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**Mer
d'Asphalte.**
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Khene.

Over Seas

Peace Adzo Medie

KOFI WAS LOOKING over the whitewashed walls of the Elmina Castle. Three centuries before, he might have seen a row of desperate Africans, shackled together and exiting through the narrow *Door of No Return*. They would have shuffled across the beach and boarded a ship whose crew would have given some of them to the sea and sold the survivors in the Americas. But on that day the beach was teeming with fishermen and fishmongers. Men, their upper bodies chiseled by years of battling the sea, dragged in gigantic nets laden with fish and rubbish while women waited impatiently with deep enamel basins in hand, their eyes trained on the day's catch, poised to haggle with the weary fishermen.

Growing up within walking distance of the castle, he and his older brother, Daniel, had often asked Mr. Koomson, the castle director, to let them into the old brick and limestone structure. Mr. Koomson had always agreed, happy that young Ghanaians were interested in their history. "We are safeguarding all of this for you," he would say each time they asked, as if each time was their first time. They had never bothered to tell him that they didn't come to the castle to see the dark and airless slave dungeons or the bright and airy governor's quarters, but to stand on the rampart overlooking the sea and boyishly fantasize about when they, too, would cross the expanse of foamy water to America. Now as a young man he stood at the same spot, nursing the same dream, but this time Daniel was not with him. Eleven weeks earlier, his brother and seven other men had boarded a pickup truck to Accra, accompanied by a smuggler who had collected all of their meager savings and promised to get them to Spain. Once in Europe, Daniel's plan was to find his way to America. Eleven weeks later, Kofi did not know where his brother was.

They didn't come to the castle to see the dark and airless slave dungeons but to stand on the rampart overlooking the sea and boyishly fantasize about when they, too, would cross the expanse of foamy water to America.

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He heard Mr. Koomson calling him in the distance and hurried down the narrow staircase into the castle's courtyard. The old man, his body gnarled by age, was addressing a group of students who had travelled from Keta to tour the castle. Mr. Koomson preferred that Kofi, instead of the other guides, take students on tours. "You have been coming here since you were a child, who better to show the youth of this country around? The others . . . well, some people here are only interested

Men don't do ashawo, it's only women who are prostitutes. Last night was a friendly encounter; it's called casual sex in the civilized world.

in meeting tourists and making tips," the old man had said in his surprisingly strong voice when Kofi complained about having to lead groups of uninterested and chatty teenagers through the castle.

Kofi knew that the "people" in question was Johnson, a tour guide who had recently resigned from his job at the castle. Johnson had been very popular with the tourists, especially the women; he was one of those men who had facial features that bordered on beautiful and possessed the charms to match. The old man didn't like how Johnson had carried on with foreign visitors to the castle. He had openly flirted with the women and it was rumored that his tours hadn't ended in the castle, but rather in hotel rooms. It was even rumored that the women had paid him for the extra services that he had provided and passed on his telephone number to their friends, who contacted him as soon as they landed in Ghana.

Kofi had known for a long time that Johnson was indeed sleeping with tourists for money. The carefree young man had once invited him to a local seaside hotel where he was spending the day with three Belgian women. Johnson had called Kofi aside when the sun had begun to set and whispered to him in Fante, "You take the short one and I will take the other two." Kofi had looked at him aghast. He had a steady girlfriend, Nancy, to whom he had always been faithful, and although he wouldn't admit it for fear of being ridiculed, the thought of having sex with a white woman scared him a little. He had seen enough pornographic films in the video centers that he had visited when he skipped school to know that naked white women looked a lot like naked black women, except that they weren't black. Yet, he still found the white form exotic and that exoticness intimidated him.

Sensing Kofi's hesitation, Johnson had begun to mock him, "*Chrife*, are you afraid?" Kofi had bristled. He didn't like Johnson mocking his manhood and he certainly didn't like the worldly young man making

fun of him because he attended church twice a week and sang in the choir.

“OK, I will take her,” Kofi had said, trying to project a confidence that he did not have, regretting his decision before he had even made it. The welcoming smile of the short woman had done nothing to ease his anxiety.

