

An unedited sample of:

The Children of the Quicksands

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Chapter 1

Holidays at the other end of the world

Simi climbed into the taxi reluctantly. A torn plastic sheet tried its best to protect a dirty and threadbare seat underneath, and it smelled of goat. She wrinkled her nose, desperately trying to suppress a new wave of anger and tears.

Her mum, who had just given the driver instructions came around the car and put a slim hand on the still open door.

Simi ignored her, folding her arms across her chest and looking straight ahead.

"Simi, it's only for two months", her mum said softly.

She didn't reply.

"Please don't make this more difficult for me than it already is. I am so happy to have found this new job. But I have to go to London for training and I can't leave you alone in Lagos for so long. And you know we really need the money now that your dad and I..." Her mum broke off and sighed.

Simi winced at the reminder of the divorce they had all gone through in the past year.

"Simi, believe me, if I had any other option, I would definitely have chosen it, rather than send you there. But we

do not have the money for any summer camps and I do not have any other family than her." The way her mum always said 'her' made Simi really nervous about meeting her grandmother.

She felt her mum's eyes on her. Eyes, hoping that she would smile and that she would say that she understood and forgave her. But she did not look up. She had spent the last weeks begging. Telling her mum that she was 13 and old enough to stay at home alone. That she could borrow the money for a summer camp from her dad, who definitely had enough of it. But her mum had shaken her head and ignored her pleas. So now, she too ignored her mum's plea.

Her mum sighed and then pulled something out of her handbag. It was a little envelope.

"This is for her. You must give her this letter immediately. On the spot! And I mean as soon as you get there!"

Simi looked up irritated. She wondered what was written in the letter and why her mum was acting so strangely again. All this secrecy really annoyed her. She didn't know anything about this woman who was supposed to be her grandmother. She hadn't even known that she existed until recently, when the holiday decision had been made. Just like that. "You're going to your grandmother! That's where you will spend your entire school holidays!"

Simi groaned. As far as she had understood, this grandmother lived somewhere in the middle of some jungle! She would even

rather have gone to stay with her dad and his new fancy girlfriend rather than to this grandmother. But her mum was too proud. She would never ask him or anybody else for help.

"Are you listening to me at all?" her mum asked impatiently. She held the letter under Simi's nose.

"It is very important that you give her the letter at once!"

"Yes, yes. Okay" Simi muttered and took it from her. She slid the envelope into her rucksack, which was on her lap. For a brief moment she felt her mum's hand on her shoulder. Then the rusty car door slammed shut with a rattle and Simi immediately felt the heavy stuffy air in the car enclose her like a sticky blanket.

Simi suddenly panicked and reached for the broken old window crank. She rolled down the window which made a stuttering noise and made one last attempt.

"Please, Mum! Can't you at least bring me there? Only until..."

But her mum immediately took a step back. Her expression tolerated no further discussion and Simi gave up. She knew that stony, distant look all too well. Whenever it came to the subject of the past or her family, her mum fell silent and became a total stranger to her. The past had always been an absolute taboo. Simi had always assumed that her grandparents had died in a bad accident or something and that her mum never wanted to talk about her parents out of grief.

She sighed. Now she would have to go alone to this grandmother that she had never even met. And she would just turn up in front of her door unannounced. Her mum had come most of the way, taking the 5 hour bus journey this far with her. But now she was to continue the last stretch in the taxi on her own.

"But what if she's not there?" She'd desperately asked on the bus earlier.

"She never goes anywhere", her mum had replied dryly. "Except into the forest to her heathen..." then her mum had suddenly stalled. "She does a few visits to neighbours at the most, but then everyone you ask would know where to find her."

"Yes, but what if she is no more, ehm. . . not living there anymore?" Simi had stammered. She had actually wanted to say 'alive'. But she didn't want to hurt her mum, not even knowing if her grandmother's death would mean something to her.

