

to the kitchen, Selina was sitting before the pot of soup, stirring it nonchalantly. 'You got out!' I gasped.

'Yes I did,' she replied. 'You thought I was done for, didn't you? Well, for your information, God does not allow good people like me to be punished for nothing.'

It turned out that Obiageli had returned from school to find Selina in 'detention', and had asked why. When Madam told her, she laughed, and said that Selina must be speaking the truth because Obiageli had caught Cally taking money from Madam's strong box when Madam was in Lagos. Selina was let out of the room with a strong warning never to take money from anyone in the household without knowing its source. No one was more relieved than me when I heard that. I found the ten naira untouched in my box, and promised myself to be very careful with it, and keep it secret from everyone in the house.

Everything now seems all right except for Selina. She seems to be crying a lot these days; her complexion is also getting fairer and her breasts seem to be getting bigger.

BA'BILA MUTIA

The miracle

Ba'mia waited anxiously for Reverend Father Tabi and his mother to come out of the church. Father Tabi had established it as a routine (after the second mass each Sunday) to come out and mix with the congregation. This particular morning Ba'mia was restless. He took hold of the sturdy ironwood stick with his two hands and hobbled to the school yard, away from the church.

As he pushed the stick to the ground, he hopped on his right leg and dragged his withered left leg after him. He had become so used to the movement that it was now a subconscious, almost acrobatic flow of motion which he executed without effort. The extra weight he exerted on his shoulders had left him with a broad chest and slightly exaggerated biceps and forearms. His thin waist, small stomach, and the baggy look of his left trouser leg, where his full left leg would have been, gave him a waspish appearance which was accentuated by his beady eyes and high cheekbones.

He stood behind the school and gazed down at the raffia palm trees and elephant grass. He knew his mother would be looking for him and, in her usual manner, getting anxious about where he was. He sat down on the grass. It was getting hot, but the grass was dry and comfortable. He placed the ironwood stick beside him and adjusted his withered left leg. A hawk was gliding in the air below him, rising and falling with the wind currents. His eyes tried to follow the stream as it meandered its way through the valley. Out here, alone, he felt at peace with himself.

Manyi looked around and wondered where Ba'mia was. A group of children was playing under the concrete water-tank at the corner of the mission maternity. Ba'mia was not with them. She looked further, towards the Reverend Father's residence. She saw Sister Mary-Jane

walking to the mission guest house. The guest house was adjacent to the single-block elementary school. The local congregation stood in front of the old stone church in small groups. The men formed their own groups while the women laughed and chatted with each other. The locally dyed blouses the women wore, their wrappers, the men's handwoven shirts, and the children's *danshikis* looked very colourful. They blended with the hibiscus, marigold, and bougainvillea to give the mission an atmosphere of heavenly beauty.

Father Tabi moved from one group to another. He shook hands, shared in a joke, listened intently to a family matter, as he moved among the faithful. Then he spotted Manyi.

'Ah, Manyi, where have you been? I was looking for you.'

'Good morning, Father,' Manyi said.

Father Tabi looked at her worried face. 'Is anything the matter?' he asked.

'Yes, Ba'mia,' she said. 'I can't find him. I saw him leave the church a short while ago. Father,' she added, 'I'm worried about him. Among the three children I have, he is the only one who's so remote and distant.'

'He's still a child,' Father Tabi explained. 'You worry too much about him. He'll grow out of it.'

'I don't know, Father,' Manyi said reflectively. 'He's almost fourteen years old. Everyone in the family loves him, but it's difficult not to sympathise with his condition.'

'Talking about his condition,' Father Tabi said, 'do you still intend to go to Menda? The Holy Father arrives in the country this week.'

'Yes, Father.' Her face lit up with devotional inspiration. 'Yes. We're lucky to have the Pope visit us at Eastertide.'

Father Tabi smiled. 'Indeed, we are. This is the third nation he's visiting on the continent. We expect him to celebrate Easter Sunday mass in Menda stadium.'

'Easter,' Manyi murmured. 'The Lord's resurrection. The time of miracles. Father,' she said, raising her voice, 'do you think Ba'mia could be healed?'

'Healed?'

'Yes. I want to take him to Menda. His leg could be made whole. It

pains me to see him hobble around with that leg.' I've always wanted to see him normal, like other children.'

Father Tabi remained silent.

'He can be cured, can't he?'

