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From *As the Crow Flies* (Oxford: Heinemann, 2001)

*If you want to love
Do so
To the ends of the earth
With no shortcuts
Do so
As the crow flies.*

Indeed, I too would have loved to write one of those serene stories with a beginning and an end. But as you know only too well, it is never like that. Lives mingle, people tame one another and part. Destinies are lost.

On looking at your reflection in the mirror you say, 'I don't like what I see.' You are hurt by your weaknesses. You are hurt by your failures.

Listen. If you cannot stand the thought your rotting body when you are buried under the earth, or you are able to say: 'I don't want to rot, please burn me!' then, you will be allowing the flowers of freedom to blossom. Your strength will spring from your scattered weaknesses and with your common humanity you will fight against the ills erected as royal edifices over dunes of silence.

I

He was a magnificent man with hands that smiled at anyone who knew how to look at them. His long fingers and the beauty of his gestures evoked poetry. But what made you dream was the rhythmic lilt in the tone of his voice and its ability to both speak and empathise.

He had an unusual way of looking at you and a unique way of carrying himself. His whole force lay in his neck.

He lived in one of those houses with a pointed roof, white windows and red brick walls. A small garden ran down to the road.

The man was rich. Rich in his life. Rich in his family. You could hear the children's laughter fill the atmosphere and decorate the home. This was a world apart.

They met at the airport. She had travelled a long way and he came to pick her up as planned. On the way to the house, he pointed out the city's monuments. She admired their beauty but did not say much.

When he opened the door, she found the house infused with joy. She greeted everyone while he went to deposit her luggage in one of the rooms. That evening, the food was prepared with particular care. They had brought out a white tablecloth.

She immediately liked her room. The bed was comfortable. There were green houseplants standing on the floor and a window overlooked the garden. She noticed a barbecue outside. A child's bicycle leant against a tree.

The next day they arranged to eat outdoors. Some friends came over to join them. It was a beautiful day with the sun shining high in the sky. As she watched him light the fire, she knew that she was going to love him.

She craved for him every day. At night after closing the door, when she was on her own, she could hear sounds drifting from the room above. She listened attentively to their footsteps and she could hear taps running and the bath water draining away. When sleep eluded her, she would read until she dropped off, the pages still open.

She spent those days walking about in the city, and watching him busy in his workshop. She loved to watch him in silence, watch the agility of his hands as they handled the wood, caressing it and moulding it into multiple shapes.

One morning she wrote the following words on a piece of paper which she handed to him: 'I'm desperately in love with you.' On reading it, he burst out laughing and she knew she had won.

After that, everything happened quickly. At first they saw each other alone in town. Then, they spent the afternoons together. Every evening they arrived home separately. On occasions he would reach the house before her and, at other times, she would. Her heart would always leap when, on approaching the house, she found his car parked in front of the gate.

Often, from her little room, she could hear what sounded like loud voices, which would startle her from sleep and make her temples throb like drums. She thought she could hear heavy footsteps coming down the staircase and that, at any moment, the door would burst open ...

However, the evenings were quiet. The shouting was coming from the television. The warm nights pearled the sheets in sweat.

As time was in no hurry, she busied herself helping the children with their homework. She would pore over it making corrections and reading exercise books covered in childish scrawls. Sometimes, she would go on walks with his wife. They were both fond of nature and spent long hours admiring the flowers, resplendent in the summer sunshine.

As time went by over the weeks that passed, *they* became close. They planned meals together and shared the chores. They seemed like friends.

But one day, she had had enough of the whole sickening situation. Sleepless nights assailed her. She had no idea where to turn. She had to leave this house and never return. The town had become a prison and her visit a complete failure. She felt trapped, diminished, hurt. She could no longer put up with the lonely nights. She had had enough of those smiles to which she could not respond, tired of not being able to demonstrate how she felt.

She decided to make this their last date. In the hotel room, they bade each other farewell.

Why on earth did it have to be on that particular day? Why on earth did his wife have to see them leaving that place?

It looks as though the house is now up for sale. She has won the divorce and she gets to keep the children.

