

husband was, in fact, a Scot.

The morning after the letter arrived I woke to a feeling, which I mistook at first for the chill that follows the end of a warm dream. A sense of apprehension, of an undertaking ahead. Every year for years I had told my Aunt Serah I was coming home. But every year Aunt Serah told me to wait. 'Come at Christmas. When things have settled down.' I knew I had left it long enough. A spectator, I had watched on my television screen images of my country bloodied and bruised. The burned out façade of the department store where we bought mango ice cream on Saturdays. Corpses rolling in the surf of the beach where we picnicked on Sundays, where I rolled for hours in those very waves. A father with his two sons dodging sniper bullets on a street I travelled every Monday morning on my way to school. Peace had been declared and yet the war was far from over. It was like witnessing, from a distance, somebody you know being set upon by thieves in the street. And afterwards, seeing them stagger, still punch drunk, hands out-

stretched as they fumble for their scattered possessions. Or else, shocked into stillness, gazing around themselves as if in wonder, searching for comfort in the faces of strangers.

What would you do? You would go to them.

I sat up and shook my husband's shoulder – my Portuguese Scottish husband – and I told him I was going away for a while.

And so there I was, standing in the forest among the women's gardens, remembering my grandmothers. Beyond the trees their daughters were waiting for me. Four aunts. Asana, daughter of Ya Namina, my grandfather's senior wife: a magnificent hauteur flowed like river water from the mother's veins through the daughter's. Gentle Mary, from whom foolish children ran in fright, but who braided my hair, cared for me like I was her own and talked of the sea and the stars. Hawa, whose face wore the same expression I remembered from my childhood – of disappointment already foretold. Not even a smile to greet me. Enough of her. And Serah, belly sister of my father, who spoke to me in a way no other adult ever had – as though I might one day become her equal.

They were the ones whose presence filled the background to my childhood. Not my only aunts, by any means, rather my husbandless aunts. Asana, widow. Mary, spinster. Serah, divorcee. The fate of Hawa's husband had never been quite clear, it remained something of a mystery. I had heard some of their stories before, though I didn't remember who had told me or when. As a child I had spent my evenings at home doing schoolwork, or trying to get a picture on the black and white TV, as a teenager I'd lain in my room fiddling with my yellow transistor radio, waiting for my favourite tunes. Without men of their own to occupy them these four aunts had always been frequent visitors to my father's house until he left to take up a series of appointments overseas and I followed in his slipstream to university.

Coming back, I thought about my aunts and all the things that had never been spoken. And I saw them for what they were, the mirror image of the things that go unsaid: all the things that go unasked.

The stories gathered here belong to them, though now they

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belong to me too, given to me to do with as I wish. Just as they gave me their father's coffee plantation. Stories that started in one place and ended in another. Worn smooth and polished as pebbles from countless retellings. So that afterwards I thought maybe they had been planning it, waiting to tell me for a long time.

That day I walked away from the waiting women into the trees