'It's a matter of faith and God's will,' Father Tabi said. 'You are his mother. If you feel strongly about it, then follow your heart's call. Have you discussed this with his father? You know he doesn't come to church -'

Before Manyi could answer, a boy's voice said, 'Good morning, Father.' They turned round. It was Ba'mia. No one had seen him hobble up to the front of the church.

'Ah, good morning, Ba-mia,' Father Tabi responded. He stretched his arm and shook hands with the boy.

'Where have you been?' Manyi asked him. 'I've been looking all over for you.'

'I'd better leave you two alone,' Father Tabi said. 'Ah, there's Sister Beatrice. I'll have a word with her.'

'Thank you so much, Father,' Manyi smiled.

'God bless you, Manyi.'

'Say goodbye to Father,' Manyi said to the boy.

'Goodbye, Father.' There was a trace of irritation in his voice.

'Goodbye, Ba'mia. Don't forget your catechism classes.'

After Father Tabi walked away, the boy turned to his mother. 'I'm hungry, Mother. Let's go home.'

She wanted to talk to other women and their families, but she changed her mind. She did not want to make the boy feel unwanted. His disability always softened her heart towards him. She waved at some of her friends as she began walking home with Ba'mia.

Gwan-Fumbat was waiting for Manyi when she came back from mass. His house was the only one built with cement blocks and roofed with aluminium sheets. The rest of the homesteads that made up the large Fumbat compound were a scattered cluster of mud-plastered houses roofed with long, dry, savannah grass.

Manyi, his third wife, the mother of his twins, was his favourite. He hoped she would be his last wife. He had married her because he wanted a male child, one who would inherit his name and sustain the unbroken line of the Fumbat lineage.

He had married the second wife because the first had given birth to three girls in succession. She too had three more girls. On his father's insistence, he married Manyi. Her maiden name was Kogah, until she bore the female twins, Nahgwa and Nahjela. Thereafter, she became Manyi, mother of twins and he Tanyi, father of twins. Twins were a sign of fertility in a woman. Perhaps the seeds of the male heir he was desperately searching for lay in Manyi's womb.

Gwan-Fumbat's father died at eighty-six, two years after the twins were born. Six months after he died, Manyi became pregnant. When she gave birth nine months later, Gwan-Fumbat knew his sacrifices on the family shrine and his repeated appeals for ancestral intervention had not been in vain. It was a baby boy. The long-awaited male heir to the Fumbat lineage had arrived.

But something was wrong. The baby's left leg appeared frail and unusually thin. Gwan-Fumbat's late father had a withered left leg when he was born. But he handled the disability with humour until a logging accident crushed the leg when he was still a young man. Not many people knew the truth about his one leg.

And now, Manyi's baby's left leg too appeared frail and lifeless. There was no trace of recognition on Gwan-Fumbat's face when he came to the Catholic mission maternity to see the baby. Despite the overwhelming evidence, he told himself that the baby's left leg was a temporary condition that would get better with time. He decided to defy tradition and wait for three months – instead of the traditional three weeks – before he would name the child.

Three months later, the visiting medical doctor from the city confirmed what Gwan-Fumbat already knew. The baby's leg had no circulation, no feeling. It was just a tiny bone and dead tissue. It was a dead leg. The condition was irreversible.

Only then did Gwan-Fumbat order the naming ceremony to be initiated. He paid the late-naming-ceremony penalty of two goats and a drum of palmoil. He knew it was his father who had returned. So he named the child Ba'mia, father has come back.

It was these thoughts that ran through his mind as the voices of the women and children coming back from mass reached him. He sent one of his older girls to call Manyi.

A few minutes later, Manyi entered his house. She bowed slightly and clapped her hands three times.

'Tanyi,' she said, 'greetings. I hear you want to see me. I just came back from church. I haven't started cooking.'

He acknowledged her greeting and motioned her to sit down on one of the several carved stools around the fireplace. He threw some splinters of wood in the glowing embers of the fire and fanned them with a piece of cardboard. A few flames caught the splinters and crackled into a bright fire. He added bigger pieces of wood and the big yellow flames lit the semi-dark room. He wore brown khaki shorts and a faded jumper. The light from the fire illuminated the face of a man in his late fifties. He had a broad forehead and bushy eyebrows that hung over deep-set eyes. The hair on his head was all grey, and the hands that threw the firewood in the fire were large and thick.

'I didn't call you here because I'm hungry,' he said. He poked the fire with a long piece of wood and stared meditatively at the flying sparks. Then he lifted his head from the flames. He looked at her intently. She was in her mid-forties, but her face did not betray her age. Her angular features, prominent cheekbones and firm breasts only added to her beauty.