II

It was a sordid affair. You were told not to go back there. You should have moved away from that town or neighbourhood. Why repeat the same thing? What were you hoping for? You knew deep inside that there was nothing to be gained, that all had been said, and that, at the end of it all, you were well and truly past the best of it. Anyway, what good would it do you? You had a choice.

It was a sordid affair right from the start. Some unlikely love story that would come to nothing. He came, you saw him, and it did not work. It was over, so why did you go back?

You told yourself, 'We'll see ... we'll be friends.' However, the only thing that remained as before was the tension, this floating lie. The memory that had no urge to fade.

For you, of course, it was spent. Sometimes, you remembered, but things were no longer the same. The days had changed. Even the city seemed insipid with its white buildings and well-manicured gardens.

You drifted through time as though your sleep was crumbling. You lost faith. What haunted you was the waiting. Tomorrow, everything would start all over again. You would be back and then there would be nothing. Nothing at all.

The waiting was tough. Intolerable. When the other one came, it felt like a plunge into the sea. You felt a breeze blowing. Your heart surged. A flicker still lingered, after all.

But you had been told: it was a sordid affair. No longer room for fine sentiments. Just a time of resentment. Harsh words uttered. Disappointments.

You see, you should never have returned. There are no fresh mornings, just torpid nights.

Sometimes, you feel as though it had never really happened, that all that had been something else. You wanted it to be just the two of you. But you see, right from the start, it was a sordid affair.

III

Such a strong desire, that it burned my house, ravaged all my fields, and extended all the way to the forest. All that was left was the strong pounding of my heart. The future had deleted that page.

Nothing existed but this moment, this festive atmosphere. Garlands hung on the sky walls. Nothing, but my spirit moving up a notch to another story that had nothing to do with ours, the kind of tale whose source is unknown.

It reminded you of those stormy nights caught in the rain. The glistening sound of the first drops; then, after that, it felt like a downpour sweeping everything in its way, the bending trees, the fleeing shadows, and the smell of the earth.

Anyway, tomorrow could have been a fine day. It could have been a day spent at the seaside with the sun soothing the skin. You would have found me beautiful, and I would have told the winds my dreams of a thousand and one nights.

IV

I remember that laughter which had my soul in stitches. It was like the luminous fresh rain that banished all boredom, the fleeting days, and the winter of the heart.

All I wanted was to hang on to what was beautiful but terrible thoughts keep knocking on my memory; the kinds of thoughts that are best discarded. I keep remembering the night when we spoke, when words were finding it hard to escape my lips and each syllable hampered the clarity of meaning. I asked you questions that needed an answer. And each time the sentences were punctuated by silence. A hurricane in my chest.

I cannot stop thinking that life might have missed a step, and that something was wrong. Strong words uttered too late, hurled into space. Lost for all time.

V

I must leave. You see, I want a different world. Things have changed. I search for you and all I find is your shadow. All of a sudden, your scent is too strong. Your estranged body has lost its heat.

Today I am waiting at an airport where most of the travellers are couples. I have the whole afternoon ahead of me. The plane is delayed. I have lost all track of time.

I am dressed in my nice outfit, and I am wearing the earrings you bought me. I shift my ring to another finger. There, at the tip of the horizon, at another airport, someone is waiting for me.

VI

A ghetto. In a large city in the United States of America. Washington DC. A black man. He must get out of it ... At all costs.

I read in the papers that a man killed his whole family. Cut each one up into small pieces: father, mother and younger sister. *This is a bad neighbourhood. Mauvais quartier.*

The bus is filthy. The seats are torn. In the street, young men hang about waiting. For what? They seem ... not very ... sort of, poor.

In the women's toilet at Howard University, I figured out the graffiti: *My man is a freak, My nigger is hot.*

In Washington, squirrels hopping about in the city centre take me by surprise. They are the hope of a still beautiful city. Every morning, a bird perches on the windowsill. It has a blue tail.

The parks are covered in a thick lawn; the gardens are in bloom. A black man passes by, a radio glued to his ear. He is listening to WHUR. This is music country. I shop, eat,

sleep, think in music. Michael Jackson's 'Thriller', Donna Summer's 'She Works Hard for the Money', ring in my head.

