

The Icarus Girl

Helen Oyeyemi

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Extract

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Alone I cannot be –
For Hosts do visit me –
Recordless Company . . .

Emily Dickinson

I

1

‘Jess?’

Her mother’s voice sounded through the hallway, mixing with the mustiness around her so well that the sound almost had a smell. To Jess, sitting in the cupboard, the sound of her name was strange, wobbly, misformed, as if she were inside a bottle, or a glass cube, maybe, and Mum was outside it, tapping.

I must have been in here too long –

‘Jessamy!’ Her mother’s voice was stern.

Jessamy Harrison did not reply.

She was sitting inside the cupboard on the landing, where the towels and other linen were kept, saying quietly to herself, *I am in the cupboard.*

She felt that she needed to be saying this so that it would be real. It was similar to her waking up and saying to herself, *My name is Jessamy. I am eight years old.*

If she reminded herself that she was in the cupboard, she would know exactly where she was, something that was increasingly difficult each day. Jess found it easier not to remember, for example, that the cupboard she had hidden in was inside a detached house on Langtree Avenue.

It was a small house. Her cousin Dulcie’s house was quite a lot bigger, and so was Tunde Coker’s. The house had three bedrooms, but the smallest one had been taken over and

cheerily cluttered with books, paper and broken pens by Jess's mum. There were small patches of front and back garden which Jess's parents, who cited lack of time to tend them and lack of funds to get a gardener, both readily referred to as 'appalling'. Jess preferred cupboards and enclosed spaces to gardens, but she liked the clumpy lengths of brownish grass that sometimes hid earthworms when it was wet, and she liked the mysterious plants (weeds, according to her father) that bent and straggled around the inside of the fence.

Both the cupboard and the house were in Cranbrook, not too far from Dulcie's house in Bromley. In Jess's opinion, this proximity was unfortunate. Dulcie put Jess in mind of a bad elf – all sharp chin and silver-blond hair, with chill blue-green lakes for eyes. Even when Dulcie didn't have the specific intention of smashing a hole through Jess's fragile peace, she did anyway. In general, Jess didn't like life outside the cupboard.

Outside the cupboard, Jess felt as if she was in a place where everything moved past too fast, all colours, all people talking and wanting her to say things. So she kept her eyes on the ground, which pretty much stayed the same.

Then the grown-up would say: 'What's the matter, Jess? Why are you sad?' And she'd have to explain that she wasn't sad, just tired, though how she could be so tired in the middle of the day with the sun shining and everything, she didn't know. It made her feel ashamed.

'Jessamy!'

'I am in the cupboard,' she whispered, moving backwards and stretching her arms out, feeling her elbows pillowed by thick, soft masses of towel. She felt as if she were in bed.

A slit of light grew as the cupboard door opened and her mother looked in at her. Jess could already smell the stain of thick, wrong-flowing biro ink, the way it smelt when the pen

went all leaky. She couldn't see her mum's fingers yet, but she knew that they would be blue with the ink, and probably the sleeves of the long yellow T-shirt she was wearing as well. Jess felt like laughing because she could see only half of her face, and it was like one of those *Where's Spot?* books. Lift the flap to find the rest. But she didn't laugh, because her mum looked sort of cross. She pushed the door wider open.

'You were in here all this time?' Sarah Harrison asked, her lips pursed.

Jess sat up, trying to gauge the situation. She was getting good at this.

'Yeah,' she said hesitantly.

'Then why didn't you answer?'

'Sorry, Mummy.'

Her mother waited, and Jessamy's brow wrinkled as she scanned her face, perplexed. An explanation was somehow still required.

'I was thinking about something,' she said, after another moment.

Her mum leaned on the cupboard door, trying to peer into the cupboard, trying, Jess realised, to see her face.

'Didn't you play out with the others today?' she asked.

'Yeah,' Jessamy lied. She had just caught sight of the clock. It was nearly six now, and she had hidden herself in the landing cupboard after lunch.

She saw her mum's shoulders relax and wondered why she got so anxious about things like this. She'd heard her say lots of times, in lowered tones, that maybe it wasn't right for Jessamy to play by herself so much, that it wasn't right that she seemed to have nothing to say for herself. In Nigeria, her mother had said, children were always getting themselves into mischief, and surely that was better than sitting inside reading and staring into space all day. But her father, who was English and insisted that things were different here, said it was more or less normal behaviour and that she'd grow

out of it. Jess didn't know who was right; she certainly didn't feel as if she was about to run off and get herself into mischief, and she wasn't sure whether she should hope to or not.