"She still lives there", her mum had replied. "And she is still ALIVE."

"And what if she doesn't feel like harbouring her granddaughter for two months without having been asked?" she had made one last attempt to change her mum's mind.

But her mum had just shaken her head. "She'll take you in. She'll be very glad to see you." And that had been the end of the matter.

Her Mum gave the driver a few more instructions. He had been very excited to hear where he was to take her and even recognized her Mum from years ago. But her Mum had been rather reserved obviously not sharing his enthusiasm.

"You will be in good hands with him", her Mum said as the car rattled to life and that was that.

Chapter?

Journey to the unknown

The journey turned out to be terribly exhausting. The untarred road was deeply marked by rain and erosion, so that the driver only made slow and difficult progress. The car screeched and moaned so heftily that Simi worried if they would arrive in one piece.

To the left and right, the dense forest crowded into the road. Tall trees and bushes, higher and thicker than she had ever seen anywhere around Lagos, gave the road a pleasantly cool shade. But at the same time, the forest had a threatening feel to it, towering high above them, so that she had a queasy feeling in her stomach.

"What are these trees?" she asked the driver who hadn't spoken a word since they left.

"Trees?" he muttered. He twisted his neck and turned his gaze away from the road to look at her, and she immediately worried about him not seeing the next pothole.

"What are those trees called? The tall ones", she asked a little louder.

He looked at her from underneath his wrinkled eyelids. Brown teeth flashed briefly as his mouth deformed into a crooked grin. "Iroko! This is Iroko tree. Tree of spirits", he said in a husky, cracked voice.

She nodded quickly and breathed a sigh of relief when he finally turned back to face the road. Tree of spirits! His words echoed in her mind like ghostly whispers and she felt nervous as she stared at the long-limbed trees.

"Woman, where I taking you, she is grandmother", he said after a short while.

That didn't sound like a question, but she felt she had to say something, so she replied, "Yes."

"She very good woman. She very well known by people."

"Well, not known by me", Simi thought and looked out of the window listlessly.

After an hour's drive, as Simi had feared, the car got stuck in a pothole with a loud crash. The driver made a hissing sound and clicked his tongue loudly.

"You help me", he grumbled over his shoulder.

Then he got out of the car, bent down and disappeared out of view. Simi opened the door and got out gingerly.

The old man knelt in front of the car on the rough ground, muttering quietly to himself.

"Kiakia!" he suddenly called and pointed to the rear end of the car with a crooked index finger.

"Push!" Simi stumbled quickly to the rear. A sudden rustling sound in the bushes beside her made her look around nervously.

The huge trees on both sides of the road trembled agitatedly in the breeze and seemed to arch in on her like huge vibrating giants. Goose bumps formed on her skin as she remembered what the driver said about the Iroko trees. She definitely did not feel as safe now as she had in the car.

"Push!" the driver called again. Simi's head jerked up. The rustling from the bushes came again and she tried to put away all thoughts of snakes and other animals that might be lurking in the forest. She began to push the car with all the energy she could muster up. The car hardly budged.

What if they did not get the car out? She thought as she looked around fearfully. In the last half hour they had not driven past a single village or town and had not seen a single person.

Simi pushed again with all possible force, sweat breaking out in her armpits. The driver heaved heavily against the car at the same time and this time the car clattered briefly.

"More!" he muttered out of breath. He twisted the steering wheel through the open driver's door and pushed the car at the same time with a loud groan. Simi pushed and supported him with enough strength to burst her blood veins. She wanted the car out of this place as quickly as possible. After three attempts, it worked. The car jerked out of the pothole.

"Kiakia" the driver called again. "Quick!"

Simi jumped into the car, dusted her dirty hands and breathed out in relief. She was really hot and sweaty, but extremely relieved to be moving again. She pulled a book from her rucksack and used it as a fan. While the old man's driving became a little more cautious, she gradually became tired. She dared to lean her head against the seat despite the goat smell and closed her eyes.