I am afraid of getting fat. The ice-creams are gigantic, and cornflakes honey-coated. Canned laughter and applause on the box.

Washington is peaceful. You can occasionally hear the siren of an ambulance wailing on deserted Sunday streets. A helicopter hovers over the area. Its searchlights slice the darkness. They are looking for a man.

The city seems beautiful. The White House is white. Dozens more drug dealers have been locked up: grass, cocaine, heroin.

Bus 36 takes me home.

VII

There are no frontiers.

VIII

Muddy, muddy Macory. I see snotty-nosed kids tumbling about streets covered in black mud. I see trousers rolled up, shoes held in hands, wrappers raised to the knee. I see bare feet, dirtied by the battered earth. Taxis are immobilised in the middle of pools of water.

I see a group of children waiting for cars to get stuck. Their torsos are bare and the rain waters them like wild plants.

Muddy, muddy Macory. I see a city suffering from its ills. I see the compounds, eating places, bars, prostitutes, bad guys.

I see a woman making aloco. The oil, hot. The plantains turn brown. Her feet are covered in dirt. Smoke stings her eyes. A kid waits his turn. He has five francs. That can buy you three alocos.

An Abogi boils water next to a table where pieces of bread are displayed. Two men sit eating in silence.

I see a dog. He is covered in fleas. He rummages in the garbage.

It gets dark. I see a man bathing, his back glimmering in the shadow like a climbing liana. His vigorous gestures make the water resound in countless splashes.

The Anagos have lit their hurricane lamps. The market looks like an assembly of sorcerers.

It is warm and dark and I think of Akissi.

Being pregnant is not something she had contemplated. It is too late now. She must conceal it. In the compound she has to ignore the women's probing eyes. These do not bother her as much as her mother's penetrating glare that pierces her thoughts and invades her sleep.

Every day she can feel her breasts swelling, her whole body transform. She has become a different person. She does not understand this thing, which has lodged itself in her, draining all her energies. She is not ready for this.

The local nurse had proved to be quite incompetent. He had promised her that the injections would return her body to its normal state but nothing had happened.

The place that her friend told her about is not hard to find. It is a shack erected in the middle of a disused sawmill. You can still smell sawdust floating in the air. The city sounds seem to resonate from far away. She puts her hand in her pocket and clutches the borrowed money tightly in her fingers. She will not need to speak to the man. All she has to do is hand over the bundle of crumpled notes.

Evening falls. She looks at the darkening sky. Around her, the faces of the waiting women are stony masks. She sits down. When her turn comes, she gets up without a word.

She cannot see very well. The room looks dirty. She is assailed by the smell of blood. The freshness of the harmattan has faded. The man's hands are moist and precise.

The pain is blinding. Profound. She gets up. Her head reels. She throws up.

Muddy, muddy Macory. I see the neighbourhood gangs. These boys have already turned into men. Their names are Hendrix, Pepito, Johnny, and they have a small band.

IX

You should listen to those whose voices remain unheard although the wisdom they carry is shaped by their closeness to the earth. No refined language but the pace of life at a gallop refashions outmoded images, well-worn phrases, and ways of thinking that are out of date.

There is a story in each of us. Listen, somebody is speaking:

It is three o'clock. I will be late. I have just half an hour to get across town. This bus not arriving will get me in trouble. Rehearsals tire me. It is the same every day, at the same time. Today it is the second act. I go on stage. I represent the people. Symbolically. I do many things. I till. I fish. I cast my net high. I hunt. I dance. The drum beats loudly and rhythmically. My feet step in time. Chest stiffened, neck arched. Then, 'Stop,' my arms are

stretched outwards like a cross. The hero is fighting for me, against the monarch.

I do not really understand everything. He often explains all the acts to us, though. We also discuss things in groups. Still, I don't understand.

It is hot. I am dripping with sweat. My head aches. I will miss the warming-up exercises. He must pay me back my bus-fare. I have to tell Him about my accommodation problems. I do not want to live in this compound any more. It's too noisy. The toilet door is broken and it stinks.

