

SANKOFA



A NOVEL

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Sankofa

ALSO BY CHIBUNDU ONUZO

Welcome to Lagos

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To Joseph Harker, for planting the seed.

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Sankofa

1

My mother was six months dead when I opened the trunk I found under her bed. I opened the trunk on the same day her headstone was erected. Rose, my daughter, accompanied me to the cemetery. I wore black, like it was a second funeral. Grass had grown over her grave, the earth erasing all memory of its disturbance. The headstone was marble, paid for by my mother's funeral insurance. Rose chose the gold-lettered inscription.

Bronwen Elizabeth Bain

1951–2018

Beloved Mother, Grandmother, Daughter and Sister

Remember me when I am gone away,

Gone far away into the silent land.

The Rossetti quote was a touch melancholic, but so was my mother and, for that matter, so was Rose. We laid flowers, fresh white chrysanthemums. Rose said a few words, addressing my mother as if she were present. When she finished, she turned to me. I shook my head. The practice felt too foreign and fanciful.

Afterwards, we had lunch near Rose's office, in what my mother would have called a smart restaurant, a maître d' by the door, thick cloth napkins on the tables. Rose went back to work, and I returned home to retrieve my mother's trunk from the storage cupboard. The day's ritual had left me wanting to touch something that belonged to her.

The trunk looked old. Brass fastenings and studs. Rose would have called it vintage. I avoided it for a long time. I had not enjoyed my previous experience of sorting through my mother's things. There had been no catharsis, only a strange fatigue after holding the clothes she had worn and the books she had read. It became clear I did not know her very well. *Madame Bovary* was on her bedside table. In the recesses of a wardrobe, I found a pair of sequined gloves.

The trunk fastenings were stiff and took some force to spring open. I lifted

the lid and took out what appeared to be a scrapbook. There was a copy of my birth certificate stuck to the first page; on the next, a photograph of me by the seaside. My skin was as brown as the sand. There was a clump of my hair glued in place. My mother had written under the cutting: *From little Anna's head. She cries when I brush it.*

The book was a sort of monument to my childhood, a small shrine of memories. In a picture from my confirmation aged thirteen, I wore a puff-sleeved dress. Plaits sprouted from my head like twigs and ribbons streamed from their ends, prayers knotted to branches. She had kept my letters from university, a swatch of red fabric, and a white rose, pressed yellow with age.

There were some loose pictures of my mother and her sister when they were girls. Aunt Caryl was tall, almost scrawny, with her red hair disguised by sepia. My mother was smaller and sleeker with shiny black curls. My mother looked like a Bain, dark hair and blue eyes, a winning combination that obscured the plainer family features of thin lips and a weak chin. Aunt Caryl was an alien, or adopted, or ask the milkman.

In the months I avoided the trunk, it occurred to me that information about my father might be inside. I was very curious about him in my childhood. I knew his name, Francis Aggrey. I knew that he had arrived in England in the late sixties to go to university. I knew he had lodged in the spare attic room of my grandfather's house, and that he and my mother had some sort of affair. When he returned to his country, Bamana, she didn't know she was pregnant with me. They never saw each other again.

Why didn't she write? She didn't have an address. Why didn't *he* write? How would she know? Why didn't she go to Bamana?

"I couldn't afford it," she would say. "We can barely afford to go to Blackpool."

What was he like?

"I don't know, Anna. It was so long ago. He was only here for a few months."

Her answers never changed. There was nothing more to tell. I didn't even know what he looked like.

By the time I was eighteen, I'd stopped trying to find out about him. Although, once in a while, I would daydream about traveling to Bamana, stopping strangers in the street and asking if they knew a Francis Aggrey. I don't remember when that dream died.

I'd gone through all the photographs. The box looked empty. I shook it and heard sliding, objects rubbing against each other. I turned the trunk upside down and banged it. A false cardboard bottom came loose. Two notebooks fell out

along with a black-and-white photograph the size of a playing card.

