

The Mosque at Larabanga

I remember the day. A hot, half-damp June afternoon. Freed for the summer from school, I skipped home, breathless, my thoughts fixed on that pair of blue sneakers I'd been eyeing for weeks in the Eaton's window. Kangaroo sneakers—complete with a secret pouch on the side just deep enough to hide my weekly quarter. A sly pedi-purse. A spy's necessity, so essential to my friends and me, all of us budding detectives.

This was in 1986, in Calgary, and despite my appetite for all that felt beyond me, not quite of my world, I had never seen *hijab* before. So when I arrived home to find the huge blue-cloaked stranger in our kitchen, I assumed she must be grieving. Her clothes seemed no more than widow's weeds to me, her grief so extreme she'd draped folds of fabric over her head. Its color set off her face, her odd eyelids. Eyelids so pale against her dark skin, they were like the halves of a cracked pistachio shell set upon a mahogany table.

Seeing me in the doorway, my mother kissed her teeth. "Eh, Afua, stop this foolishness and come and say hi. The child who stares down her elders goes blind."

I rushed in, slapping my ecstatic report card on the table between them. The kitchen smelled of freshly watered plants; knots of steam rose from the bitter tisane my mother had poured into their cracked mugs.

"Mom," I said, glancing nervously at the stranger. "You *promised*, you said—" But a sudden cold feeling broke my speech. Those eyes. Framed by all that dark cloth and those eyelids, the stranger's glance was as startlingly naked as a child's. Never had I seen an adult look so *open*.

"*Eh*," my mother said. "We'll talk about your shoes later. Sit."

But then, with huge blind hands—hands so massive they might have belonged to a man—the stranger swept the dark cloth from her head. A natural gesture, without majesty, as if she were used to children fearing her.

I stared. She had a shapely doll's head, smooth and full-cheeked, with a round forehead and plump, plum-colored lips. There was something of my mother's Asiatic shape to the eyes. And yet she looked nothing like my mother, or her few Ghanaian friends. Those women flitted through our house, kissing their teeth, complaining, eating raw sugar cane by the stalk. This woman was bigger than them, with a horse's corpulence, and from what I could tell, a man's height. But despite this, her face bore a sweetness my mother's never had, even in her childhood, I was sure. I wondered what this woman wanted from us.

Smiling at me, the stranger turned and spoke to my mother. I was shocked—not at the mild voice emerging from this huge human doll, but at her language. She spoke to my mother in Twi. The language of my father's tribe. My mother, a polyglot, had upon her arrival in Canada chosen to keep company with only Ga women, as if to spite my father. He'd walk into rooms of squawking women, sweating with embarrassment over what he imagined were jokes at his expense. And so it was odd, astonishing even, that my mother should be speaking his tongue with another woman.

I myself spoke no African languages. But I understood the woman was asking about me.

Tapping the table's surface in irritation, as if I didn't merit the stranger's curiosity, my mother said, "Afua Kwansa." Clearing her throat, my mother turned sharp eyes on me. "Eh, stand up straight, Miss Afua Kwansa. That is no way to greet Auntie Naysa."

Naysa. It sounded absurd. Like "nice, ah?" Something someone might utter trying to sell you something. I wondered how she could possibly be Ghanaian. How she could share any common tongue at all with my parents.

"Auntie Naysa," said Naysa, testing the words on her tongue, delighted. "Auntie. Aun-tee." She turned and asked something quickly of my mother.

My mother answered in a faintly reproachful voice. She turned to me. "I'm telling her you're twelve years old. Twelve years old and still good for nothing. Do I wake to a nice clean house? No! Do I rise to a good boiled

breakfast? No! It is like I do not even have a daughter. No, not at all. And yet she expects Elephant shoes.”

“*Kangaroos.*”

“Whatever,” said my mother with a smirk.

Naysa stood from her chair, and started towards me. My chest seized. She was immense. Well over six feet, she towered over my mother and me with the serene force of an old tree.

“Mommy,” I said in alarm.

Naysa let out a sharp laugh—light, high-pitched, like a single loud hiccup. “Muh-mee!” she cried, clapping her massive hands together. She turned to my mother, speaking quickly, then back to me, her eyes narrowed with pleasure.