The area is huge yet I don't know anybody. People come here for sleeping. In the morning, when the sun rises, the bus stop looks like a market place.

When I think of the last play we performed, it hurts. It is very depressing. I don't feel like going to rehearsals. If it wasn't for Him, I would stop going. He is counting on all of us, though. Yesterday He told us not to worry, that we were professionals and that our time will come. He said, 'Don't worry, just keep playing so that at least the hire of the room can be paid.'

Me, I just wanted to cry. When I look at the others, they look like they are about to cry also. After all that work! The room was empty. Only three rows full. We waited until 9.15, then 9.30 and then 10 o'clock. Somebody came to the door and asked, 'Hey, is it going to begin or not?'

Then He said: 'We have to perform. It is okay. That will teach you to perform no matter what the circumstances. That's how you will gain experience.' But me, my throat was tight, and when the curtain opened, I felt like I was going to die. I felt unable to move. But in the end, I performed. We played, the people laughed and that made me a bit pleased. They clapped. They were happy.

We too were happy in the end. He gave us a bit of money, which He asked that we share out amongst ourselves. After that, we went to talk to the spectators. I like that. They asked us questions. Some of them were kind.

As for me, I was speaking to a girl. She asked me if being an actor was tough. Then all of a sudden, we heard shouting. I thought that the people were just messing about, but the shouting went on for a long time and it was even impossible for us to go on talking. We went to see what was happening. Even me, I was shocked by what I saw. Two youths sat on the ground, completely naked except for their underwear. They were the ones we could hear screaming, yelling. They were putting their hands on their heads to stop the stick from hitting them on the shoulders and backs. One of them was shouting: 'Forgive us, sir, forgive us.' The beating got harder and harder. The other one was crying and his mouth was twisted as he kicked his feet about. The girl standing next to me asked:

'But what's going on? Why are you beating them?'

He turned suddenly and looked at her straight.

'They are thugs. Thieves! They were caught breaking into a car in the parking area. They stole everything: papers, radio, cassettes. Everyone is scared now. That is why nobody comes to the theatre any more!' But the girl went on when He began hitting them again:

'Stop it! You're going to injure them!'

'Don't stick your nose in things that don't concern you, it's none of your business!'

The girl made a face and left. We too felt sorry for them because He was so big and strong. But He kept whacking them, and there is nothing we could do. He was angry and you could tell that no matter what we said, He was going to take it out on the two youths. Somebody went to call the police. We stood around Him and begged for mercy on behalf of the thieves. He got angry again. He whacked them harder. Towards one o'clock in the morning, the police came. He went with them to report the robbery.

It is hot. That bus is not coming. If the new play works, that will be great. That should make a hit of money. As you know, acting is not a real job. One day you are lucky and another day you are not. I love it but it is not a real job. What is good about it is that we get to travel. We perform around the country. That way, I know many towns. Sometimes we stay in hotels and sometimes, we stay in people's houses. He said that maybe we would go to France one day. France ... I have seen it in the cinema and in television, but that will be great, if we go to France. I will buy lots of stuff. They say you can find all sorts of things over there. Then we can earn some money. I know a guy who made it is an actor in Paris. I saw a picture of him in a magazine the other day. He looked smart and there was a white girl next to him. He had his arm round her shoulder and he was smiling.

My friends say that my acting is good. Anyway, He is happy with me. He says that I am making good progress. I have to keep doing it, no matter what.

I left school early. I did not study to become an actor. I was just hanging around, not doing anything special. One day He called me. At the time, He lived near the police station. I knew Him because I had seen pictures of Him in the papers. I also knew that we are from the same place back home. His village is near my mother's one. Everybody in the neighbourhood knows His name.

His house is always full of people. The drummers from the group sleep at His house. Sometimes there are a few actors there too. Anyway, the place is always crowded. They eat together and if you are around at lunchtime, you can join in the meal too. The girls cook rice and stew. In the morning He gives them money to go to the market.