Her mother held out a hand and, grasping it, Jess reluctantly left her towel pillows and stepped out on to the landing. They stood there for a second, looking at each other, then her mother crouched and took Jessamy's face in her hands, examining her. Jess held still, tried to assume an expression that would satisfy whatever her mother was looking for, although she could not know what this was.

Then her mum said quietly, 'I didn't hear the back door all day.'

Jessamy started a little. 'What?'

Her mum let go of her, shook her head, laughed. Then she said, 'How would you like for us to go to Nigeria?'

Jess, still distracted, found herself asking: 'Who?'

Sarah laughed. 'Us! You, me and Daddy!'

Jess felt stupid. 'Ohhhhh,' she said. 'In an aeroplane?'

Her mum, who was convinced that this was the thing to bring Jessamy out of herself, smiled. 'Yes! In an aeroplane! Would you like that?'

Jess began to feel excited. To Nigeria! In an aeroplane! She tried to imagine Nigeria, but couldn't. Hot. It would be hot.

'Yeah,' she said, and smiled.

But if she had known the trouble it would cause, she would have shouted 'No!' at the top of her voice and run back into the cupboard. Because it all **STARTED** in Nigeria, where it was hot, and, although she didn't realise this until much later, the way she felt might have been only a phase, and she might have got better if only (*Oh, if only if only if only, Mummy*) she hadn't gone.

Jess liked haiku.

She thought they were incredible and really sort of terrible. She felt, when reading over the ones she'd written herself, as if she were being punched very hard, just once, with each haiku.

One day, Jess spent six hours spread untidily across her bedroom floor, chin in hand, motionless except for the movement of her other hand going back and forth across the page. She was writing, crossing out, rewriting, fighting with words and punctuation to mould her sentiment into the perfect form. She continued in the dark without getting up to switch on a light, but eventually she sank and sank until her head was on the paper and her neck was stretching slightly painfully so that she could watch her hand forming letters with the pencil. She didn't sharpen the pencil, but switched to different colours instead, languidly patting her hand out in front of her to pick up a pencil that had rolled into her path. Her parents, looking in on her and seeing her with her cheek pressed against the floor, thought that she had fallen asleep, and her father tiptoed into the room to lift her into bed, only to be disconcerted by the gleam of her wide-open eyes over the top of her arm. She gave no resistance to his putting her into bed and tucking her in, but when her father checked on her again after three hours or so, he found that she had noiselessly relocated herself back on the floor, writing in the dark. The haiku phase lasted a week before she fell ill with the same quietness that she had pursued her interest.

When she got better, she realised she didn't like haiku any more.

In the departure lounge at the airport, Jess sat staring at her shoes and the way they sat quietly beside each other, occasionally clicking their heels together or putting right heel to left toe.

Did they do that by themselves?

She tried to not think about clicking her heels together, then watched her feet to see if the heels clicked independently. They did. Then she realised that she had been thinking about it.

When she looked about her, she noticed that everything was too quiet. Virtually no one was talking. Some of the people she looked at stared blankly back at her, and she quickly swivelled in her seat and turned her attention on to her father. He was reading a broadsheet, chin in hand as his eyes, narrowed with concentration behind the spectacle lenses, scanned the page. He looked slightly awkward as he attempted to make room for the paper across his knees; his elbows created a dimple in the paper every time he adjusted his position. When he became aware of her gaze, he gave her a quick glance, smiled, nudged her, then returned to his reverie. On the bench opposite her sat an immense woman wearing the most fantastical traditional dress she had ever seen. Yellow snakes, coiled up like golden orange peel, sprang from the beaks of the vivid red birds with outstretched wings which soared across the royal-blue background of the woman's clothing. Jess called it *eero ahty booby* whenever she tried to imitate her mum's pronunciation of it. Sometimes, when her mum was having some of her friends around, she would dress up in traditional costume, tying the thick cloth with riotous patterns around her head like a turban, looping it over her ears. She would put on the knee-length shirt with the embroidered scoop neck, and let Jess run her fingers over the beautiful stitching, often gold, silver or a tinselly green. Then her mum would run her fingers over the elaborate embroidery herself, and smile, turning her head from side to side as she regarded her reflection in the bedroom mirror. *Iro ati buba*, she would say, lapsing from her English accent into the broad, almost lilting Yoruba one. *This is iro ati buba*. Then she would

