

Flying

by Elnathan John

I fly when I sleep. Not the *tatata* wing flapping of pigeons and doves. More like the stationary gliding of a plane. My hands are my wings- I run, leap forward chest out, and will myself to fly. The engine that propels me is my mind, so if when my eyes are closed anything bothers or distracts me, I glide for a while, then start to descend sharply and crash. This happens at least one out of every five times. When it does I wake up sad and with a headache. But when I am happy, I soar so high I start to feel breathless.

Aunty Keturah asks me questions before she states her theories. Do my wings have feathers or are they *wings-wings*? Do I usually fly alone? How high do I fly? If my wings have feathers then I was a bird in my last life. If I fly alone, then I was an eagle and if I was in company, a vulture- but only if I was bad in the life before that. If I have *wings-wings* however, like a butterfly or a bat or the stiff wings of a plane, then maybe I was a bat or pilot. But God forbid bats, she says, God forbid bad creatures caught between lives, neither bird nor mammal. Bad people get trapped between world's, between bodies, so that they are half this, half that; neither this nor that. You have to be really evil to become a bat. She is afraid of getting a child like that. A bad person from an old life.

I am normal so I must have been good in my last life. Except if this getting wings at night means I am part one thing and part another. Aunty Keturah knows so much of this stuff I wonder what she was in her old life. To know so much, she had to have been something great in her past life, maybe a seer, something that would have shown her these secrets of how and why we return as one thing or another. Sometimes, I fear for her because of her temper and swearing. I fear she may become something dreadful in her next life. "Your mother's cursed womb," she says when any of the boys on window duty forget to clean some of the louvers or leave them open at night or when someone wets the bed. Good thing though, she doesn't stay angry for long. She protects us like a dog protects its puppies.

Once a man tried to lure Adnan, the albino boy out of the house. Adnan had wet the bed and tried to hide it by turning the mattress upside down. The smell was so strong she turned the entire dormitory upside down until she found the guilty mattress. She slapped Adnan and said that his penis would wither for making the whole place smell and told him to kneel down

outside between the two cactus plants by the short broken part of the fence. The dark man wore a beard like Che's face on the t-shirt I got from the clothes donated by the Cherubim and Seraphim church on our street.

The man was telling Adnan to climb over the fence and take something when she spotted him. She alerted the guard, Bimbol, with whom she went through the back gate. They caught the man. Another man on a motorcycle who was waiting to whisk Adnan away sped off. Aunty Keturah bit the man on the neck and hit him with the guard's stick until she had to be dragged away by the Policeman who had come from the junction.

Aunty Keturah is not really my Aunty. She is not anyone's Aunty. She started Kachiro Refuge Home when they told her in the hospital she couldn't have children and her husband went off with a woman who had six toes. I have heard Aunty Keturah tell that to some visitors she was giving a tour round the Home. She refuses to call it an orphanage because she says the word orphan has too much stigma around it. Moreover, she says, most of the children are really not orphans. Many of their mothers, whose wombs she always curses, dumped them by the roadside, in garbage dumps, in wells, in churches or just left them in the hospital.

Our home is also a school. The school is mostly for the children who are in the home but we have some children who come from outside and leave every day after school. The rest of us, live in the dorms. The babies are in a house called the nursery. I have just started JSS3, the most senior class in the school and I am both class prefect and dorm leader for the boys' dorm. There is a separate dorm for girls and no boy is allowed to go in there. Aunty Keturah says that the greatest sin you can commit is to insult God. The second greatest sin is to be caught in the girls' dorm.

Far in the distance, beyond the football field, are the staff quarters. Aunty Keturah lives there as do the Principal and his family, some teachers, the school nurse and the cooks. No one is allowed across the football field. The Principal, a bald headed man whose suits have hands that are longer than his, has a quiet voice that people can hardly hear during morning assembly.

As dorm leader, Auntie Keturah expects only that I clean her office, early in the morning. I can take a junior boy from JSS1 or JSS2 to do the work, but I like being alone in her large beautiful office. She has many books and paintings and a fridge that she doesn't lock. The big black table, the TV, the two cushioned chairs and three plastic chairs, the floors I clean every morning before school. The high cupboard, the books, the louvers, I clean once every week, and twice during the dusty harmattan. I clean the table last because then I sit and flip through the books on her table or check her drawers. There is always something to find in the drawers. Sweets, dates, left over biscuits. Last week I found a big old brown book called "Kachiro Memorial Refuge Home Records". It has details about everybody. Names are arranged alphabetically beginning with Aaron and ending with Zichatt. There is no name under X. I can't think of any name beginning with X. I started reading from the first page and after a few pages decided to read only a little, three pages, every day. Reading the book gave me then as it gives me now, a breathless feeling, like I feel when I fly too high. I feel my stomach almost empty and my heart suddenly fill my entire chest. Knowing everything about a person's life, where they came from, where their mother dumped them, what sickness they came with, makes me feel I have some kind of power over them. It was in that book that I saw that Adnan was dumped by his mother in General Hospital. In the column called "Remarks", she wrote that Adnan was abandoned because he was an albino and that the whereabouts of his mother are unknown. I thought for a long time when I read it, what he must have been in his former life. Maybe a white man. A bad white man. Perhaps that is why big as he is, he still wets the bed. The sun hurts his eyes and skin and his eyeballs cannot focus on one thing. It keeps darting back and forth like someone searching for something.