He writes and directs the plays Himself, and we perform. In town, they say that He is a good producer. When He speaks on television, His French is good. He usually talks with people from the university. They say that He is a revolutionary and that the plays we perform say bad things about the government. We always get into trouble. At times, when rehearsals finish, we are not even sure if we are going to perform or not.

One day, after we had performed at the theatre just three times, the minister called Him. After that, we could not perform any more. He got angry. There were pictures of Him in the newspapers and He spoke on the radio. We had to stop the performing. That year, we did not do a thing. He called us and told us that we had nothing to fear and that if there were any problems, He would deal with them. He asked us to stay at home. We will see what will happen in a few weeks' time.

Things were much better when His wife was around. She was kind. She always gave good advice. She knew everything that went on, but she hated it that the house was always full with people. One day she came back from work and kicked everyone who was there out

of the house. Because of this, He went off to stay at His brother's house for one month.

I agree with what His wife did, although it is not a good thing to kick people out like that. I would personally never go to live with married people. It causes too much palava. Now because His wife is gone away, the house belongs to everybody. They never lock the door. You can come and go, as you like. If He is not around, you can stay. In any case, there is nothing to steal. He has a TV, but it does not work.

So, the day when he called me and asked me whether I wanted to act, I said, 'Yes.' That is how I got involved. In the play, I represent the people. My hands are stretched in the form of a cross. Symbolically. The hero is fighting for me. Fighting against the monarch.

X

We must be living in a squalid century. He begs because he is an albino. Another has drawn his sleeve well back in order to show his stump to effect. He also wears shorts to let people see his rotten leg.

The shop fronts light up the subdued city. The night hides its boredom behind blinding neon lights. You want a classical round watch with a leather strap and there is no shortage of choice. I am dazzled.

This must be a century that is ill at ease. My friend wants to die. Several days pass without my seeing her, and on my return, I tell her, 'You shouldn't take things so seriously. Life is not a soap opera like *Dallas*. You must learn to cope.'

Sometimes I wonder: 'Why must we make the same mistakes as our parents and grandparents? We play Russian roulette with our lives, as if we have nothing to lose.'

Time moves anti-clockwise and somersaults backwards. Will our children be able to avoid our mistakes? Will they know how to judge us?

XI

Give me a few more days and you will see what I will do. The same thing. I feel it already. I have seen it in his eyes, in his hand, the way he walks and the way he smiles. I already know it.

If time was on our side, we would have smashed down walls, forced doors open, ripped roofs and shattered windows. Rain would have soaked the soil and the wind would have howled in the middle of the ruins.

I felt it in the way he speaks and in the force which draws me to him. The call extends way beyond the mountains, and beyond the seas. It is like a powerful drum deafening my body.

But today, time is not on our side and days elude us. Our lives run on parallel tracks ...

Would you have desired me if we had walked similar paths?

XII

The story of misery recounts itself. Years pass by and nothing changes. It is almost always the same old never-ending tale. Dirty, muddy roads and blackened walls.

I want to talk about the death of a pregnant woman in that suffocating part of the city. The architect had not been entirely honest and the contractor was negligent. It was in low-cost housing. Gas had built up in the plumbing and travelled up the toilet pipes and into the houses.

Did you know that Turkish toilets could kill? Why Turkish and not Chinese ones? Those WC things kill. I can prove it: my wife is dead.

The husband in tears says: 'We live in a world where we can tell neither head nor tail. We live in a world that jeers at you and proffers insults, an incestuous world that robs you of hope. I tell you my wife died in that stagnant neighbourhood. You'll never have me believe that the gods' wrath caused it!'

The buses are so full of passengers they have nearly reached bursting point. People are warned through the television: 'Beware of men who claim to multiply banknotes. They are charlatans. They will steal your money and fade into thin air.'

Abortions are illegal. You will get to learn. Young girls, muttering inaudible words, contort their bodies on the hospital floor. One of them looks especially young. When a nurse passes in the corridor, her groans grow louder.

Someone told me the following story, which I will recount to you as I heard it.

[...]

Translated from the French by Wangfū wa Goro