Instantly, I knew she was making fun of me. A shy, nervous child— as much due to my mother’s moods as to being the only black kid in my school—everything had the potential to hurt me, so that even now, in adulthood, my father speaks to me in a very cautious way. Naysa’s mimicry cut through me sharply, and I was filled with hot disbelief that someone who didn’t know me could wound me so much. Even when my mother, seeing my hurt, told me I could go, I couldn’t keep from damning Naysa under my breath. “Muh-mee,” I hissed in mockery of her mockery, scowling as I trudged upstairs to my bedroom. I wondered how someone whose moose-like size had likely made her the target of taunts could be so mean. Here she was, dressed head-to-toe in an operatic showing of grief, but laughing, smiling, making fun of children. I didn’t know the word for hypocrisy then, but if I had, I would have muttered it with the rest of the insults flooding under my breath.

When later, in a guarded way, I complained to my mother, she only sucked her teeth.

“Eh, Afua, don’t criticize your elders. She was only saying that she liked your voice, the way you called me Mommy. If you don’t learn some morals, child, you will rot at the heart.”

Naysa returned the next day. She wore the same cloak of mourning, the same look of doleful sweetness I couldn’t quite accept. She stayed only

half an hour, but returned the following day, and the day after. The phone rang ceaselessly during her visits. With a roll of the eye, my mother would thrust the receiver at her. And each time Naysa would mutter a few mortified words into the mouthpiece, then skulk back to her chair.

Once, when I'd been gossiping with a friend for an hour, the phone rang right after I hung up. I answered to the assault of an odd, gruff voice.

"What is this! Naysa?" it said.

Before I could respond, my mother yanked the phone from my hand, listened a little, then said, "Eh! Can my daughter not speak on the phone in her own house?"

But this was a unique confrontation. My mother's usual response to the constant calls was nothing more than a scornful grunt. The calls were never explained. I was left to imagine an aggrieved brother-in-law, perhaps, half-broken by loss. I pictured him as a fat man, a former athlete now gone soft with office work, knocking his head against his desk as he wailed with grief.

Naysa herself never stayed long. At precisely quarter to five each day, she'd glance at the clock, and patiently wait for a pause in my mother's ranting before asking her to call a taxi. There was a calm sense of ritual about it. I wondered if five was the hour at which her brother-in-law could no longer stand to grieve alone.

"Grieving!" my mother replied with a hot laugh when I asked her. "Your head is so full of Kangaroo shoes you pay no heed to what's before you. Who told you anyone died? Uncle Faris is alive and well." She softened her tone. "Auntie Naysa is not in mourning. Not at all—she has just been blessed in marriage."

"Why does she wear that dark dress then?"

A sign of faith, not loss, said my mother. Auntie Naysa was from northern Ghana, west of Tamale, and her faith required she cover herself. She'd been brought to Canada just seven weeks before as a bride for Uncle Faris, not a blood relative, but simply like us, a part of Calgary's tiny Ghanaian community. They had married five weeks ago, at the mosque on Wilson Road, just up from the Canadian Tire store. She left at five not to

comfort anyone, but to pray, either too embarrassed to do so in our home or not finding it sacred enough (my mother spoke this last phrase with a whiff of disdain). Even the taxi rides home had proved a problem for Naysa, chaste Naysa, left alone for six full minutes in an enclosed space with a strange man. Uncle Faris could ferry her around on weekends, but not during the week. Naysa told my mother they'd argued about it, gently, with Faris only relenting when he saw how depressed she became, sitting inside all day. At first, she could only visit those of her faith, who respected prayer times. But such pious brides bored her. She begged Faris to take her to the house of a lively person, even if only for an hour, before having to return home for prayer. And so, our house. Our lively house. And every hour he'd call out of, I suppose, love.

"In Ghana, if you follow a pastor, an imam, a *juju* man—eh, who cares? So long as you have God," said my mother. "So Faris brought her here, to me." She smirked. "I guess I am a 'lively person'." She kissed her teeth. "He probably just thinks I am crazy."

Naysa's life astonished me. I'd so long believed her to be grieving that my grudge softened towards her. In fact, I pitied her. Marrying Faris—this I could hardly believe. Naysa was twenty-one years old. And though, at twelve, anyone over eighteen seemed ancient to me, Faris seemed pre-historic—forty-five at least. A short, tight-faced man, with skin the color of dusted eggplants and a pair of round spectacles seemingly borrowed from the face of some nineteenth-century Austrian physicist. A mouthful of brown, disobedient teeth. My father had nicknamed him 'The Squirrel.' Such a man seemed fit for little, least of all marriage. My mother disdained his shift work at a box factory. He was, in all respects, a failure. I thought about this.