I have deliberately refused to jump to my own page. I don't know the feeling I will get if I read my own history: who dumped me and why.

The large field behind the dorm where there are groundnuts, tomatoes and sweet potatoes planted has three mango trees, which are forbidden to climb. During mango season, we have slices of mango served at breakfast and dinner. There is never enough for anyone, especially for those who really like mangoes. When we were in JSS2, Bakut who has the biggest head I have ever seen started telling the boys that the reason why we couldn't get whole mangoes was that Auntie Keturah was selling the mangoes. Abednego, who stammers and always gets knocked by teachers for his dirty collars, swore that he saw women leave

with sacks full of mangoes. Aunty Keturah heard and made all the boys in our class spend the entire break kneeling in the sun and made Bakut and Abednego cut grass for two days. Abednego's bow legs make me laugh. He walks like a duck. I wonder what he was in his last life.

Another mango season is here. The boys in my class are planning to steal mangoes instead of getting one slice at breakfast. It is break time and the boys, all ten of us, usually head to the last desk in the classroom to play biro soccer. Today there are no biros on the table. Bakut, Gideon and Bosan- the fat boy we call Biggie- are talking about how to sneak out in the evening to steal mangoes. Biggie says that when the guard goes to say his evening prayers, they will sneak off and climb the trees. Gideon has found a way of removing the louvers in case they need to come in through the windows. Me, I don't like this their plan and I tell them I won't go with them.

Bakut stares at me. He says that I am a sell-out and that he thinks it was me that told on them last year.

"How come you didn't serve punishment with us that day?" he says.

"Because I am dorm leader. And she sent me to count the new exercise books that they brought to her office."

"Why are you always in Aunty Keturah's office then?" Biggie asks.

"Yes, why is she always asking you to come?" Mindat the fair boy with the curly hair joins in.

"But she is not even there in the mornings when I clean her office," I protest.

"OK, but in the afternoon when she asks you to come she is in the office," Bakut insists.

"I tell her about..."

I stop. They will laugh at me if I tell them what happens to me when I sleep. They will not believe if I tell them that the reason I am always talking to Aunty Keturah is that she is the only one who understands my dreams and she doesn't look at me like I am crazy when I tell her. I tried to tell Samson, the tall boy whose hair never stays combed for more than five

minutes. Samson is more my friend than any of the other boys and even he, laughed at me. Samson is quiet when they question me.

"I help her arrange her books!" I scream and walk out, pretending to be angry.

"Lie-lie," Bakut shouts out.

I don't care that they think I lie. The things I know about them- Bakut's mother was 16 when she was raped and she refused to touch him or breastfeed him and Biggie was found in a toilet, wrapped in plastic bags- make me feel bigger than them.

I walk to the dorm to eat the biscuits I took from Aunty Keturah's drawer yesterday. I think of the day she told me she had a baby once who looked just like me. Same nose. Same face. The ground under my feet started moving and I had a sudden urge to pee. I didn't want to hear her talk with a shaky voice about a dead baby who looked like me.

"Can I go and pee, ma?" I had asked her when I couldn't bear it any longer.

"Yes, use my toilet. Just don't mess it up."

Nobody ever used her toilet. Even though I had seen the toilet every morning when cleaning, I was excited about the prospect of actually peeing in her toilet, so excited that I couldn't actually pee. The reflection of the fluorescent bulb on the floor and wall tiles made me dizzy. I sat on the toilet seat and thought. That was when I decided that if I had to listen to her story, I would tell her mine.

"Wash your hands in the sink," she shouted when she heard me flush.

When I came back in and sat down, she continued.

"Sometimes I think, you are my baby that came back," she said and stopped. Her eyes looked at me like she wished she didn't say it. She went quiet for a while. Afraid, I began.

"I fly."

She didn't say anything. Perhaps she didn't hear, I thought. But it was already out, already in the air between us and I knew I had to continue.

"I fly. When I sleep, I fly."