wrap the longest, widest sheet of dyed cloth around her waist, over the bottom half of the scoop-necked top, and fold it over once, twice, three times, her fingers moving across the material with the loving carelessness of one who could dress this way in the dark. Her mum, standing smiling in the bedroom, her costume so bright it seemed to stretch the space between the walls.

The thought made Jess smile as she sat waiting with everyone else, looking at this woman, who stared back at her, her small eyes squinting out from their folds of flesh, the fluorescent lighting giving her skin an odd, flat finish, as if the dark brown was catching light and not throwing it out again. Jess kept her eyes fixed on the woman, caught by her gaze, gradually growing frightened, as if somehow she could not look away or let this woman out of her sight. Would that be dangerous, to *not* look while being looked at?

On the plane, Jess threw a tantrum.

It was Nigeria. That was the problem.

Nigeria felt ugly.

Nye. Jeer. Reece. Ah.

It was looming out from across all the water and land that they had to cross in the aeroplane, reaching out for her with spindly arms made of dry, crackling grass like straw, wanting to pull her down against its beating heart, to the centre of the heat, so she would pop and crackle like marshmallow. She had been reading about Nigeria for the past month, and her excitement had grown so much that she had nearly succumbed to that peculiar febrile illness of hers again, but recovered just in time for the Yellow Fever and Hepatitis C injections that she needed. The anti-malaria tablets were disgusting, coating her tongue like thick, sickly chalk.

It was the combination of the two white pills and the leering idea of her mother's country that made her begin to struggle and thrash, screaming, half-dangling head first out of the seat, nearly choking on her seat belt, fighting off her mother's hands as she snaked herself away from the little chalk circles. Inside her head, she could hear her skin blistering, could almost feel it, and she tried to outscreeam the sound. She could hear herself. She felt other people looking, heard people stirring, muttering, and felt good to be making this sharp, screeching, hurting noise. Yet some part of her was sitting hunched up small, far away, thinking scared thoughts, surprised at what was happening, although this was not new. She panted as she shook off her father's restricting hands. Sweat was beading on her forehead and her eyelids, and she felt the prickly feeling at the back of her eyelids and that familiar sensation of her eyes almost involuntarily rolling upwards on to her head. It was a kind of peace.

Then her mother, who for a while now had been speaking in a pleading monotone, said something with a sharp buzz, something that she didn't quite catch, and slapped her hard. It was oddly like a cooling wind on her skin, the sting that remained when her mother's hand had left her, and she stopped struggling and hung limp from the side of her seat, her mouth a small, open 'o', until her father, murmuring reproachfully, settled her properly into the aeroplane seat.

He looked at her, dabbed at her cheek with his handkerchief. 'Never mind about the pills for today,' he said quietly and put them back into her pillbox.

After a while the minutes sank into each other, and Jess sat still, her eyes following the two air hostesses up and down the aisles. Beside her, she felt her father's heavy, musky-smelling presence, the weight of his arm pressing along hers, heard his shallow breathing as he slept. An air hostess whose name badge said 'Karen' smiled quickly at

Jessamy, and sleepy as she was, Jess somehow understood that this woman, her jaunty red cap perched atop a black bun of hair, was not smiling at her in particular, but at a child, at the idea of a child. Because she was an air hostess. Smiling at a child. That was what she was supposed to do. Jess gave a drowsy smile in return.

Jess fell asleep slowly, her hand reaching for her dad's. She closed her eyes completely, and the darkness was warm and quiet, like a bubble lifting her higher even than the aeroplane.