And I thought about their wedding at the mosque on Wilson Road. Its gold dome gleamed exotically above the lower hills of the city. Passing in our car, I'd watch the dome sink, alone, isolated, into the beige mass of Strathcona houses. Behind them: mountains. At school I had a classmate from Pakistan, and I used to imagine her entering this place, wading through its vacant marble splendor to the heart of an enormous silence.

Within its many chambers lay the prostrate bodies of people kneeling in prayer. It seemed a place that contained the essence of all silences. But no one I knew intimately ever went there—especially no Ghanaian. Ghanaians were *Christians*, staunchly and without exception. Impossible to be Ghanaian and anything else, even, in some respects, Ghanaian and Albertan. If Faris and Naysa were an anomaly in their old country, in this, their new one, they were beyond strange. Alberta was a place of few ethnic faces and even fewer black ones. As a young child, I dreaded crowded streets for fear of people’s eyes on me—I was stared at wherever I went. How much harder, how much more stunning, than to walk the streets in dark robes. For this alone, I was glad I was not Naysa.

But she felt differently. With a timid smile, she’d boast in Twi and broken English that life in Canada was so much better than where she’d been, while my mother frowned, unconvinced.

“Food here, so good,” said Naysa loudly, stroking the lip of her cup with nervous fingers. “And car, and Faris. Mosque on Wilson Road—incredulous.” (I believe she meant *incredible*.) “Mosque on Wilson Road more good than mosque at Larabanga.”

Larabanga. Its cool white walls rising like a glacier from the dirt. Later, in my thirties, I would travel there, to that most ancient building in all of Ghana. Local lore claimed the man who built those horned pillars, exhausted from his search for a mystic stone, threw his spear in a fit of pique, and decided to sleep where it landed. That night bore him odd dreams. He dreamed of a mosque where his head lay. And in the morning, he found Larabanga’s foundations piercing the ground like buds. The rest he built himself. A luminous hive. Home to one of those first seven hand-bound Korans, said to have descended from heaven.

But I knew nothing of that place then, at twelve years old, only whispered the name to myself. Glancing at me, my mother shook her head.

“Look at this one,” she said to Naysa, “showing off by praying to herself. Eh, child, not even this little performance will get you those Kangaroo shoes.”

I remember Naysa would sit forever, enraptured by my mother's stories. This was in that first summer, years before their quiet falling out. Utterly absorbed, Naysa kept completely still, as though any sudden movement might cause the flock of my mother's words to scatter. But always at five, her eyes would stray predictably to the clock over my mother's shoulder. Then she'd open her mouth to ask my mother to call the taxi, and my mother would cut her short.

"Why do you not simply pray here?" she'd say. "We only just arrive at the good parts when you rise and scuttle away like a lizard."

Naysa would stare uncertainly at her hands.

"The guest room upstairs is empty. You can draw the curtains. I have a mat you can use." When Naysa would say nothing, my mother would add, "Never mind Faris. I will talk to him."

And then, one Thursday, Naysa raised her eyes cautiously to my mother—those Asiatic, strangely light-lidded eyes—as though trying to assess both whether my mother had it in her to take on Faris and whether she would keep her word when the confrontation came. And then she nodded. "OK," she said.

My mother, excited, said, "I will talk to Faris."

And Naysa rose, half-crouching, from her chair. Her dress lisped. She said something to my mother.

"Don't worry about that—you can wash in the upstairs bathroom. Come, come—I'll get you a towel."

With a look of suppressed triumph—the look she gave my father when he didn't respond to her insults, as if his defeat left an actual sweetness on her tongue—she led a nervous Naysa out by the hand. I sat alone in the kitchen, listening to the creaks and drips of the tap with a dry fear. As if some of Naysa's fear had passed into me. But she merely dreaded her husband's wrath; I dreaded God's. What would He do to my mother for interfering in His affairs? For forcing this woman to defy her husband? To submit to Him in hopelessly unholy surroundings? For we were fickle Christians, puffing up our proud Christian chests in public only to let the breath out once our doors were closed. Our Easters were spent not in the mahogany pews of

Richmond Presbyterian, but with a dinner roll in one fist and a glass of red wine or grape juice in the other—a communion of sorts, I guess—eating a turkey feast while watching Charlton Heston in Moses-ropes break the stone tablets in *The Ten Commandments*. I imagined Faris in a Moses-like rage, breaking one of our plastic placemats over my mother's head.