She looked at my hands that were rapping on the table. I stopped. She leaned forward.

"Who else have you told about this?"

"Nobody. Emm, just Samson."

"And what did Samson say?"

"He said I am mad and he laughed at me."

"OK, first thing. You *will* not tell anyone else about this. Do you hear me? Nobody!"

"Yes ma."

"Second. You are not mad Tachio."

For the first time I wasn't afraid to talk about my flying, not ashamed. Flying wasn't such a bad thing. She made it all so real, people being born before and coming back. My dreams took on new meaning and I looked forward to the night. Flying became more exciting and I gradually started being able to choose where I would go, where I would fly to. I stopped crashing. It was in that month, that first month of secondary school, the month she created the post of dorm leader and put me in charge that I started enjoying flying.

The bells ring and I run back to class. I am in the E section in the records but tomorrow I will jump to G just to check Gideon's story. His big scattered teeth make me think he was a donkey in his last life; he acts like a donkey.

The boys in the class are looking at me funny and passing little notes behind me, and everyone it seems knows something I don't. Their murmuring has become loud and Mr. Ezra the Mathematics teacher with dark lips, who holds the chalk like a cigarette, asks what the matter is. They go quiet and he continues teaching. The notes still fly around and I am getting really annoyed. I want to punch somebody in the face, and tell them their life history.

I think of Bakut's accusation and of the day, last year, when I had a cold drink in Auntie Keturah's office. She asked me if the boys were unhappy about anything. I told her about the

mangoes and the stories Bakut and Abednego were spreading about her selling mangoes. I thought of mentioning Samson, but Samson borrows me his extra clean socks when mine are dirty. Did I do a bad thing by telling Aunty Keturah about the lies they were spreading? Did they not cause it by saying things that were not true?

I walk to the dorm alone after the last class. Some JSS2 girls walk past me, turning and laughing. The principal has forbidden senior boys from punishing junior girls. Only senior girls can punish junior girls, otherwise I would have stopped them and asked them to kneel down for an hour. When I take off my shirt in the dorm I see why they were laughing. Someone has glued a sheet of paper reading "I am a big fool" behind my shirt. I wonder how long the paper has been there. It could have been any of the boys in my class.

Bakut sits whispering with Biggie on his bunk below mine. I know they are talking about stealing mangoes. They make me feel like I have a disease. No one is talking to me. Even Samson just waves at me as he goes to sit with Bakut and Biggie.

I know they want to go this evening. My head struggles between telling Aunty Keturah or Bimbol the guard, between getting the boys punished, being hated *and* joining the boys and sealing my lips if she asks me who went out to steal mangoes.

Gideon sneaks out first and taps the window from behind the dorm to say that it is safe to come out. Then Bakut and Biggie follow, taking pillowcases to fill with mangoes.

I get down from my bed and walk around the dorm. At the other end of the dorm where the JSS1 boys are, some louvers have been left open. I walk toward the louvers and ask them who it was that left it open. Before the boys around the window begin scrambling to shut it, I see the Principal and Aunty Keturah walking toward the farm from a distance. My heart races and I run to our end of the dorm.

"Aunty and Princi are going to the farm," I shout to Abednego who is standing by the window waiting for the rest to return. He slides out through the louvers they have removed to alert the others.

They come in one after the other panting, barefoot and sweaty. They have plucked only four mangoes. Under my bunk they laugh loudly. Gideon puts back the louvers gently.

"Men, dey for catch us o! Who told you Princi was coming?" Bakut asks Abednego.

Abednego points at me. They are all surprised and look away. Bakut takes the four mangoes out from the pillowcase. There are seven boys that will share it. Two of the boys, Ishaya and Monday don't like mangoes. As suggestions fly between the boys on how to share the mangoes, Bakut throws me a mango. I understand it. It is his way of telling me they have forgiven me.

I wake up in fright, earlier than I used to. I felt like I was disappearing. My night had no dream. No flying. No running and gliding. No choosing where to fly to. Nothing. Not even crashing. For the first time since I remember dreaming, I did not fly. I am afraid.

The minutes are passing slowly and my hands are trembling. I am sure Aunty Keturah will know what this empty night means. The earliest I can see her is during break and I don't know if I can hold on for that long.

After cleaning the office, I sit in her soft black chair, with the record book in my laps. On Gideon's page, I read, "found crying and abandoned in the market." Maybe someone even stepped on him as they went by, I think, feeling sorry for him. Then it comes back to me- my night without flying and I am afraid again. I turn to my name in the book even though I have told myself I wouldn't look at it yet. I can hear my heart beating and it is hard to breathe.

