved on with a little more confidence.

“Besides, it also helps in terms of who to contact immediately and all that kind of stuff.”

Of course, of course.
The children might get mashed up.
But their labels will be safe from all but fire.

Secure within their plastics which
no hail, no snow, neither war nor pestilence
no water, no blood
can touch.

So what dinosaur ever talked of King Cotton?
All hail Emperor Oil! Step slightly
Nana Black Gold.
We sing the praises of Incorruptible Plastic
the miracle child of a wondrous century.
It appeared the mother still felt a little apologetic: "Allen and I have had to live apart most of the time we've been married. Commuter couple is what they call our type. These things happen. But whenever we can, we try to be together. Like we always try to spend our weekends in one place. That means we fly all the time. Or nearly all the time."

Sissie didn't think she would ever recover from this piece of information. Certainly, to fly in and out any distance most week-ends is definitely to fly all the time . . . So, in what part of the universe and how many centuries gone past had Sissie envied the ease with which so many women kept two homes in different towns, and struggled desperately to bridge the distances with buses, private or state-owned?

Kumase — Ga
Takoradi — Oguaa
Koo'dua — Keta
Off Friday afternoon, back Sunday evening.

Then she knew that between her country of origin and her new environment, the differences were so much in many things and yet so few in others, the best thing to do might be never to try to figure anything else out.

" . . . So I was thinking that one ought to put tags on the kids. I never forget them. At first Allen didn't like the idea a' all. Made him feel funny, he said. But now, he doesn't mind them, anyhow it makes me feel better." The last statement sounded like a defiance.

Hmm, Sweet Sister Courage
There is time. There is time. Time to shop for clothes and food.
Time to answer awkward questions about the moon and the sun and why daddy too can't make the new baby brother, instead of mammy again.
Time to deal with the newest African menace: insulting anonymous telephone calls from the frustrated unmarried sisters your husband is busy chasing.
And here and now, there must be Time to type out tags to label children just in case any old weekend, they might become bits of torn flesh, debris.

Sissie's throat felt like it had been sewn up. It was therefore natural that just when she was realizing that they had not crashed after all, and in fact, they were touching ground smoothly, she should remember too, with infinite humility, those defiled ancestresses who had been shipped across the seas. And she wondered where they had hidden their bowel-begotten infants, rather than leave them to grow up in slavery.

Hei, Hei, Hei
Sweet Sister Courage, hei:
courage to welcome death who bears lives . . .
So what then are two or three years? Isn't absence bearable for those who know ultimate togetherness?

And time does fly so?
Hei, Hei, Hei.

Maybe courage is all, and for the rest,
grief is part of
the theatre? and tears are orgasmic?
Dear Mother Courage:
my mother silk.
Hei . . .
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