She returned, alone, to the kitchen, obviously pleased. But seeing my face, hers grew serious, and she gestured that we should respect Naysa by keeping quiet. In mincing steps, she took the seat across from mine, her eyes lowered as she listened with her entire body to the offering above us. I lowered my eyes. The waning light was playing across the table's waxed surface, and an uneasy silence rushed over us. It was odd, this straining towards something you could never hear. And doing it together, intensely, as my mother and I had never done anything together intensely since child-birth. It was as if Naysa's prayer had seeped down through the ceiling. As if the prayer were taking place between us.

All that evening, it seems to me now, my mother did not answer the phone. It rang and rang, and she rose at last and turned down the ringer. She urged Naysa to pray upstairs at the prescribed times, and prepared to confront Faris. My mother relished the coming argument, I believe, which she pictured almost theatrically: Faris pounding the floor with his fists, her own face ashen with rage. But nothing came. As Naysa later told her, Faris simply arrived home to an empty house, and finding his wife neither outside nor at the neighbors, lumbered back out to his rusting Volvo, and drove the six minutes of pavement to our house, where he arrived on our front stoop complaining to himself.

It was my father who heard Faris' soft knock at the door, my father who let him in, smiling sheepishly. He himself had only learned of my mother's defiance minutes before, when he'd arrived home, disheartened and weary, from a long day of work. After trying to lecture her (she'd sucked her teeth and laughed in his face), he'd fixed himself a drink. At the sound of that timid fist on the wood, I saw my father hesitate. But he'd been ridiculed enough for one evening—he walked staunchly to the door.

Frowning over his spectacles, Faris entered, first the hallway, and then our kitchen, his brown teeth working in his jaw. He did not so much as glance at his wife, who sat at our table, shaking. Faris raised his arm and shook it at my mother, his skin soft and pendulous; but opening his mouth to speak, he looked at me and closed it. Sighing, he tried again. “You have no respect for our religion?”

“Don’t play the goat. You know I have great respect for your religion,” said my mother, crossing her arms with a flourish. “But I don’t see why a grown woman should be made to sit alone in her house all day, or go to others’ homes only to run out like a cat with diarrhea. We *all* love God here. We are *all* Ghanaians. My house is as good a place for prayer as yours is.”

“Margaret—” my father warned. He turned to Faris. “What she means to say is—”

“What I mean to say is what I’ve said,” she said, raising her voice. “Do you mean to insult me by telling me my house is not fit for prayer? *Eh?*”

“Eh, eh, *eh*,” said Faris in a tone of harassed embarrassment. He glared at Naysa, who wilted. He turned, and seeing my father silent, he sucked his teeth and gave a mean laugh. Abashed, my father looked away.

I glared painfully at him. Even at twelve, I could see Faris was pointing out my father’s submission. Only later did I understand he scoffed at my father’s frailties to distract us from his own.

In the end, Faris just raised one vaguely threatening arm at my mother, and said, “Woman.” Like a man explaining away an absurdity. Then he gestured to his wife to follow him.

My mother stood with crossed arms, her smile baffled, as they filed out. “Was that it?” she said with annoyance. The door slammed shut. She turned to my father. “Even *you*, the *great Economic Forecaster*, this country’s *great Monetary Soothsayer*, give a better fight than *that*.” With a nervous flinch of the eye, she strode from the room.

We all assumed we’d never see Naysa again—or at least, only at the obligatory Ghanaian parties. How surprising then when Faris dropped her off at our house at the usual hour. I never learned how this had come about—

whether my mother's brief showdown had been a victory, or whether Naysa had later won the fight herself—but I felt grateful to see her again, to have her among us. And Faris stopped calling entirely.

Naysa now spent her entire day with us. She blended the peanut butter for the soup, kneaded the *kenkey* and *fufu* for the month's meals, parceled the pale, trembling, opal balls into Saran Wrap before swathing them in long green leaves to be frozen. And always, she took in the stories of my mother's childhood with a curiosity I'd never had. She'd iron my father's shirts for the week (a chore my mother despised) all the while saying, "Oh, yes, Alberta is good, very good."

But something had shifted. My mother seemed more tired. She would go whole hours now without speaking, flipping through *Woman's Week* while Naysa darned piles of my father's socks, a softly eager expression on her face. Naysa began to cook our lunches, and once I returned home from playing next door to find my mother gone out, and Naysa spraying down the linoleum with Lemon Pledge and rotating the mattresses for the month. It was puzzling. Though Naysa never minded, even worked happily, humming in little puffs under her breath, I couldn't help but sense she felt she owed us.