The man in the picture was the darkest tint in the human spectrum. Clean-shaven, smooth-skinned, almost oiled. I had his jaw, that straight square jaw that no other Bain had. His suit was pale, either grey or light blue. A metal pin held his tie in place, a silk pocket square bloomed from his breast pocket. His hair was cropped close, freshly clipped, shining with hair oil. I turned the picture over. *To my white rose, with love, F.K.A., 1969.* The ink was faded, the letters cramped to fit into the small space, except his initials, which took up half the inscription. It could be my father. Francis K. Aggrey. What did the K stand for?

I opened the first notebook, cheaply bound and filled with the same tight script.

London is afraid of me. Black man cannibal. Black man rapist. Hide your fat wives and your dumpy virgin daughters. Shut your door in my face. Look out. Tollund Man is coming.

The author's voice was strong and alive, as if he had walked into the room and begun speaking. An intelligent black man, angry, humorous. Surely not my father, hidden away in this box by a woman who told me there was little to know but his name.

I do not know how to write in a book like this. I am not used to talking to myself, but where else will I keep my confidences? A student drowned himself last week. Ghanaian boy with mother and family back home in Accra, and he threw himself off a bridge because someone called him a nigger. One time is nothing. Nigger, coon, darkie—you hear it like a mosquito flying past your ear. But a year of traveling in a crowded bus with an empty seat next to you, of old landladies opening their doors and quivering at the sight of you, “Francis Aggrey? I thought you were a Scotsman,” “Francis Aggrey, I thought you were white,” and the bottom of the Thames might begin to look like home.

It was my father, Francis Aggrey, trapped between these pages for decades. I was suddenly cautious. What if this diary revealed something discreditable? Some crime he had committed, some fraudulent stain from which my mother thought it best to shield me.

I read on slowly. The next few entries were sketches of places I recognized. He was an accurate draftsman. On a double leaf he had drawn the façade of the British Museum with this caption:

I go to the Africa Section to sit in the warmth. Masks, stolen from my ancestors, surround me. These masks are made grotesque by their setting, the sacred turned ridiculous under the gaze of the uninitiated. The British public glance at me often, eyes darting from fertility goddesses to my black face. One of these days, I'll climb into a glass case to oblige them.

I had enacted this scene several times in my youth. Young Anna walking into

an affluent space, a jewelry store, for example, or a gallery. Cue side glances tracking my movement, nervous and on edge. I tried to explain it to my mother once. “Don’t be so sensitive,” she said.

There is something unseemly in running home to tell tales in these blank pages instead of speaking my mind like a man. Just on the corner today, I was running late for a lecture and I asked a man for the time. “Twenty minutes to noon,” he said, before adding, “You talk nice for a nigger, don’t you?” In Fanti, my response would have been out before he finished speaking. “You talk nice for a fool.” But in English, this language I learned from missionaries, linguistically trained to turn the other cheek, all I could manage was, “I wish you good day, sir.”

Years from now, when I am back in the Diamond Coast, among my own people where I am most confident, to open these pages would be to release the sharp stink of unaided retorts.

I shut the diary. I did not want to meet my father in one sitting. I put the scrapbook and loose photos back in the box. I kept the books and Francis Aggrey’s photograph. I double-locked my front door and checked the kitchen window was shut. I left the stair lights on to show I was awake and in lunging distance of a panic button. Next year, perhaps, I would sell the house and move to a flat with other families stacked like crates above and below me.

I went upstairs to my bedroom. I changed into my sexless pajamas and turned off the lights. I still slept on one side of the bed, pinned to my half of the sheets, facing the space my husband once occupied. In the mornings, one side was always ruffled, the other smooth as an egg: portrait of a single woman’s bed.

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I woke up thinking about Francis Aggrey. I looked again at his picture, dated 1969. It was taken just after Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech, the worst of times for my father and my mother to fall in love. Or perhaps they were never in love. I was merely the result of a hapless fling, conceived hastily in 1969 and born nine months later, in January 1970.