When Simi woke up the car was slowing down and they were driving into a village. She sat up and looked out of the open window. Everything was the colour of dark red clay, the houses, the compounds and the road. Even the rusty iron roofs appeared to want to blend in.

On either side of this one red road Simi counted 10 houses, which were not much more than little huts. Between them she saw goats, chickens and naked toddlers running around. Under a huge mango tree two elderly men faced each other on a bench, playing a kind of board game with large round seeds. Simi groaned. No TV, no internet or phone to chat with friends, just a board game with seeds. How was she ever going to survive eight weeks here?

She glanced at her phone. Zero signal! She sighed. What had she expected?

At the end of the village, just before the road disappeared into the forest, was a tiny house made with the same reddish-

brown clay as all the others. Two faded wooden shutters framed a single window beside an open front door.

The driver parked the car in front of it. They had arrived.

Two hibiscus bushes adorned the yard in front of the house. The leaves and flowers were covered with red dust giving even the plant the same colour as the whole village. A large pot stood waist high next to the front door, a small cup hanging on a cord from the handle.

Suddenly, a tiny woman appeared at the threshold. She had a colourful yellow scarf tied around her head and she wore a floor-length green caftan. Cowry-shell chains dangled at her wrists and ankles and she was barefoot.

The woman had appeared so suddenly that Simi drew in her breath sharply.

Her grandmother was not quite as old as she had imagined but she knew immediately that it was her, because she looked exactly like her mum. And like Simi. They all had the same slim little nose, serious, sharp eyes and defiant mouth. Three generations of women with one and the same face.

Simi was surprised at the resemblance and again felt sad and confused about her Mum's secrecy concerning her grandma. She sighed and climbed out of the car.

The old woman's sharp eyes were fixed directly on her.

The driver had already taken out her suitcase from the trunk and was carrying it to the door.

"Baba Ayo, welcome", her grandmother said. "How are you?" She took her eyes off Simi to greet him only briefly, before she looked right back at her.

"Eku ale - Good evening", the driver replied. "My body and my health are fine, thank you."

"Congratulations, I heard you got your eighth great-grandchild?" her grandmother asked.

"Yes, Iyanla."

"The gods have blessed you well."

"Yes, I am a blessed man, thank you Iyanla." He placed Simi's suitcase in front of the door.

"Good evening ehm... grandmother", Simi said bending her knees respectfully.

"Welcome my child", the old woman said. "It is good that you have finally come."

Simi did not know what to say. Her grandmother did not appear in any way surprised to see her. She did not ask any questions. She just stood there in the doorway as if she had known that today she would get a visit from her granddaughter.

How many times had Simi tried to imagine this moment? Her fantasies of stuttered explanations, confusion, hugs or maybe

even tears now seemed totally silly. She had a sudden feeling that you did not have to say much to this woman. Somehow, she already knew everything.

Simi had the very uncomfortable feeling her grandmother could read her mind.

The car coughed itself back on.

"Duro, wait", her grandmother called. "I have something for your grandchild!" She went inside.

The driver drowned the engine and came back out of the car. Simi did not know if she should follow her or remain waiting on the doorstep. She decided to wait. Her grandmother returned with a small package wrapped in banana leaves. The driver took the package respectfully with both hands and bowed his head.

"Your granddaughter should rub the ointment on the baby after bathing her in the evening. It will keep illness away."

"Ese gan", he said, bowing his head. "Thank you Iyanla".

Her grandmother nodded. And when the driver was gone, she turned and went inside the house.

"Suitcase do not grow legs to carry themselves in this part of the country", she called over her shoulder.

Simi took off her sandals, grabbed her suitcase and hurried in after her grandmother.

Chapter 2

Iyanla

It was quite dark but pleasantly cool inside the little house. The floor under her bare feet felt soothing and she was surprised to find that it was made of clean polished red clay. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light and she looked around. Her grandmother was nowhere in sight. There were two more doors, one closed and one open, leading into a tiny corridor.