But I was most confused by my mother. It seemed that now, with Naysa in her care, she no longer wanted her. When the doorbell rang, she'd kiss her teeth and mutter, "Here comes my second husband," or "Here comes my other daughter." Some days she wouldn't even answer the door, leaving me to do it. Or she'd greet Naysa, complain about her aching head, then go upstairs and watch television. Naysa—anyone, I believe—was a burden she couldn't bear. Her own life was enough.

On the day before Father's Day, my mother came into my bedroom. She seemed angry. "Miss Afua Kwansema, what are you doing?" She took a sock from the carpet and set it on my nicked dresser. "Do you want those shoes or not? Go get your sandals on. As soon as Naysa gets here and starts the laundry, we will go. I have to show her what to wash by hand."

My mother, I remember, was prone to teasing, to whimsically agreeing to a thing, only to burst out that she was joking. I sat on my bed, holding my breath.

“You don’t believe me?” she said with a scowl. “Then I will just change my mind.”

And I ran out into the hallway, I threw on my sandals. An almost painful exhilaration filled my throat, so that I couldn’t breathe. After months of begging and silent prayer, how strangely and suddenly she’d relented! How mysteriously and with what dignity—as if an act of grace, however superficial, had taken place in my life.

But to my horror, the day wore on. I kept glancing around the kitchen, aggrieved by the emptiness of our house. “Where’s Naysa?” I said.

My mother shrugged. She’d taken to sitting at the table reading *Woman’s Week*, sipping her Earl Grey tea. I prayed she would go to the phone, to the car, anywhere—but she only continued to sit. Why she couldn’t start the laundry herself was beyond me. She sat utterly still, reading. There was only the ticking of the clock, and the occasional rustle as she turned a page.

At last my mother sighed and rose from her seat. She went to the window, then to the phone. She spoke in a low voice into the receiver, in Twi, hanging up after a few seconds. Shaking her head, she returned to the table, and stared quietly at the wood’s grain.

“Well, where *is* she?” Seeing my mother frown, I calmed myself. “Is Auntie Naysa coming?”

My mother sucked her teeth, grunting. “She is not.” Her face twisted into a contemptuous smile. As if to say, *finally!* Finally, after weeks of ignoble labor, tea-making and sock-darning and collar-pressing, mattress-turning and curtain-stitching and toilet-cleaning, she’d finally gotten wind of her own worth and thrown down the rubber gloves. It occurs to me now that this might be the lesson my mother had been teaching her all along—to be wary of others’ needs, to see they could drown you. But at the time I was surprised by my mother, by her disgust. “*Stb*, that woman. How does she expect to run a household if just helping out in another’s makes her ill? If just helping me to do small, small things here and there gives her the flu?” In the hall, she grabbed her town coat off the hat stand with a rough, contemptuous gesture. She snatched her green kerchief from her pocket, setting it to rest on her messy, greying curls.

“Well, Miss Afua Kwansema,” she said tartly. “It seems Auntie Naysa has deprived you of your Kangaroo shoes. Come.”

I was crushed. I sat in the taxi, not talking. My mother faced her window, kissing her teeth under her breath every few minutes. Despite my anger, despite having lost something I’d never owned, I watched her, nervous. Since her own mother had died, nearly four years ago, dumb with throat cancer, she couldn’t bear the thought of physical suffering. And yet here she was, griping about Naysa’s illness.

We climbed out of the taxi at the wrong building. Or so I thought at first. The grey tenement, rain-stained, its lawn strewn with trash, seemed to tilt in the wind raging off the mountains. In the foyer, I was sucker-punched by a stink no human being could possibly tolerate—something like seared rubber, creamed corn, and car exhaust. The carpets were tattooed with stains. The walls were the fungal yellow of old men’s fingernails. I took my mother’s hand. Her own face was calm, closed, angry.

The elevator was broken. We climbed the stairs to the third floor, to Naysa’s apartment, her *home*—how astonishing to call it that, this plywood door, and whatever black paradise lay beyond it. My mother knocked, lightly, her eyes—deliberately, I thought—avoiding mine. After a time, she let out a long breath and turned away.

But I tried the knob. The door drifted open. My mother, annoyed, seemed to steel herself. Holding her purse to her stomach, she stepped gracefully over the threshold into the apartment. The walls leprous with cracked paint, the air damp, the kitchen table swaybacked as a mule beneath the weight of tin cans. Pinned across the windows in place of curtains were old threadbare sheets; a voluptuous sweetness, like the smell of rotting cake, drifted from everything.

My mother glared around her with the same look of determination, that same iron air. As if she too were thinking: how ridiculous, how crazy, to live like this and keep house for us.