Her father reached out and enfolded her hand in his far bigger one. She turned her head a fraction in his direction, opening her eyes into slits. His dishevelled, sandy hair obscured his forehead, and his greeny-blue eyes were half-open; they looked darker with the overhead light switched off. He had taken off his glasses, and she could just about make out the two small indents they had left on the bridge of his nose. He gave her a disorientated, inquisitive smile. *Are you OK, Jessamy? Really OK? I'm worried.* But she was too tired to move her face, and, letting her eyes linger on his face for a few seconds longer, to acknowledge the smile, she closed her eyes again and slept, and dreamed a confusing dream that had people and animals and dancing coloured shapes moving in and out of it.

2

Jess had not expected Nigeria to be this hot.

She stood at the luggage carousel, holding her mum's hand, trying to ignore the stickiness of her orange and white button-up top. She could feel the sweat collecting into a big drop in the hollow of her back, and wriggled her shoulders a little, wondering if it would drop and splash the floor like water from a bucket.

The heat was emptying her out already.

Two thin, tall men in khaki shorts were helping people to load their luggage off the carousel. Luggage was moving past her in a disorderly line, some of it in big, bulgy plastic bags, striped red and white, some in suitcases and trunks. The men were laughing and calling out to each other in Yoruba, flashing white smiles at each other, sometimes staggering with the force of their laughter.

Her father was standing near the carousel, his hands in his pockets, watching out for their luggage. Another thing she had not expected: she hadn't expected him to seem so . . . well, out of place. His face was wet with perspiration and flushed pink, and even the way that he stood marked him out as different. The people milling around him all glanced pointedly at him as they passed; their glances were slightly longer than usual, but not outright stares – more the kind of look that Jess herself gave when passing a statue or a

painting. The acknowledgement of an oddity. She looked at him, willing him, at least, to look at her.

He didn't.

Her mum smiled at her. There was something in the smile that Jess could only vaguely describe as *careful*.

It was the same smile that she had worn when they had been going through customs. The official behind the desk had a neat moustache and goatee beard, and his expression had been polite; in fact, overpolite. So solicitous that his face was immobile, and Jess, looking at him from a short distance beneath the counter, thought that he was somehow making fun of her mother. The man had flicked his gaze over her with the same small smile on his face.

Had he been thinking, who is this woman who has a Nigerian maiden name in a British passport, who stands here wearing denim shorts and a strappy yellow top, with a white man and a half-and-half child? Had her mother also put herself in his place, looked at herself from his side of the counter and found herself odd and wanting?

Maybe that had been the carefulness in her smile.

All that the eight-year-old Jess knew was that the smile wasn't a particularly happy one, and that her mother hadn't smiled like that in England.

She felt herself, also, growing careful.

Her mum tugged at her hand, and Jessamy saw a real smile spread across her mother's face, as if she had just remembered sunshine.

'We're going to see Grandpa and your cousins!'

Jess nodded and gave a half-hearted, placebo smile while she thought about this. When she thought of her Nigerian grandfather and cousins, she saw a bustle of people, a multitude, all of them moving so quickly that she couldn't see their faces, and any one of them could be family. Her grandfather would have a walking stick. Would he have a walking stick? Her mum said that he was very active and

strong, and so suspicious of people that he liked to do things for himself to make sure that they were done properly. He would have grey hair, like her English grandfather, but his hair would be springy and less silver, sprouting like steel wool. But his face – there was none. She felt her lungs constrict and turned her head away from her mum for a second, struggling to breathe in the humid air.

If she couldn't see him, then how would he see her?

Once they were outside, which was only fractionally cooler than the inside, her father had no sooner tipped the man who had helped them with the luggage than several people hurried across the white paving from where they had been lounging against their parked cars. The sun struck everything, bouncing ultra-shiny colours into Jessamy's line of vision, and Jessamy, now silently clutching her father's hand, thought she might begin to scream when she saw the men, some in the loose, flapping gowns worn, she would later learn, by Nigerian Muslims, descending upon her father as if they wished to swallow him up.

'Here, sir! I have very nice car for you here, air-conditioned, right size to take your luggage, now,' one man was bellowing above the din of the others.

'... only 10,000 naira to Ibadan or Ife, or I go take you to Abuja, where there is a Hilton,' pressed another one.

They were surrounded by the folds of clothing, the gesturing hands, the smell of ironed clothes and sweaty bodies. Jess felt as if the heat was intensifying, even though she could only see chinks of sunlight through the gaps in the milling gathering around them. She clutched her father's fingers for dear life, her hands alternately sticking and sliding as the pads of her fingers caught his fingernails.