Surely my grandfather had been foolish to take on such a handsome lodger with a teenage daughter in the house. My mother was nineteen when she had me, which meant she was eighteen when they met. How had she dared look at Francis Aggrey, let alone sleep with him, creeping past Grandpa Owen's door and up to his bedroom?

I would never know. Her death was swift and unexpected. Light headaches had surged into blinding migraines, brought on by a brain tumor that was metastasizing. I sat by her while she lay under the standard-issue NHS blanket, shrouded to her neck, hiding the tangle of tubes that fed into her arms.

When she was in pain, her lips puckered like a purse drawn tight. Her wrinkles became more pronounced, dark lines in pale skin, etching on porcelain. I often looked out the window on a view of a bare tree, roots buried under the asphalt of the parking lot.

While she was ill, I asked about Francis Aggrey only once. She grew agitated when I said his name.

"I was all the family you needed. Didn't I feed you and clothe you and love you? What else did you want?"

She tried to sit up and I eased her back down.

"I was just trying to make conversation," I said.

The doctor said my mother's personality might change as the tumor grew. I wondered whether her character had changed or merely revealed itself.

Towards the end, I moved her from the hospital to my guest bedroom.

"Where's Robert?" she would ask most mornings. I told her but she always forgot.

I learned how to sponge her clean and check for bedsores, to feed her and wipe her chin, to ask before I did any of these things because she was an adult. She died on a May morning, Rose and I by the headboard, my husband, Robert, briefly reinstated at the foot.

Perhaps there would be something in Francis Aggrey's diary about how he met my mother. She was often timid, unsure, almost fearful. From what I'd read so far, they didn't seem an obvious match. I opened to where I had stopped.

I have joined a union for African students. I came to England to bowl with the English, and dance around their Maypoles, but the English will not have me. Not for tea. Not for scones. I attended my first meeting today. It is all young Africans like myself in worn shoes, and carefully brushed suits and big talk about politics. Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya have their independence. South Africa and Rhodesia must soon follow. Ghana has left the sterling standard and rightly so. Nigeria should align with the Communists. I sat in a corner and listened. They have had big men come out of this students' union: a president in Central Africa, I have heard, although you could not tell it from the building. Crumbling walls and damp. "Where are you from?" a Rhodesian called Thomas Phiri asked when I got up to leave.

"Diamond Coast," I said.

"That's a slave name. Named for what they stole from us."

It's the only one I know.

In the photograph, Francis looked young, not far from Rose's twenty-five. As I read his diary, my feelings were almost maternal. I was eager for my father to settle down, to make friends in his new playground, to stop feeling so rootless. I hoped this Thomas would be a good influence.

I have seen Thomas Phiri again. He is not so bad the second time around, a bit forward, but London does one of two things to a black man: cows him or turns him into a radical, which is what I think Thomas is. Compared to myself, at least. In the Diamond Coast, the politicians say we are too small for independence, that Ghana or Nigeria will try to swallow us up if we cut ourselves off from the British Empire. Nkrumah talks of a United States of Africa, but who will be the head of this United States? Not tiny D.C. Thomas does not agree with these arguments, which are not necessarily mine, but which I offer to counter his strong opinions.

The next page detailed Francis's run-in with his landlady and her son. First, the mother complained about the noise, and then the son came to put the unruly black tenant in his place, or that was how Francis saw it.

I knew well the hours of agonizing that could follow such an incident. A woman crossing the road to avoid you. A shopkeeper who did not notice that you were next in line. Was that racist? Was it not?

My mother mostly erred on the side of not. People were rude, people were ignorant, but only racist if they called you an ape outright.

I have had the flu. Two days in my room with no one to attend to me, eating bread and water and feeling

sorry for myself. I am my mother's only child. I am used to being made much of when I am sick.

My mother never went to work when I was sick. She would sit by my bed and hold my hand, even when I was asleep. It was one of my earliest memories, waking up and feeling her hand in the dark.