In one corner of the room was a small table and a wide bench covered with a hand-woven blanket in dark red and orange patterns. Pretty yellow curtains covered the small window. A straw mat lay under the table, and on the table stood a clay bowl with cola nuts. The decoration was simple but friendly. Her mum preferred darker colours and monotones. Their little flat in Lagos was filled with all possible shades of grey.

She put down her heavy suitcase and her sandals and walked gingerly through the open door towards the back of the house.

The tight corridor led into a slightly larger passageway, which obviously served as a kind of storage room. On one side, Simi saw tall shelves filled with foodstuff. There were yams, green plantains, a huge palm oil tin, a rice bag and other foods neatly lined up against the wall and on the shelves

above. On the other side hundreds of little clay pots, vials and packages wrapped in brown paper or dried leaves lined the shelves. Simi stood and stared.

"Why do I have the feeling that you were sent here in ignorance?"

Simi almost jumped when she suddenly heard the voice of her grandmother beside her. She had not heard her approach.

"In ignorance?" She asked, swallowing nervously.

"Your confusion is clearly carved into your face. And since I know your mother well, my name probably never crossed her lips."

Simi shifted uncomfortably from one leg to the other.

"She had no choice? Things were tight and she saw no other way out? Is she in trouble?" Her grandmother's eyes were so sharp now that Simi had to look away.

"How..., how do you know? Did mum call you after all?" Her grandmother waved a hand around the room. "Do you see a telephone anywhere?"

Simi felt her face heat up and once again regretted her quick tongue, which was always a bit faster than her brain.

"You mean she did not even tell you what sleepy village she's sending you to? Were you expecting to find a telephone here?"

"No! I mean, yes, of course she told me, I, ehm, I just forgot that."

"May I now know what made your mother send her daughter to me when we have not spoken in years?"

"Ehm .. my parents got divorced ... last year and my mum has to travel for work," Simi said slowly. Even now, a year later, she did not like to talk about the divorce. She pushed the words out of her mouth and tried to ignore the bitter taste they left behind. Her Dad's words to her Mum in one of their many quarrels came back to her: " Nothing ever makes you happy ... You carry anger around with you like a shield ... You don't let any other feelings through... If you don't face up to your past you will never be happy in life..." Was this her Mum's way of trying to get back in touch with her past? Did she want to fix the broken relationship with her mother by sending her here? But if that was the case, why had she sent her here alone? And why could she still not bring herself to talk about the past?

Her grandmother made a face that was difficult to interpret.

"Is it OK, that I, ehm that I came here?"

Her grandmother walked to the shelves with the little pots, and reached up to bring one down. She ignored Simi's question.

"What kind of job is it that separates a mother from her child?"

"She's a pharmacist. She just got a new job in an international company and she has to go to London for the training."

Her grandmother's forehead creased and she looked confused.

"A pharmacist is someone who...", Simi began to explain.

"I know what a pharmacist is," her grandmother interrupted irritably. "Even though I live out here I am not from yesterday."

"I'm sorry," Simi said, feeling very embarrassed.

"It is just that I am surprised that your mother chose this profession. I would not have thought... "

Her grandmother stopped and shook her head with the colourful headscarf. Simi was not sure, but it almost looked like a brief flash of pride that she saw in her grandmother's face. She was obviously a kind of herbalist, the traditional form of a pharmacist, so to speak.

Simi watched as her grandmother bent to take out a small cloth bag from a larger container.

"Come on, we have a lot to do today," she said and slipped out to the backyard.

The first part of it was covered, and underneath the roof was a large wooden table with two chairs on one side. Next to it was a traditional open firewood-hearth with a three-legged pot

balanced on soot-blackened stones. A fire blazed under the pot.