There had been a fifty-dollar bill on the nightstand when he woke up the next morning, and the woman was gone. Still groggy from sleep, he had reached out to touch the crisp note but then abruptly pulled back his hand as if the money were on fire. Even after he had washed his face—for the first time in his life over a face basin—he still hadn’t been able to bring himself to touch the bill which appeared to him to be turning brown, the color of dirt, even as it lay on the nightstand. Johnson had entered Kofi’s hotel room unannounced, his lush lips widening into a mischievous smile when he spotted the lone bill.

“Take the money and let’s go, Mr. Koomson will spend the whole day insulting me with his toothless mouth if I go in late,” Johnson had said.

“But Johnson . . . this one is *ashawo*, I can’t take this money.”

“Ah! Kofi *paa*, you are not serious. *Ashawo*? Men don’t do *ashawo*, it’s only women who are prostitutes. Last night was a friendly encounter; it’s called casual sex in the civilized world. You have your fun and if the person wants to show their appreciation by giving you something small, they do. It’s only in this bush that someone will call this prostitution,” Johnson had said with the fluidity of someone who had given this speech before. Kofi had nodded in agreement although he didn’t agree with what Johnson had said.

“If you don’t want it, give it to someone,” the young man had urged him, so Kofi had converted the fifty dollars into cedis and given it to his mother, telling her that it was a tip from a tourist who had visited the castle.

“Your people are being very generous these days,” she had said while carefully knotting the money into the edge of the shorter of the two faded cloths that were tied around her waist. The money would be put toward her medication. She had suffered a stroke after his father’s death that had made it difficult for her to continue selling fish in the central market.

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Halfway through Kofi’s tour with the students from Keta, one of the junior guides ran into the high-ceilinged room that was once the Dutch Reform Church and which overlooked the female slave dungeons.

Gasping for air, the teenage boy announced, “The smuggler is here.”



**Baigneur et
Béton.** ©2012
Rym Khene.

“Where?” Kofi asked, oblivious to the thirty pairs of eyes that were trained on him in search of an explanation for the torrid affair between slavery and Christianity.

“On the bridge, they say he’s on the bridge,” the boy gasped.

In his hurry to get to the bridge, Kofi bumped into the teacher leading the group, who had been following him too closely, and sprinted down the shaky wooden steps. In the courtyard, he saw Mr. Koomson talking to a group of sunburnt tourists, but didn’t stop to reveal the news to the old man. Instead, he ran past the reception, across the moat, and out of the castle’s fence. His heart was beating so loudly that he was sure he would see it hammering in his chest if he looked down. He reached the bridge in two minutes and didn’t have to ask where the smuggler was. On the section of the bridge with the broken railing he saw a small group of people. They were shouting and gesticulating and had encircled a tall man with a long face and three horizontal razor marks on each cheek. Kofi stopped short, small beads of sweat dotted his forehead. That was not the man. That was not the smuggler who had taken Daniel and the other young men away.

“We have caught him, today he will produce our sons,” an old woman, bent over a cane, said to Kofi.

“That’s not him,” Kofi said, more to himself than to her. His heart-beat had slowed.

“They say it was a tall man from the north,” the woman whistled through gaps in her teeth. She was feebly attempting to raise her cane above the angry crowd to hit the man, but was barely able to lift it above her shoulder. Kofi turned away from her and began walking back to the castle, his shoulders slumped. For the first time in a long time, he wished that their father were alive. He would not have allowed Daniel to leave.

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Their father had been a fisherman who worked with the men of their extended family. Every morning before school, Kofi and Daniel would meet him on the beach to pull in the nets. After school, they would walk back to the beach to mend the nets. The white Styrofoam floats on the nets had reminded Kofi of sugar-coated doughnuts, the kind that he imagined he and Daniel would eat three times a day when they made it across the sea to America. When they had a reprieve, they would play in the cavernous frames of canoes that were under construction, frames that were shaped like an upturned whale’s skeleton. They would each pretend that they were the biblical Jonah trapped in the belly of a wooden whale, one that would spit them out on the shores of America where they would drink milk like it were water and eat chicken every day, not only on Christmas. After mending the nets, they would walk home to their mud house with its carelessly thatched roof and sagging fence made out of dried, woven coconut fronds. There, their mother would have an early supper waiting. Supper was usually a ball of *kenkey*, fried fish, and pepper, ground with too little tomato and too much of the tongue-scorching *kpakpo shito*. The boys would wolf down the meal and then set off to the beach where they would play in the surf or visit the castle to plan their voyage to America.