Tears are gathering in my eyes. I am scared of seeing my story. Not left in a toilet like Biggie, I pray. I trace the words with my forefinger. *Place of birth: Ridgeway Hospital, Kaduna. Mother's name: Ruth Kachiro (deceased). Father's name: Bobby (whereabouts, unknown).* Just Bobby, without a surname. I take out a sheet of paper from the top drawer of the table and start copying quickly, thinking how I will ask Aunty Keturah about this without her discovering I have been reading her records. I have questions: what killed my mother, why my father has no surname, how she found me.

At the morning assembly two girls from JSS2 are standing in front, between the Principal and Aunty Keturah. After the Muslim and Christian prayers, we hear that two girls were caught with lipstick and will be given six lashes each. One of the girls, a thin, dark girl with big eyes, cries as she stretches out her hand. Aunty Keturah's lashes don't look so painful. The second girl looks very stubborn and has her eyebrows raised and her mouth squeezed

like she doesn't care about the lashing. Everybody is stretching to watch this girl. Her mouth makes me think of the rats we sometimes chase out of the dorm. Aunty Keturah is breathing hard as she lashes. The cane drops before the sixth lash and Aunty Keturah staggers a bit and falls to the ground. Girls scream and I rush to where she has fallen.

"Go and get the nurse!" the Principal screams.

He and the other teachers try to lift her up. They fan her face and call out her name. Then they pour water on her face. Their voices sound like voices from a dream- far away yet near. I am getting dizzy. The nurse comes with a car and the teachers help carry Aunty Keturah into the car.

It is the third period and I haven't heard a word of what the two previous teachers have taught. I try to pay attention as the Social Studies teacher talks about civic duties. He is writing on the board when a teacher from the Primary section comes in and whispers something to him. She is short so she has to stretch to reach his ears even though he has lowered his head to hear her. He drops the chalk and runs out.

My heart is beating and I stare out the window. I see a big brown chicken with a limp in one leg. The chicken is staring at me in a way that chickens shouldn't stare at people. I have not seen this limping chicken before. Everyone in the class is talking about Aunty Keturah. Some girls are saying that the girl being caned was possessed. Flogging a girl with an evil spirit could make one collapse, they say. I would ask them how they know but I don't like talking to girls.

The whole day passes like a breeze and the school is more quiet than usual. Those who are talking about what is happening are doing so in whispers. Everyone is behaving right. No one is walking on the lawns, no one has left a window open and at lights-out, everyone is still. Aunty Keturah is everywhere, in the breeze, in the whispers, in the dorm.

I wake up in the morning, relieved that I flew. I flew higher than I had ever gone, above white clouds that looked like balls of cotton wool in the sick bay. I saw big brown chickens like the one that stared at me in class. This is a good sign, something to show me that all is well with Aunty Keturah.

Everyone is on time for the morning assembly, properly dressed; I can't even see anyone chewing gum. Aunty Keturah will be happy if she comes. For once everyone is obedient without waiting for her to chase them around.

The principal climbs the concrete podium and takes off his glasses. He is wearing a dark blue caftan and a light blue cap. I can't remember the last time I saw him in a caftan.

"Today," he starts, but is barely audible. He clears his throat.

"Today," he says again, this time shouting too loud. Everyone is still and silent and I can hear the wind sweeping the dry leaves across the ground.

"Today is a sad day. The Bible says there is a time to be born and there is a time to die..."

I can no longer breathe and my nose hurts. Hot tears form in my eyes and I can't see clearly.

"Let us have two minutes silence for the soul of our dearly departed mother, proprietress and founder."

The principal takes off his cap. He does not need to tell us to have two minutes of silence. We came silent. The tears are rolling down my cheeks and my stomach rumbles like when I am hungry and drink water. The teacher by my side, the fair French teacher whose rings seem to be too tight for her fat fingers, holds my hand when she sees I am crying. Her hands are trembling and she holds me tight. I wonder how someone who was not sick or very old, can just fall, and die. Aunty Keturah should not just die like that, I think.

By the time he is finished talking, the Principal also has tears in his eyes. He dismisses us. No one walks fast or runs or chatters.

I can feel her in the strong wind that blows. More hot tears roll down my cheeks. Some girls ahead of me are crying. Bakut is also a little ahead of me, wiping his eyes with the back of his hands.

After the first period which the English teacher spent mostly wiping her face and telling us how Aunty Keturah is now happy in heaven, I clean the chalk board and go to the tap behind the class to wash my hands. I see the chicken of yesterday limping toward me. It comes a bit

closer, stops and stares at me. It looks around. I look closer and suddenly, I recognise the stare in the chicken's eyes. I am not so sad anymore. I smile and watch Aunty Keturah turn and limp away.