The rest of the yard was swept clean and surrounded by a low wooden fence. At one end stood a huge frangipani tree that stretched its long arms across the backyard and provided shade.

Beside the tree was a small round well, and next to this a herb garden. Butterflies and bees flew about, and Simi could smell the fresh, spicy scent of thyme. Her Mum loved thyme and even grew it in their tiny Lagos garden. Simi tried to imagine her Mum as a little girl here, bent over the thyme and breathing in its scent. But she couldn't. She had never even seen a single picture of her mum as a child. Simi sighed and stared beyond the fence. A path ran into a thick forest one way, and the other way back towards the village.

Her grandmother had already seated herself at the table.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

Simi thought for a moment - her stomach still felt queasy from the bumpy journey. She shook her head.

Her grandmother leaned over a large bowl on the floor next to the table. Between brightly coloured towels and kitchen utensils she pulled out a small stone pestle and a mortar. She put them on the table in front of Simi. Then she placed some dried leaves into the mortar from the little pot she had taken

from inside the house. She added black powder from a tiny clay bowl. Then she got a small bottle containing a thick yellow liquid that looked like peanut oil and added a few drops.

"Grind," she said, pushing the stone pestle toward Simi.

At first uncertain, Simi began to carefully stir the pestle then, getting bolder, she began to grind the leaves with more force. Back home, she loved helping her Mum in the kitchen. Her Mum was uncomplicated when cooking. The deep worry lines between her eyebrows smoothed when she was stirring efo leaf soup or chopping vegetables for fried rice and Simi always enjoyed these relaxed moments with her.

In the meantime, her grandmother plucked a sprig from a tall bush in the garden. She removed the dark green leaves that looked like bitter-leaf with which her mum often made soup and washed them in a bowl. Then she sat down at the table with a small knife and a board.

"What does she call you?" She asked suddenly.

"Sorry?" Simi asked confused.

"What did your parents name you? Surely you have a name?" Her grandmother looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Simi," she replied. And after a moment's hesitation, she said her full name. "Oluwanifesimi."

Her grandmother nodded in satisfaction. That is a good name to own. You know what it means?

"Yes. *God loves me.*"

Her grandmother nodded once more looking very satisfied. "It is good when the gods are on your side."

Simi looked up surprised at the use of the plural form of 'gods'. It was the second time since she arrived. But Iyanla's face remained unreadable, though the hardness of her face had loosened. Simi could see signs of white hair under the yellow headscarf and her grandmother's posture was bent with narrow shoulders and a slightly rounded back, but she did not have a single wrinkle on her face. She wore such a peaceful expression as she chopped the herb that Simi suddenly felt bold enough to ask her the question that was at the front of her mind.

"Grandma? Why did you and mum quarrel? »

"Iyanla!" Her grandmother interrupted her. "Just call me Iyanla, 'big mother'. That is what everyone calls me. It means the same thing. If you call me 'Grandma', I will feel as if I am back at the white man's school." Iyanla paused briefly, then added, "it was not a quarrel, as such."

Simi nodded even though she had not really gotten an answer. She sensed that it was probably too early for that conversation. She watched 'Iyanla' chop the leaves the cowry shells at her wrists dancing with each movement and her quick fingers keeping the leaves in place. She tried to picture her

as a little girl in some missionary school some 60 or 70 years ago, but couldn't.

For a while they were quiet. But the silence was not unpleasant. It only felt surreal, like in a dream. Sitting at the border of a huge forest in the middle of nowhere and stirring strange mixtures.

Suddenly, into the silence, came loud cries, and they were coming closer. Iyanla stopped what she was doing and raised her head.

"We have visitors," she said with a sigh. "Visitors with problems it seems." She got up and rinsed her hands in the basin. "Why don't you take a little walk, my child?"

Simi nodded feeling worried.

"If you go out there, the path to the right leads towards the village." Iyanla pointed to the little gate in the fence.