The white Styrofoam floats on the nets had reminded Kofi of sugar-coated doughnuts, the kind that he imagined he and Daniel would eat three times a day when they made it across the sea to America.

Daniel had led the way, audacious, fearless, and immeasurably wise in the eyes of his younger brother. It was he who had first brought up the idea of going to America, where they imagined everything to be different, perfect.

“The canoes cannot take us all the way so we have to find another way to get there,” Daniel had patiently explained to Kofi, pointing a finger at the horizon, which was reddened by the setting sun.

“We can go by plane,” Kofi had suggested, wanting to sound as intelligent as his older brother.

“Plane? Even if they sell all of us and our crooked house, there won’t be enough money to buy a plane ticket for a flea to go to America!”

Kofi had become crestfallen; he could see his dreams slipping away, the meat and sweets, the new sneakers, the fluffy pillows and soft mattress. He had feared that they would always eat *kenkey* and bony fish, walk barefoot, and sleep on mats on the mud floor of their house. They would never live like the children they saw in the films that were screened in the thatched video centers, children with comfortable houses and beautiful yellow buses to take them to school. They would never be as plump as the Americans who came to the castle with their stylish blue jeans and their cash-filled waist bags. Cash with which he imagined they could buy anything they wanted, even the whole of Ghana.

“Don’t worry, we will find a way,” Daniel had tried to comfort a dejected Kofi.

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They had continued to plan their departure. Every once in a while they would share their plans with some of the neighborhood children, sometimes Johnson, but it was usually just the two of them. Their time together was reduced when Daniel quit school to work full-time

They would never live like the children they saw in the films that were screened in the thatched video centers, children with comfortable houses and beautiful yellow buses to take them to school.

with their father, joining the adults on their overnight fishing trips. Kofi would stand on the beach, his feet sinking into the gritty sand, and watch as the men sailed off, their canoes forming a perfect semi-circle on the horizon. He would be back there early the next morning, waiting to welcome his brother and help the crew unload the night’s catch.

When he turned fourteen, his father had also asked him to drop out of school to join the crew. On one of his visits to the castle, he had told Mr. Koomson about his father’s decision. The next day, upon his return from school, he had been surprised to find Mr. Koomson sitting on a bench in front of their house, talking with his parents. The man, his shirt and trousers crisply ironed and his springy Afro parted neatly at the side, had looked out of place in their dirt yard. Kofi had gone indoors and had not come outside until his father called him.

“So you went to report me to that book man?” he had asked angrily, his face scrunching up so that his nose was almost on the same level as his eyes.

“No Papa, he just asked me about school and I told him. I wasn’t reporting you,” Kofi had responded nervously, fearing a beating.

“I wasn’t *fii fii fii fii*, vanish from my face! You think that because that man sits in that ruin everyday speaking through his nose to white people, he knows better than me? How is school going to help you become a fisherman? Are you going to read a book to the fish to convince them to jump out of the sea into your canoe?” he had bellowed in rapid Fante.

Kofi had remained silent, looking to his mother for help. He had been relieved when his father stood up and stormed off, scattering the chickens that were pecking in the dirt and muttering something about the burden of education. He had also been happily surprised when his father gruffly told him to “register again” when the term ended. He would later learn that Mr. Koomson had taken over the cost of his education and was also compensating his father for the labor that was lost when he was in school. Mr. Koomson had continued to pay Kofi’s fees after his father died of cerebral malaria two years later, until the boy completed senior secondary school.

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The false alarm raised over the supposed sighting of the smuggler left Kofi even more dejected than before. Instead of joining his colleagues for lunch as he usually did, he sat alone on bricks stacked in front of the dark, windowless cell to which the Dutch and British had sent belligerent male captives to slowly suffocate to death, and there he ate *waakye* which he had bought from the vendors who sold food on wobbly tables outside the castle’s fence. He missed Johnson, whom he was sure would have known what to do to find Daniel and the other men, and despised himself for sitting and waiting helplessly to hear about his brother’s fate.