He was not used to formalities, so he went straight to the point. 'Where's Ba'mia?' he demanded.

'Somewhere in the compound,' she said. 'Is anything wrong?'

He poked the fire again. The agitated flames lit his face. After a short silence, he raised up his head. 'What's this I hear about you taking Ba'mia to Menda?'

'What is it you want to know?' she retorted.

Her aggressiveness caught him off-guard. Then he laughed. It was a short, sarcastic bark. 'So you're now throwing my questions back at me?' he asked.

'Your question sounds like a riddle. Let me know what's in your mind, and I'll answer you accordingly.'

He laughed again. The laughter faded to a frown and a firm tightening of his lips. He began grinding his teeth. The diminishing flames produced dark shadows on his face.

'Ba'mia belongs to this compound,' he said emphatically, folding his fist into a tight knot. 'His place is here, with the ancestral shrine.'

A gust of wind came through the open door and stirred the fire. There were patches of light and shadows on Manyi's face. She stared defiantly at her husband.

'God has a purpose for him. He belongs to the church. The Holy Father arrives from Rome this week. He's celebrating Easter mass in Menda. This is a chance for Ba'mia to receive a cure -'

'He doesn't need a cure,' he cut in. 'He's not suffering from a disease. He was born that way.'

'He deserves to be normal, like other children.'

'If there's anything he deserves, it's our responsibility to help him accept his condition. It's his right to grow up into a man. Your motherly sympathy will not help him much.'

'You don't understand God's ways -'

'And let me tell you something else. Ba'mia's condition is his personal load he carries from the world of our ancestors.'

'What do you mean?'

'He's a reincarnation of his grandfather.' He ignored the mocking gentleness of her laughter. 'My father too had the same disability,' he carried on.

'But I thought he lost his leg in an accident.'

'He was born with a dead left leg. When Ba'mia was born, I knew my father had chosen to return to the family. His fate was decided before he was born. We can only help him accept it.'

'You have a right to your beliefs,' she said. 'He may be your father, but he's also my son. I feel what he suffers when he hops around on that leg. That's why I'm taking him to Menda.'

There was a tone of finality in her voice. The firewood in the fireplace had been totally consumed by the fire. Gwan-Fumbat poked the fireplace and looked at the hot coals that were left in the ashes. He looked around and saw some firewood. He thought of putting more wood on the dying coals to rekindle the flames, but he changed his mind. He looked up at Manyi.

'There's not much I can do to persuade you,' he said, 'but the truth is never hidden. When it's nightfall, when the day comes to an end, the fowls come home to roost. When Ba'mia grows up, he will know where he belongs.'

It was almost noon. Long rays of sunshine came in through cracks on the wall. They had replaced the light from the dead fire.

'It's almost midday,' Gwan-Fumbat told Manyi, 'and I'm getting hungry.'

Manyi stood up. She felt vindicated. As far as Ba'mia was concerned, she would always have her way. The boy could be Tanyi's reincarnated father; he could be the heir to the Fumbat lineage, but he was still her son.

'I know,' she said. 'I was about to cook some corn *fufu* when you called me.' She was almost at the door now. 'I'll send Nahjela to give you the food as soon as it's ready,' she said, as she stepped out of the door.

When she got to her house, Ba'mia was waiting for her. There was a defiant look on his face.

'What's the matter?' his mother asked him.

'You've been arguing with Father again, haven't you? About me as usual, I'm sure.'

'Everything I do or say is for your interest,' Manyi said.

'You've never given me a choice,' the boy protested. 'Don't I have a chance to talk for myself? Has Father or you ever thought I've got a mind of my own, that I know what's good for me, who I am?'

Manyi kept quiet for a moment. After a while she said, 'I'm sorry, Ba'mia, I never wanted to -'

'I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me,' he blurted. 'I can always take care of myself.' He turned round suddenly, gripped his stick, and hobbled out of the house.

The following Sunday Manyi and Ba'mia got up after the third cockcrow. She wore one of her colourful three-piece wrappers. Her son wore a golden embroidered *danshiki* over navy blue trousers. He also had his walking stick with him.

The first bus had already left before they reached the park. The second bus was full even before they got to the park. The third bus took a long while to be filled up. They did not leave the park till seven thirty.

By the time they arrived in Menda at eight o'clock, the streets were jammed with people. The most prominent sight was the variety of school uniforms worn by children all over the city. There were school

bands everywhere. The police mounted roadblocks at every crossroad. They were checking people's identification papers. Ba'mia had been to Menda only four or five times, and he never ceased to be amazed at the novelty of things.