"Walk past the houses, then you will find a big tree at the other end of the village. The only one of its kind in Ajao. You can check for ripe ube and collect some. There is always a long stick beside the tree.' She handed her a small woven basket.

Simi nodded but wondered if she would find the tree. She loved eating the little dark purple fruits but she had never seen an ube tree before.

"Make sure you turn right, not left!" Iyanla repeated, with a frown. "And do not be gone for too long. It will be dark in an hour and you do not want to be outside at nightfall."

Iyanla gathered her long robe and looked irresolutely at the unfinished mixtures on the table. The voices were much louder now. They spoke very quickly in Yoruba, and it was difficult for Simi to understand.

"I hope that this will not take too long," said Iyanla, disappearing into the house. "When you come back, we will eat."

As if on second thoughts, Iyanla suddenly stopped and turned. She put her hand to her throat and pulled out a chain from underneath her dress. It held a beautiful blueish-green stone in a copper setting. Iyanla placed it in Simi's hand.

"Here my child. This is for you," she said. "It makes an old woman very glad that your mother sent you here." Then she disappeared into the house.

"Thank you, Iyanla," Simi called after her in surprise, but she was already gone. Simi looked closely at the stone which was of a transparent colour somewhere between blue and green like a deep river on a sunny day. She noticed tiny bubbles in it making the stone look like a huge drop out of a river. She placed the chain carefully around her neck feeling happy about such a special gift. Then she sneaked in quickly after Iyanla, hoping the patients were not in the house because she had to

get her sandals. Through the window she saw a young boy who was being supported by a woman. His hand was covered with blood and his face was wet with tears. Simi squirmed at the sight and looked away. The woman holding him spoke gentle words to calm him while a crowd of children surrounded them and another woman was talking to Iyanla. The woman that was speaking with Iyanla had a baby tied to her back that was screaming in the midst of the whole racket.

Suddenly Iyanla held up her hands and shouted "Quiet! Everybody quiet."

Simi was startled by the sudden **calm** that immediately came over the crowd. She backed away from the window, grabbed her sandals, and walked quietly out of the back door.

She snatched the basket from the table outside and walked past the herb garden and through the little gate. She stood in the middle of the path and looked around. A tiny stream almost overgrown with grass and other water plants trickled alongside the path. To the right the path looked wider and more used. To the left, the path was barely visible and, after a few meters, it disappeared into a thicket of ferns and bushes under huge trees.

Just as she was about to turn right towards the village, as Iyanla had instructed, she thought she heard a strange sound and stood still. She listened, cocking her head towards the forest. There it was again. A quiet vibrating melody that

rippled through the air reminding her of winds swishing over the sands of Lekki beach back home. It was only brief but gripping. Her nerves tingled strangely in her body. Then suddenly it was gone and she wondered if she had really heard it. She realised that without noticing, her feet had actually taken her towards the left into the forest. Surprised she looked around appreciating the sudden coolness of the air. Suddenly she heard laughter. It was a high pitched screaming laughter, clearly that of a monkey. Goose bumps came over her. How amazing! She was really in the middle of the jungle here. She suddenly felt like a National Geographic reporter, right at the source of nature, in the middle of the wilderness. She paused in her tracks for a brief moment feeling scared, but then her curiosity took over again and she decided to peek further into the forest. She would go only very few steps. Her heart pounded at the thought of seeing some cute monkeys. Real, live monkeys in the wild. Then at least she would have something exciting to report at school after the holidays. Her friend Taye had flown to her cousins in America and Chinwe had gone to Enugu, where her parents had their family home with a pool.

She was the only one who had to spend her holidays in the wilderness. Then it should at least be worth something, she thought. She picked up a long stick she found at the side of the path. She definitely did not want to collide with snakes

or any other wild animals without some form of protection. She was not going to be unprepared like some helpless and naïve city girl.

Just a few steps, she thought, and then she would go and pluck ube.