We entered a doorless room in which a mattress had been mounted on bricks the color of raw beef. A clean room, its floor swept, its pink curtains fastened, the air laced with toilet water. And at the centre of it all lay Naysa, her great form just hidden by the starched, rustling sheets. She looked so

dark there, in that room flooded with light, so alone in her aliveness.

She was crying. Heaving beneath the sheets like some great lost bewildered sea beast. Her eyelids paler from crying, her lips dry, she lay moaning under her breath, pitiful.

My mother stood some seconds in the doorway. She had a slightly caustic expression. Slowly, she walked bedside, looking down into Naysa's feverish face. Naysa stared back with slow recognition.

"*Maame*," she said, tears falling. She continued, quietly, in Twi.

My mother continued to stand, disdain on her face; for a moment I thought she might turn, leave. But she stood, listening as Naysa mumbled and wept through her fever.

And then my mother sat, and clasping her hands, exhaled. "Shh . . ." she said, "enough tomfoolery from you." And the astonishing softness of her voice, her gestures, made me turn away. She spoke in Twi, broken with English. Her voice flowed smoothly. And it was through this new, unexpected tone that I understood Naysa had not called *her* "Mommy," but had been calling for her own mother, thousands of miles across the sea. Twenty-one years old, a new bride, she was sick for the first time in a strange land, and terrified.

"You must be strong," uttered my mother. "You are of a great people, one of the greatest of Ghana. You must get your strength." She cleared her throat, stroking Naysa's head. "You think Canada is scary, no it is not, thank you. You think this life is scary?" She trailed off in Twi. "You think this Bow River is a match for our *Sutare* Volta? *Eh*? You think the mosque on Wilson Road is a match for your mosque at Larabanga? That ancient *ade*? Use your head. It is stronger, older than all this. There is nothing to fear. Nothing."

I stood, silent, watching. Watching my mother hold Naysa's head, murmuring in English and Twi. Without irony or anger.

When my mother finally fell silent, Naysa had dropped off to sleep.

Years later, I met Naysa again, under sadder circumstances. Seated in the pew before my mother's closed casket, I turned to see Naysa, aged but with the same girlish, light-lidded face, sitting by the dark oak door of

Richmond Presbyterian Church. Though she no longer wore *bijab*, her hair was still covered with a dark linen scarf. A tall, gangly girl was seated to Naysa's right. To her left a shorter boy, whose light-colored eyelids and plum mouth marked him as her son. Naysa looked strange sitting there in the pew, like a phantom from those earlier days. I had not seen her since her falling out with my mother some years before—over what, my mother wouldn't deign to say—and her appearance at the funeral stirred a pain I'd been forcing back into myself all that week. I nodded to her, and turned away.

After the service I stood, with my grey-haired father, greeting the line of mourners heading out to their cars for the cemetery procession. Naysa approached, her two children before her, smiling a shy, pained smile.

"Oh, Kojo, Afua, I am so sorry for you," she said in a breathless voice. I felt blinded, amazed. I'd never heard her speak our names before. "Faris is sick, or he would have come. But we're all of us—" she gestured to her children—"so sorry." She looked nervous. As if the long silence between her and my mother might not be forgiven.

My father's eyes had gone damp. "Margaret would have been so pleased to see you. *Is* pleased. From the better place she is in." He reached out and took her hand. "So glad you came, Naysa."

Naysa hesitated. Glancing at her children, she lowered her face a little and said, "Actually—it's Maysa. Not Naysa. Maysa, with an 'M'."

I was astonished; turning to my father, I saw he was, too.

"Did you change it?" he asked.

"It was always Maysa," she smiled, apologetic, embarrassed. "Well, we should go catch the Yeboahs—they're driving us to the cemetery." Squeezing my father's hand, then my own, she ushered her children off.

My father looked at me in surprise. "All this time," he said. "She never said anything." And he turned to take the hand of the next person in line.

Maysa. A gorgeous name. I turned, watching her cross the sunny parking lot and help her children into a blue Sedan. How strange to have known someone beyond the label of any name, and yet not have known them at all. We had not known Maysa. For the six years of their friend-

ship, my mother had not known her. Perhaps, I thought with a soft smile, it was not God's or Faris' tyranny Maysa had needed saving from, but my mother's. The awesome, well-meaning, nagging tyranny of my mother.

From the blue Sedan, someone waved to us. It might have been Maysa, it might have been her daughter; it might even have been Mrs. Yeboah, for all I could see at this distance. I waved back.