Both sides of the road from the stadium to the Catholic mission premises on the hilltop were already crammed with people. Some had been there as early as three in the morning to have a vantage place at the edge of the road.

Ba'mia and his mother were not so fortunate. They walked as far down towards the stadium as they could. The crowd was so thick that they could not go very far. They finally settled at the outskirts of the crowd, away from the main road itself where the Pope's motorcade would pass.

It was now past nine o'clock. The mass in the stadium had just started. They could hear the choirs from the big loudspeakers that were mounted in the stadium. They found a place and sat down to wait.

The open-air mass was over at eleven thirty. Ba'mia heard the shouts and yells of excitement from the thousands of people who were jammed in the small municipal stadium. He stood up and turned round to his mother. She was dozing.

'Nah Manyi,' he said, shaking her shoulder, 'the service in the stadium seems to be over.'

She stood up, craned her neck, and looked down the road. Small crowds were already trickling out of the stadium. Because of the big population most people had been unable to gain entrance into the stadium. But the throngs of believers lining the road seemed larger than the huge crowd in the stadium. They all waited patiently.

Ba'mia and his mother were pushed back ten or fifteen yards by the ever-increasing crowd. A policeman with a whistle on his lips lashed with a cowhide whip at the feet of the fortunate ones along the road. The crowd pretended to retreat, and the sea of heaving bodies undulated in human waves whose ripples reached Ba'mia and his mother at the back.

Without any warning, the stadium gates were flung open as the flamboyant motorcycle escorts emerged from the stadium. The escort riders were immaculately attired in white. They wore white uniforms, white boots, white goggles, white helmets and white gloves. They had

not yet switched on their sirens, but their red lights were flashing. The Pope's walkabout in the stadium had not lasted as long as Ba'mia thought it would. Someone beside him had said they might have to wait for more than three hours under the hot sun.

Ba'mia used the support of his stick to elevate his head another inch or two. When he saw the black Mercedes emerge behind the escort riders, his heart fell. He turned to his mother.

'Father Tabi said the Pope usually walked around and shook hands with the Christians.' There was a note of disappointment in his voice.

'Have faith, my son,' his mother said. 'We didn't come here for nothing. God is on our side. I believe in miracles -'

The boy did not hear her last words. Even as she spoke, the black Mercedes suddenly came to a halt half-way down the road from the stadium. The Pope came down from the car and was quickly surrounded by aides and government security men. A bishop in a white robe also came out of the car. A slight gust of wind momentarily caught the Pope's white vestment. Instinctively, he reached for his head to keep the white skullcap from being blown away.

'Mother! Mother! Look! He has come out of the car. He's shaking hands with the crowd. Mother -'

'A miracle, my son. Faith. I told you. We must have faith.'

The Pope was just about fifty yards away. Ba'mia tried to think. The crowd in front of him was too thick. If he did not act fast, he would miss the chance of his lifetime. When his mother turned her head towards where he stood, the boy had vanished. Initially she panicked. Then she saw him about five yards away. It was his colourful *danshiki* that caught her eye.

'Ba'mia,' she shouted. 'Ba'mia. This way, not that way. The crowd is too thick over there.' The boy did not hear her. Her small voice was swallowed by the noisy cheers of the crowd.

Ba'mia began heaving and twisting his way through the dense jungle of human bodies. Where the crowd was too thick, he crept in between the legs of the adults. When he stood up again, the edge of the road was about three yards away. He raised himself on the toes of his good foot and managed to support his weight on the stick. He looked up, towards the stadium. The Pope was still walking down the road, stopping here and there, touching the foreheads and hands of the

faithful, administering a silent blessing to those who reached out but could not touch him. He was now about thirty yards away.

Ba'mia made up his mind very quickly. He lowered his body and went down on all fours. There were only eight yards of legs and dust between him and the edge of the crowd. He gripped his stick tightly and began creeping forward. The smell of dirty shoes and feet, and the foul taste of raw dust in his throat and nostrils was becoming unbearable. It was suffocating. He thought he would faint. He could not go any further. He crept through the last pair of legs and, without warning, found himself at the edge of the road. He was standing in front of a short fat man who was focusing his camera on the approaching entourage.

'You dirty dusty cripple,' the man swore. 'Get out of my way before I kick you. Don't you see I want to take a picture?'

The boy apologised. It only infuriated the man. 'Get out of my way before I kick you back to the dust.'