The forest was not even as dense as it looked at first glance.

The thin path snaked around huge tree trunks with thick, gnarled roots that dug into the ground. But she could see pretty far through the bushes and treetops. She took a few more steps, but the walk did not really get very exciting. There were no monkeys that swung from branch to branch, no great gorges, huge caves or anything even half as exciting as that. The forest remained absolutely monotonous. She looked back, and could no longer see her grandmother's house. Only the greens of the forest all around her. She suddenly felt foolish standing in the middle of the jungle with just a stick in her hand and wondered what had made her do such a crazy thing.

She shook her head and was just about to hurry back when she heard a creaking noise behind her. She turned around and was terrified when she found herself staring into the yellow eyes of a grim-faced raggedy-looking man. He sat on a heavily laden rusty bicycle. Plantains piled up in a big basket on the luggage carrier behind him. He had tied the plantains on with

a rope. She jumped backwards on shaky legs into scratchy scrub to let him pass.

"Eku ale," she greeted him in Yoruba when she found her voice again. He did not reply. He just looked at her with his yellowing eyes and muttered something which sounded like 'the madness of young people nowadays'. Then he shook his head before he continued riding his rusty bicycle through the uneven forest path. A shiver ran down her spine, but at the same time she felt the blood rise in her face. She was annoyed at his rude behaviour. Maybe it was her pronunciation, she thought uneasily. She was aware that her Yoruba was not so good and that she spoke with an accent. Her father had often told her to be more diligent in learning it. He had often spoken to her in Yoruba, but like her mother, she had always responded in English.

The thought of her parents and in particular the thought of her parents before the divorce, suddenly made her sad. If they hadn't divorced maybe they would have gone on a trip together somewhere nice like two years ago when they had travelled to Jos and strolled through the wildlife park and eaten real strawberries grown in Nigeria on the high Jos plateau. Then she wouldn't be spending her holidays here all alone in this remote village which felt like the end of the world. She noticed how the burst of energy that had made her so

adventurous suddenly seeped out of her bones. She began to walk back when she suddenly heard the strange melody again.

It began again like the sound of a vibrant wind scattering sands about. But then the swishing sound grew louder gathering into a rippling, high-pitched tune. It was a birdsong so beautiful and so haunting that she stood motionless, her feet glued to the spot. The tune continued persistent and urging and Simi felt sure that it was calling her. She turned, her feet moving in the direction of the song. She left the main trail, passing through bushes that scratched her legs but somehow she could not stop walking. The forest around her began to change. It became denser. The air became heavier and more humid with each step, the trees higher and the undergrowth thicker. Long vines hung down from the tall trees almost touching the undergrowth.

Only 10 more steps, then I'll turn back, she thought, but she kept going.

Only 20 more steps...

At some point, she couldn't tell how many steps she had taken. She finally came to a standstill in the middle of a clearing, and drew in a sharp breath.

In front of her lay a dreamy little red lake. In the middle of it was a grey rock its smooth surface glowing in the fading light. A huge tree stood at the edge of the lake and leaned

over as if to protect the water below it. It was an 'Iroko', she saw at once; a tree of spirits.

She looked up and saw a bird sitting in the branches of the Iroko. She instinctively knew that it was this bird that had lured her here. Even though he was so high up, she saw him clearly. His shiny yellowish plumage was well visible through the leaves. She wondered how he had managed to bring her here in spite of her growing unease. She felt like she was standing beside herself. As if she had lost control over her own body which throbbed almost painfully. And now, she had the insistent feeling that something was about to happen. The air seemed to crackle. She licked her lips nervously as she watched the bird.

Suddenly the bird left the treetop. He fluttered over to the rock and sat on it. His beady black eyes seemed to glitter as he stared at her. She understood him immediately. The bird wanted her to come to him. And even though she wanted to run back to Iyanla's house as fast as possible she could not control her feet. She put one in front of the other and moved towards the lake.