Thomas has invited me for a meeting of the British Communist Party. I don't think I will go. It is illegal to be a Communist in the Diamond Coast, and while a meeting in Russell Square may not get one arrested, it is sure to come to the notice of the government authorities in London that are rumored to keep an eye on foreign students.

Francis Aggrey was cautious like me. I'd always avoided large groups of people swimming in the same direction with one mind. I could never agree with all the tenets of a movement and so I could not join, but merely sympathize with feminists, with socialists, with Christians, with atheists, with vegans.

I really cannot see what threat communism can pose to the world order, at least not as it has done in England. So much jargon, so much theory. Proletariat, bourgeoisie, hegemony: what do these words mean to the fisherman in Segou? I said this to Thomas afterwards and he replied that the meeting was a necessary part of my political education. All I saw was a gaggle of Englishmen playing revolutionaries. There were some members of the working class present, oil on their hands, straight from some factory job or the other, but for the most part, it seemed to be the bourgeoisie they are trying to destroy. One speaker said Labour is killing the movement with its cheap housing. The proletariat are being lulled into complacency with indoor plumbing and central heating.

It appeared Thomas was trying to politicize my father. I'd never seen the point of politics in Britain. There was no choice, only the same men who had gone to the same schools, pretending to believe in different things. I hoped Francis did not succumb.

It was already noon and I was still in bed with the diary. Francis Aggrey's writing was not always easy to read. When his tone was angry, his letters shrank into thin black strokes. I spent a quarter of an hour trying to decipher a paragraph.

I got out of bed but did not open the curtains. There was nothing to see in the room. I was hungry but I had no food in the house. There had been a flurry of resistance when the supermarket chain opened at the top of my street, but we all shop there now, grabbing the bargain cuts and combination deals. The store had made us all richer, pushing the value of our houses over two million pounds.

I stepped outside into the cold. I did not like the area much when we moved in. We were on the cusp of the countryside. In spring, when the wind changed direction, you could smell the manure. The street was like a car showroom now. Low, sleek sports cars that never went at full throttle, tethered birds in our

suburbia. The neighborhood children didn't play on the streets anymore. I saw them strapped inside 4x4s but I rarely heard their voices.

I saw my neighbor Katherine by the shop entrance and swerved into the vegetable aisle. Of all my neighbors, she was the only one who came to knock on my door after the ambulance came home with my mother. She brought us food that was too rich for my taste. I did not know how to respond to her kindness. She invited me to her church, but I declined. It was too much to exchange for cream of mushroom.

I had only come for sausages, but I found apples and soup and ice cream in my basket. I had lost weight on a diet of takeaways or nothing. I did not like to eat by myself, hunched over a foil pack with a plastic fork, brittle enough to bite through. I must have appeared eccentric to the young Asian man I gave my twenty-pound note to. I had worn my coat over my pajamas and my hair was uncombed. He was already looking past me to the next customer, preparing his "How are you today?"

I fried two sausages when I got home. Their skins ruptured, hot mince spilling out like lava. I covered them in baked beans. I forgot to buy bread. I fetched Francis Aggrey from upstairs when I was done. He was familiar to me, a friend, almost.

I have been thrown out of my lodgings. Thomas came here the other day and made a racket. He turned up my record player and stomped around until my landlady herself came to knock. I felt chastised when I saw the old lady, not far from my grandmother's age, woken from sleep to ask us to keep it down. But Thomas shouted at her, "Ma'am, now you have a real complaint for your racist son!"

Reprisal was swift. The son came two days later with a tough behind him. He won't have any coons insulting his mother. Clear out or they'll break my bones. I made a meek protest, citing tenancy agreements and contracts. Then he decided to become violent. He pushed me in the chest and so I pushed him back. I have not wrestled with street boys in Segou to have an English midget shove me about. I was ready to fight them both when the useless back-up said, "If you give any trouble, we'll call the police and get you done for assault." I have chosen not to test the impartiality of the London police force. I am writing this from Thomas's flat. As he was the one who began my troubles, I will stay here until I find a new place.