Ba'mia moved out of the man's way and took two tentative steps towards the direction of the approaching entourage. He pushed his wooden stick firmly to the ground and raised his neck. Unconsciously he wrapped his paralysed left leg around the stick. He managed to maintain a precarious balance with his healthy right leg.

The Pope was now about twenty yards up the road. The crowd surged forward, yearning to touch his hand. He touched one hand after another, as many as he could. An old haggard woman struggled to catch his attention. Just when she was giving up, the Pope stretched out his right hand and touched her head. Her face broke into a smile and her mouth hung open revealing two rows of black toothless gums.

Some distance away, the motorcade was creeping down the road, keeping an anticipated distance behind the pontiff. He lifted a small baby girl from the arms of her mother and kissed her on the forehead. The child's face wrinkled into a frown and she began crying. He handed the baby back to her mother.

Ba'mia waited apprehensively. He felt his heart throbbing violently against his chest. The Pope was now only a few yards away. The boy held his breath and adjusted the stick to maintain his balance.

Then he jerked his body and darted forward. The police guards and plainclothes security men were completely taken by surprise. They

tried to push the boy away. He ducked twice, fainted a fall, and slipped between their legs. He looked up, saw the Pope's flowing white vestment and grabbed it with his left hand. His right hand still clung to his stick. He could not afford to lose it. Two security officers fell on him and tried to pull him away. But he clung to the vestment with all his might.

The Pope raised his hand in a gesture of restraint. The guards and security men hesitated. They stood by in pensive anticipation, waiting for the slightest excuse to pounce on the boy. For a moment, everyone held his breath.

Ba'mia planted his stick firmly on the ground and raised himself upward. He was barely four and a half feet tall. He shifted his body weight to his right foot and, in a quick, sweeping and dramatic motion, took hold of the withered left leg and lifted it effortlessly with his left hand. A murmur of sympathy came from the onlookers.

The Pope laid his right hand on the boy's head and smiled. 'What's your name?' he asked in a thick heavy accent.

'Ba'mia,' the boy barely whispered. He was trying to stop his body from the sudden chills of trembling that had seized him. He coughed and cleared his throat. 'I want you to make me walk upright,' he demanded. His black eyes looked up at the broad face of the Pope.

'I will pray for you . . .' the Pope began to say.

'But . . . but,' the boy stammered, in a faltering voice. 'My mother said you are here for God. You speak with him. She said you will make me walk erect.'

There were visible signs of impatience on the faces in the crowd. The motorcade had now caught up with the entourage. The aides glanced at their watches anxiously. The escort riders were revving their engines.

'I speak for God,' the Pope said. 'I am only his voice, his messenger.'

Someone discreetly tapped the Holy Father on his right shoulder. He turned round and an aide whispered into his ear. He barely nodded. He turned round again and looked at the boy's dusty countenance.

There were tears in Ba'mia's eyes. 'I want to walk like other children. Tell God to make me walk properly. Help me with a miracle,' he said.

The black Mercedes pulled up a few feet away from the entourage.

'You are God's miracle,' the Pope responded, 'a miracle of His love and creation. You have to pray to Him.' In a wide, rehearsed gesture

he made the sign of the cross over the boy's head. On a second thought, he reached into the pocket of his vestment and brought out a rosary. He handed it to the boy. 'Use this to pray to Holy Mary, mother of God. God will answer your prayers.' Ba'mia took the rosary and slipped it into his *danshiki* pocket.

Another aide came forward and whispered into the Pope's ear again. He moved forward and shook a few hands. When he turned round, television camera crews and a horde of newsmen closed in around him.

A uniformed attendant opened the rear door of the waiting Mercedes. The Pope looked at the waving crowd. He raised his hand in one final benediction.

'What shall I tell my mother?' Ba'mia heard himself shout above the din of the cheering crowd. His voice was swallowed up by the hum of the crowd and threatening throttle of the BMW motorcycles.

The Pontiff's face expanded to one last, memorable smile. Then he stepped into the waiting upholstery of the Mercedes' interior. The uniformed man closed the door mechanically. The motorcade began crawling past the main market, on its way to the Bishop's Residence in the Menda Catholic mission. The escort riders turned on their sirens and flashing lights.

The crowd had already begun breaking up. Ba'mia found himself swallowed up again in a whirlwind of legs, bodies and dust. He did not know when he lost his stick. He crept around in utter desperation and confusion, looking for it. When he located his mother, he was out of breath and exhausted. His face, arms and legs were covered with dust. He began to cough.

'What happened?' his mother asked him.