Kofi and Daniel’s desire to escape their lives had grown sharper when Johnson had left for America. Before his departure, Johnson had married Yaa, a girl whom he had met in Accra while taking one of his tourists to the airport. The couple didn’t have a church wedding, but Kofi had attended their traditional ceremony. Everyone had remarked on Yaa’s beauty and how perfectly suited she was for Johnson. Kofi had been surprised when, three months after the traditional wedding, Johnson whispered to him that he was getting married.

“Are you forced to have a church wedding?” he had asked, misunderstanding his friend’s announcement.



Marche.
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Khene.

“I don’t mean to Yaa . . . I found someone.” Kofi’s confusion had been plastered on his face.

“I’ve found an American baby who is going to marry me,” Johnson had announced, his eyes twinkling. It turned out that one of the older women to whom he had provided extra services on several occasions had taken a serious liking to him and had been working to get him a visa to travel to America, where they would get married. Johnson had revealed that Yaa had been against the idea until she saw a photograph of the woman in America. According to him, she had laughed for a full five minutes after seeing the photograph and then given him permission to have sex with the woman as often as he liked. He planned to divorce the American and send for Yaa as soon as he got his Green Card.

Mr. Koomson had been elated to see Johnson leave. “That is all he is good for, sleeping with women who are old enough to be his grandmother. I hope that he spends his life changing her diapers.”

Kofi hadn’t told the old man that he, too, wished that he could leave, even if it meant changing an old woman’s diapers. He hadn’t said that he was tired of living from hand to mouth, that he hated watching his mother suffer because they couldn’t afford her medication every month, that he desperately wanted to go to university but knew that, with what he earned, he could never save enough money to pay the tuition. He hadn’t told Mr. Koomson that, since he was a child, he had been convinced that America was the only place where a person like him—who would always be a fisherman’s son in Ghana, a

nobody—could become a somebody. But that evening, as they shared a meal of *banku* and fish dry soup, he had told his brother about Johnson's good fortune. He had seen the fire in Daniel's eyes and the way he had kept nodding, as though grudgingly acknowledging the victory of a competitor he had long underestimated. It was a few weeks after Johnson's departure to America that Daniel had told Kofi about the man who smuggled people to Europe.

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Kofi had disliked and distrusted the lanky man on sight. The man spoke no Fante and very little English. Every other garbled sentence that he had uttered had been punctuated by a wet cough and the indiscriminate ejection of phlegm. Kofi had cringed every time the smuggler smiled; the tribal marks on the man's cheeks resembled cat whiskers, so that every time he smiled, he looked like a grinning, skinny cat. The smuggler had met with eighteen young men, including Kofi, in a beachside bar on a Friday evening and told them about his services. For one thousand dollars—two hundred of which they would pay before their departure—he would take them through Burkina Faso, Mali, Algeria, Morocco, and then across the Mediterranean Sea into Spain. In Spain, they would work to pay off the remaining eight hundred dollars to his partners, and would then be free to continue on their journeys or settle down. It had sounded so easy that all of the young men, except Kofi, had decided on the spot that they would leave with the smuggler.

“If they don't die of thirst in the desert, they will die at the hands of bandits. If the desert doesn't get them, the sea will get them. Whatever happens, they will fail!”

That was until Mr. Koomson heard from the boys, who aggressively sold trinkets to tourists along the castle walls, about the tall stranger who was recruiting young men to take to Europe.

“They will all die,” he had said quietly to Kofi. “If they don't die of thirst in the desert, they will die at the hands of bandits. If the desert doesn't get them, the sea will get them. They will be packed like sardines onto rickety boats with no life jackets and those boats will capsize into the sea. If they manage to set foot in Spain, they will be apprehended by the authorities and deported to Ghana. Whatever happens, they will fail!”

His worst fears confirmed, Kofi had run home to warn Daniel.

“Why do you listen to everything that old man says? Why do you insist on living in his armpit?” Daniel had said when he heard the warning.

“Dan, Mr. Koomson is right, it’s not safe. We have to find another way,” Kofi had insisted, afraid for his brother, afraid of not having a brother.

“What other way? Has an old American woman proposed to you? Should we go with a canoe, or would you prefer that we fly there? Kofi, there is no other way. No one is going to give us a visa to go to America and, even if they did, we don’t have the money to buy tickets to get there; the airlines are not going to accept fish as payment. This is the only way for us. When I get there I will send for you and Mama. This is the only way.”