I want to cheer for young Francis. He would have taught me how to fight, how to make a fist and throw a punch. Not like my mother, who raised me to have nice manners no matter the provocation. I was told to shrink from conflict even when it sought you out, even when it thrust its finger in your face and said, "Go back to your fucking country." Tell them this *is* your fucking country, Francis Aggrey would have said.

He wrote about living with Thomas, two young men in close quarters. My father was the tidier of the two, the more domestic. Thomas arranged their social affairs, dragging my father to meetings with what he termed the "British left."

Francis was skeptical but he went. He had traveled some distance from the Francis sitting alone in the British Museum, ogled by strangers.

I have had a letter from home. It is my mother asking how my studies are. I have not set foot in a lecture hall in two weeks, while my poor mother is in Segou, trading fish up and down the coast so I can pay my fees and have a little spending money. Thomas is a bad influence. We are out till the early hours of the morning and we spend our days dissipated as drunks. I must find new lodgings.

Grandpa Owen was the only grandparent I knew. He taught me some chess strategies and called me Shirley Bassey when I sang off key. I would have liked Francis to write more about my grandmother, but he was too busy discovering London with Thomas.

Francis and Thomas attended a lecture on West African decolonization and Francis's tone grew fierier. He bristled at an English woman being an expert on West Africa, and Thomas was pleased that his protégé was "waking up." It seemed my father had fallen prey to politics in the end.

I have been introduced to a man called Ras Menelik. He is Thomas's mentor, and I have been kept from meeting him because Thomas did not feel I was ready. Perhaps he is right. Had I met Menelik two months ago, I might have laughed in his face. No barber has touched his hair in years. He is like John the Baptist in the wilderness, or one of the mendicant men rooting for food in the rubbish of Segou. He has a bevy of young English girls around him, typing his ideas into articles and pamphlets and chapters. They are the secretaries of his movement, which is to emancipate Africa. I took two of his pamphlets away: "Africa: A New Dawn" and "Sunrise in Ethiop." I cannot tell if it is bombast or visionary. He sends his writings all over the world. People are reading his ideas as far as Tokyo, Thomas tells me.

I have been a few more times to Menelik's flat. It appears I am the first man from the Diamond Coast to join their circle. I was deliberately sought out because there are few students from the Diamond Coast in Britain. We are a poor colony. "Why is that?" Menelik asked me yesterday. "You say you are from the Diamond Coast and yet you are poor?" The truth is, few of us in the D.C. have anything to do with diamonds. In my mother's tribe we are fishermen. We have no diamonds on our land and we pay little heed to what goes on in the diamond towns of the north. We fish as our ancestors have always done. Menelik showed me photographs of what he said were miners in Mion. They go down the mines in rags, Menelik says. They die in the tunnels and their bodies are left to rot, or they are blown up if the tunnel is still in use. They are paid too little to live on and are forever in debt to the mining companies for food and other basics. And what am I to do with this information, I wondered, as I stared at the bony limbs of my compatriots.

Run, you foolish boy, I thought. The world would always have people like this Menelik, trying to press guilt on you, forcing pamphlets with gory pictures into your hands, holding you personally responsible for wars, famines, genocides. Why not be of use to those around you? Why rile my father with atrocities he could do nothing about?

I have made friends with one of Menelik's secretaries. She is a bookkeeper during the week but comes to Menelik's flat on Saturdays to lend her hand to the liberation. She is the first *obroni* woman I have spoken

to in any depth. Her hair is the color of ripened tomatoes, which makes her almost as rare as I am on the streets of London. I asked why she cares so much about Africans. She says she is from a colonized people herself. By that, she means she is Welsh.

A redheaded, radical Welsh bookkeeper. It must be Aunt Caryl! So absorbed was I in Francis's London life that I had almost forgotten that he must meet my mother at some point.

It seemed he had met Aunt Caryl first. She was always a few steps ahead of her younger sister. Four years older, a head taller, and first to Francis Aggrey, too. My mother was more beautiful, but Aunt Caryl had the glamour, a certain recklessness.