There were tears in his eyes. She lent him a hand and he stood up erect. His lips trembled. The dust in his lungs made him cough again.

'What happened?' Manyi asked again.

'Nothing,' he said between sobs, 'nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing happened. I lost my stick.'

'Did you . . . did you see him? Did he touch you?'

'The motorcade is gone,' the boy said, wiping away his tears. 'I'm tired. I want to go home.'

They began walking towards the old road that led to the motor

vehicle park. She half-held, half-supported him. They walked in silence. A sudden impenetrable silence has descended on her and the boy. His face had a blank expression. It was as if he was no longer conscious of her presence beside him. He had retreated into an unfathomable world. She did not want to intrude in his private world, so she too kept quiet.

Finally, they reached the park. The minibus that plied the rough, dusty route between Menda and their village was almost full. The passengers paid their fare. The driver started the engine and the bus left the park.

Everyone in the bus was quiet. The monotonous drone of the bus engine was occasionally interrupted by the regular change of gears. Manyi could no longer bear the silence. She glanced at Ba'mia.

'What shall we tell Father Tabi?' she asked, in an effort to break the curtain of silence between her and her son.

'I don't know,' he said. 'And what about my father? What will you tell him?' His voice was flat, without feeling or emotion.

Manyi kept quiet. After a while she said, 'What are you thinking about?' There was a slight trace of desperation in her voice.

'My stick,' he said. 'I will need a new one.' After a while, he reached into his *danshiki* pocket and brought out the rosary. 'Here,' he said, handing it to her. 'You may keep it. The Pope gave it to me.'

'Why?' she asked. 'It's yours.'

He still held the rosary out to her. There was no expression on his face. Manyi took it reluctantly. The bus now began ascending the first of three steep hills before it arrived at the village.

'Tanyi will have to get me a new stick,' he reflected, after a few moments of silence.

'He's your father,' Manyi rebuked him sharply. 'You don't call him Tanyi. It's only the elders who call him Tanyi.'

'I am Ba'mia,' he said softly.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Tanyi's father,' he replied. 'I came back to be reborn in the family, to inherit what is rightfully mine -'

'Ba'mia! Don't say such things!' She recoiled back in shock and astonishment. She suddenly went pale. A kind of glow came over the boy's face. His thoughtful, reflective gaze had disappeared. It was

replaced by a knowing one. He was radiating a strange aura that stunned his mother.

'I know who I am,' he continued. 'My place is with the ancestors. Tanyi will initiate me in the family shrine to commune with them. But first, he must carve me a new stick.'

Ba'mia did not hear his mother's reply. The driver changed gears and the bus jerked violently. Behind them a thick cloud of dust rose and died down as quickly as the bus's tyres churned it up. Ba'mia closed his eyes and lapsed again into another long silence, listening to the strained drone of the engine.

TIJAN M. SALLAH

Weaverdom

The weaverbirds, yellow feathers with black spots, so noisy is their ceremony. They congregate on the long, slender leaves of our palmtree, turning their necks and beaks in different directions. Their beaks curve into their feathers, fishing lice or ticks or just game. They peck the red palmnuts, which sometimes drop, and they would stare, marble-eyed, at the unfailing traction of gravity. The gaunt children in the yard run for the fallen nuts with fragmented rock pieces or slices of cement bricks, ready to crack the shells and nib the core.

The weavers are legendary birds, perhaps the griots of the bird-race. They have a penchant for intimidating noise, strident oratory, resembling a handful of chattering pirates boasting with their pranks and plunder. They squeak, regardless of the rhythm of time: dawn and dusk, crawling on palmleaves, or sometimes coaching their young under the apprenticeship of their wings. The weavers' small, acute beaks protrude in inverse proportion to the giant-sounds they make.

The weavers are great architects; their nests, intricately woven blades of dried grass, sticks, pebbles, leaves, and feathers, resemble dangling fragile gourds with openings at the handles, the regal thresholds into the weavers' bedrooms. Sometimes the crows and vultures vie with weavers for turf on the palmtree, but the drama resolves itself into the survival of the fittest; suddenly the weavers disperse haphazardly into the horizontal distances of the sky. Other times, the survival of the most numerous or of the most shrewd rules, and the larger birds yield for Weaverdom, envious of the power in sheer numbers.

The weavers have an English accent, punctuated nasal notes that grip everyone's attention. They have a habit of messing up everything in the name of Queen Victoria's glory, the Elizabethan successions, and the CommonWe or CommonWoe. Their droppings, hot and