Kofi had tried to reason with his brother, but the imagined sounds of America had clogged Daniel’s ears. Kofi now loathed the adventurous spirit that he had long admired in his big brother, who had already paid the two hundred dollars—which was almost half of their savings—to the smuggler, and was scheduled to leave in two days. Mr. Koomson’s warning, which he had broadcast to everyone within earshot, had whittled the original seventeen men down to eight.

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He vividly remembered Daniel’s departure. His brother had been sitting in the bed of a pickup truck, pressed against the bodies of his fellow travelers who all wore the looks of men who were going to a dangerous place to search for something beautiful. Daniel had been clutching a small backpack in his lap; their mother had bought it from a secondhand clothing seller in the market, along with the sneakers which had soles that were worn away on one side as though the previous owner had teetered to the right when walking. She had also packed a bottle of *Lucozade*, instructing Daniel to drink it when his energy ran low. Kofi had marveled at her calmness; he had been on the verge of falling apart. He hadn’t gone outside to say goodbye, but had watched them through the window, afraid that he would cry in front of the other men. It was Daniel who had come back into the house to hug him and say goodbye.

His brother had been sitting in the bed of a pickup truck, pressed against the bodies of his fellow travelers who all wore the looks of men who were going to a dangerous place to search for something beautiful.

“You will hear from me soon,” he had said, holding Kofi close.

Daniel had called twice when they reached Accra, and once in the second week when they arrived in Mali, but there had been no more

calls since then. Kofi refused to even think that his brother might have fallen in the desert or lay at the bottom of the sea, as Mr. Koomson had predicted. He knew that, if he allowed those thoughts to bloom, he would be consumed by sadness and his mother would be alone. He wished that he had not participated in building Daniel's fantasies, that he had been satisfied with their lives, that they had never lived by the sea and the promise of possibility that it made to the hopeful souls who looked across it.

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He climbed back up onto the rampart again before he left the castle for the day. Seabirds screeched noisily overhead and the scent of raw fish coated the breeze. He saw the canoes gliding out to sea, flying the flags of various countries, the crews singing songs that had been sung for centuries by his people. He spied his family's canoe, manned by one of his cousins, setting off with the American flag flying at full mast. His mother was waiting for him at home; they had begun to eat supper together out of the same fire-blackened clay *asanka* since Daniel's departure. He retreated to bed after eating, exhausted from a day of answering the repetitive questions posed by three groups of students. The frogs residing in the mangrove swamp behind their house provided a crude lullaby that lured him to sleep.

He was awakened around midnight by the first ring of his cell phone. He waited for it to ring two more times. His girlfriend, Nancy, usually flashed him to say goodnight, hanging up after the second ring. He was careful not to waste her credits by answering the phone when she flashed. Today, when he answered after the third ring, the line crackled for about eight seconds and then went dead. He couldn't see the caller's number because his phone's screen had been cracked when he dropped it during a tour with a group of rambunctious primary school students. Now all that appeared on the screen was a slowly-spreading inky blackness.

The second time, he answered the phone on the first ring, hoping that it wasn't Nancy but not daring to hope that it was Daniel. He stopped breathing when he heard his brother's voice. Daniel sounded so far away.

"Dan?" he exhaled into the phone so loudly that his mother rushed into the room, her cloth loosely tied around her waist, her thin breasts asleep on her stomach.

"I'm here, I'm in Spain," Daniel said.

"Dan?" Kofi said again in disbelief, his throat tightening. His mother yanked the phone from his hand and began to speak to Daniel.

“Heh? You were stuck in the desert?” he heard his mother ask, her voice cracking with emotion. “Did the *Lucozade* help? . . . Camels? . . . And the others? . . . Aye, people are wicked but my God is good!” she said. She reluctantly gave the phone back to Kofi, her face wet with tears.

“I will call you tomorrow,” Daniel said, “I just wanted you and Mama to know that I have arrived.” When Kofi and his mother finally went to bed at dawn, after they had sung praise hymns and stretched their bodies on the floor in thanksgiving, he dreamed about America. He and Daniel were eating sugarcoated doughnuts. 🌐