There were some more entries about her. They'd had a romance of sorts. Thomas, used to dalliances with white women, encouraged the match. He also had a wife in Rhodesia, a woman Francis was hearing of for the first time. I wonder what my father thought of his friend's philandering. The diary didn't say.

Francis's attachment to my aunt seemed shallow. He was curious about white women but cautious. He had a fear of being turned into a black sex object. He "walked out" a few times with her but there didn't seem to be more. Still, my aunt might have been my mother, or some other person like me, Bain and Aggrey mingled. She was better equipped perhaps to have a mixed-race child, but my mother was softer, the more maternal.

How did the sisters get on after sharing a man? How did they live with it? They were like the Boleyn girls, except Francis Aggrey was not a king, just a poor student living in a single room.

I wanted to speak to someone. I wanted to go out, but I no longer had places to go. I had shed my friends in the past eighteen months, more Robert's friends than mine. My mother was six months dead and I had been six months in the grave as well, or so it felt that evening when I was ready to rush out trailing my winding sheets. I called Rose.

"Mum! Hello. I was just wondering whether I should call to say bye."

It was not the first time she had traveled without telling me. My daughter had a life removed from mine. I glimpsed it on her social media pages: photographs with people I didn't know, in places I'd never been to. Her pose was always the same, legs angled to highlight her slim thighs, smile wide like a commercial. It was what you hoped for your child after twenty-one: independence. And yet, once in a while, the severance still came as a shock.

"Where are you off to now?" I asked.

"Mumbai, for work. I'm part of a team helping a car manufacturer get back

on its feet. I know. I'm sorry. I should have mentioned it but it was decided at the last minute and I've been so busy. I have to switch off."

"I've been reading about Bamana," I said.

"What's that you said? Panama? Yes, I'm getting off. Just saying bye to my mum. Sorry about that. I have to go. We'll talk about Panama when I get back. I love you. I miss you."

My daughter had the strange habit of never saying bye. She said she preferred to leave things on a comma, not a full stop.

I put my phone down and set the kettle to boil. Where was Francis Aggrey now? Was he alive? Did he have another family? He was a handsome man. I couldn't imagine him still single.

I put a tea bag in a mug and poured boiling water over it. Steam rose. The water turned black. I took out the tea bag but I didn't throw it away. Aunt Caryl always said a woman and a tea bag were the same. No matter how many times you boiled one, there was always something left.

3

It is a Sunday the next day and I go to the park. The sun is out, a rare winter sun that raises a glare. There are families with small children on leashes, tugging at the cords that bind them to their parents. Dogs roam free, ranging far from their owners.

If Francis Aggrey had stayed in London we would have been a colored family, welcome only in Notting Hill or Brixton. I saw the marches on television in the seventies, the placards, KEEP BRITAIN WHITE, the faces of the race warriors, bared to the cameras, unashamed.

“Switch it off,” my mother always said.

“Let her see it,” Aunt Caryl would retort.

Grandpa Owen always concluded, “The English are shites.”

A woman sits on the far end of my bench with a child clinging to her. Her hair, done up in a bun this morning, is escaping from the knot, falling down her face like wisps of dry grass. She holds a cigarette in her free hand, unlit, poised.

Aunt Caryl was a smoker. My mother was not. My grandfather had a pipe he lit occasionally. He was from a Welsh mining family. He showed me a picture of his father once, up from the mine with a dozen other men, faces covered in soot.

“Looked like a colored fella when he came home.”

I was the only black child on our street. The shopkeeper called me Sambo and gave me free sweets, sherbets and cherry suckers that turned my tongue bright red. Jenny Jenkins was my neighbor and my best friend. When we quarreled, she called me a stinking wog.

“Can you watch him for me, please?”

It is the woman on the bench. She is speaking to me, leaning across the gap between us.

“Pardon?”

“Just for a moment. I need a smoke. Please. I’m just going across there.” She points to a tree a few steps away. She props the child against the bench before I can answer. He is bundled in a red jacket stiff with padding, his arms sticking