Her father, standing defensively by his suitcase, darted a confused look at her mother, who quite suddenly took charge and began to outshout them all, speaking rapidly in a mixture of Yoruba and broken English.

‘*Wetin* you be wanting, now? You no go want us to chop? . . . 10,000 naira, *sae* everything is OK, or *ori e ti darun?*’

Both her mother and the people surrounding her began to laugh – mysterious laughter, like a liquid, bubbling wall, leaving Jess and her father drenched with it, but still outside. Jess rubbed her forehead with her free hand and squinted at her mother, who seemed to be transformed by her bargaining, bantering tone, then up at her father, who shrugged, putting his own hand to his face to adjust his glasses, which were slipping down the bridge of his nose.

Minutes later, her mother had selected a driver, and the other hopefuls scattered, grumbling good-naturedly. ‘Daniel, could you help the driver?’ she said, abruptly slipping back into her smooth English accent as she took Jess’s hand again and led her to the long, egg-brown sedan that would take them to Ibadan.

Seeing her mother get into the front seat of the car and slip her sunglasses on, Jess sat in the back seat of the car. She turned her face upwards so the air conditioning cooled her skin, and opened her mouth and gulped loudly, imagining that she was filling up with cold air like a balloon. Then, she looked out of the side window, straight at a man who was leaning against his car, his jaw working as he chewed gum. He was almost impossibly tall and wearing a rough, cotton shirt and a pair of long shorts that reached down to his calves. The light colours contrasted with his skin, and he stood out in gaunt relief against his cream-coloured car, like a paper cut-out. He was looking at her, but in a distracted manner, as if she was something to look at while he waited for something else.

The car rocked downwards as her father loaded his suitcase into the back, and she heard his shoes clicking on the white paving as he began to walk around the car. She carried on looking at the man who had laughed. She even

pressed her fingers against the dusty window and brought her face closer to it, peering at him. He watched her laconically, slapping flies away as he chewed. Her father, puffing slightly, opened the car door and threw himself down on to the seat beside her. 'All right, Jessamy?' he asked, cheerfully, and although she didn't turn from the window, she felt cooler, as if a lone scrap of home had just blown into the car. England, where people who stared at you would shift their eyes away with an embarrassed, smiling gesture if you stared back. England, where people didn't see you, where it was almost rude to, wrong to.

Would her cousins be like this? Would they look at her, then see her, and just not really . . . well, *care*? See her, and leave her looking, trying to see something?

Then, as the driver got into the seat beside her mother and started up the car, chattering in Yoruba, the man suddenly widened his eyes so that the whites seemed enormous and luminous, and gave a short laugh again as she drew away from the window, startled.

Her father fanned himself with a copy of a Nigerian newspaper that he'd bought as they were leaving the airport. The car began to move away. The man in cream mouthed something.

'Mummy,' she said, finally, when the man who had laughed was out of sight and they were moving down a seemingly interminable length of road.

Her mum paused in her conversation with the cab driver. 'Jess?'

'What does oh-yee-bo mean?'

Her mum twisted around in her seat, looking puzzled. 'What?'

'A man just said it to me.'

The cab driver looked into the rear-view mirror and laughed.

‘He probably meant *oyinbo*. It means somebody who has come from so far away that they are a stranger!’

Jess settled back against the leather seat, fiddled with her seat belt.

‘Oh.’

Her father looked up distractedly from a column he was reading about the Nigerian president. ‘That’s a bit of a shabby thing to say . . .’ He looked at Jess and winked, and she smiled at him.

The driver said something in Yoruba.

Her mother, who had pushed her sunglasses on to the top of her head so that they settled on her thick, slightly frizzy hair, seemed restive. When the driver spoke, she looked at him and said, in a slightly sharper tone than usual, ‘I think we should speak in English, so everyone can understand.’

Mr Harrison stamped his feet to applaud his wife’s sense of fair play. ‘Bravo, Sarah!’

He beamed at her, his hair standing on end as usual, and Jessamy smiled too, in preparation for the unifying smile, the smile that they would all be smiling because it was important that they could all understand and share this country too.

It didn’t come.

Her mother turned back in her seat and began a discussion with the driver about several places that she’d used to know in the Lagos area.

In English.