

MICHELLE YAA ASANTEWA



elijah



Michelle Yaa Asantewa was born in Guyana in 1969. She migrated to the UK when she was 10 to reunite with her mother. Her interest in African traditional practices and cultural identity inspired her Phd thesis on Guyanese Comfa, which includes the novella, *Something Buried in the Yard*. She facilitates Creative Writing Workshops and is editor at Way Wive Wordz Publishing through which her first novel *Elijah* and collection of poems, *The Awakening*, are self-published.

Elijah
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For Ashton

“One of the first things I think young people, especially nowadays, should learn is how to see for yourself and listen for yourself and think for yourself. Then you can come to an intelligent decision for yourself.”

Malcolm X

Part One
London

Chapter 1

Blood. I don't know how you expect this to go down but I'm showing you there's only going to be one outcome. Trust me.

Three boys sprinted down Mitcham Road away from Croydon. Their heads were covered with the hoods of dark sweat tops, making them seem like wavering shadows. It was a summer's night and the sky was on the verge of deepening darkness.

Elijah Lovelace sprinted ahead of the other boys. This was unusual because he was not the fastest runner. Saul Harrison – “Foots” struggled to keep the pace set by Eli. Whilst sprinting and making quick decisions about where next to lead his feet – as well as Foots and Tweeks, Eli remembered to stick to the Code: *never look behind when being pursued*. It was a fear they shared when in Sunday school they learnt of the frightening fate of Lot's wife.

Either side of that lonely road were open fields that invited momentary refuge if foxes

weren't feared. Eli darted into a clearing, trusting that he was noticed only by Foots and Tweeks.

"Naw man – what da fuck was that shit Foots? What was you doing man? What da fuck..." Ishmael Diome, a stump of a boy, didn't seem to have the same insight as Foots and Eli to take time to catch his breath before he spoke, gushing his words between gasps.

"SHUT UP, Tweeks! Just shut the FUCK UP! Man need to THINK." Eli had barely caught his breath and was sitting on a tree stump. His knees were bent with his arms wrapped around them, head shaking from side to side.

For a moment nothing was said. Breathing was not the only sound, however. The road was still busy, buses and cars roared pass and occasionally the boys heard rustling in the trees and cracking of twigs which they assumed were from foxes prowling.

"You think he's dead, blood?" Eli noticed a peculiar deepness in Foots' voice. There was no intonation when he asked the question. It carried no feeling, he thought, and it seemed kind of cold.

“Don’t say that shit man. FUCK! What da FUCK you do that for, blood?” Eli’s heart started pumping faster again. Before Fooks asked the question that disturbed those moments of un-exchanged words Eli had been lost in one of his visionary abstractions. This time he saw himself naked, lying flat on his back looking for the man they said was in the moon. He could never find the man but he never stopped believing he was there.

“E. You think...”

“I ain even know, blood. But we need...” Eli halted his sentence. He shot up from the tree stump as if a sharp instrument had been rammed into his backside. He started to pace a few steps one way, few steps another, grabbing his head and stomach in agitation.

“What’s up blood?” Fooks asked.

“What you still got that shit for, bruv?” Saul and Ishmael looked down to where Eli was pointing, not with finger but eyes.

“SHIT! *Shit*. Fooks what’s wrong with you, bruv?”

“Aw, yeah, yeah, I was gonna dash it still but...” Though there was light subtly streaking into the clearing from the road, Eli could make out that Saul held the knife firmly as if the boy’s blood had glued it to his hand.

Eli didn’t like to repeat himself but Saul seemed reluctant to dash the knife.

“What you waiting for bruv? What’s wrong with you?” Eli knew what was wrong with Foots. He’d started using– ignoring what Eli felt was serious advice from Mr Montana when he had told them – “stick to weed – this shit’ll *fuck you up.*”

“Don’t rush me, bruv.” Foots screwed up his face. Sweat dripped from his forehead. “This is my star, man,” he said eyeing the knife as if it was invested with some magical secret he was curious to understand. “Ma girl give me this...” Eli noticed that as he spoke Foots’ eyes twinkled.

“What fucking girl you talking ‘bout bruv?”

“What fucking girl eh? You think only you can have gyal blood...?” Eli wasn’t short but Saul towered a few inches past his 6’1 stature which was the way he came by the name “Foots.” Saul

squared up to him not for the first time, Eli reminded himself, but he didn't like that he was doing it *now*. Foots still held the knife in his hand. Eli wondered if Foots had gone crazy enough to stab him too. He regretted dashing his piece so soon but that too was their Code. Soon after heat, anything that could link them to beef had to be dashed. Foots knew this. Eli couldn't understand why he still held the knife.

“Hey, hey. Chill bruv. What's this? Foots she – your *girl* – can get you a next one, bruv. It's got blood on it, you done know.”

Tweeks, at 17, was two years older than Saul and Eli. Perhaps it was because they shared the same birthday – August 1st – that they often clashed. Eli always backed down first only because he knew he could take Foots with ease, big as he was, from the time they were in nursery together. Foots had the height and aggression but that was mostly bravado. There was something potent in Eli's bouts of anger which turned violent without warning. This potential for violence was masked by his otherwise calm disposition.

And when that calm mastered his violent tendencies some people, mostly his Crew, thought he was smart. Sometimes Eli would sit for hours listening when they were jamming at their usual spot. He'd be smoking weed, sometimes smiling, as if he was immersed in some private world with images that played for his amusement alone. When he finally spoke everyone hushed almost involuntarily as if awaiting wise words from a prophet. Music that had been blasting seemed to be automatically switched off, along with TV screens. Girls stopped giggling and stared at him with eyes that seemed glazed over.

“Foots dash the knife. I aint telling you again, bruv.”

“Where?” Foots made a gesture of looking around for some place.

“Told you to stay off the shit” Eli said, shaking his head and burning with impatience. “Are you nuts? Look where we are. Any fucking where'll do.”

Foots walked a few paces away from them, crushing twigs and leaves and threw the knife somewhere into the night. Eli thought it was a

lame throw; it didn't carry the thrusting power of which Saul was more than capable given his shot putting triumphs at school. He was disturbed somewhat by Foots' attachment to this particular knife when they had discarded countless others after similar nights – though if the boy was dead, murder for them was something new.

“We best shiff.”

“Ends?”

“Naw.” Eli didn't want to say where he was going – partly because he wasn't sure where he should go but he knew he couldn't go back home.

“My mum'll suss if I don't go home, blood.” Tweeks didn't sleep out. Unlike Eli and Foots, his mum would call the police if he was too late home or ever stayed out.

“Go your yard then.” Eli said, annoyed that he should have to confirm a decision he knew Tweeks had already made.

“Where're you going E?” Eli pretended he didn't hear a kind of frightened, almost pleading in Foots' voice.

“Ain even know, bruv.” And he hoped that Foots didn't hear the same in his voice.

“Yeah, I hear you. You and me cool, aight?”

“Say nothing, blood. Keep it down yeah.”

“Course.”

“Boy...that was...”

“Tweeks, hold it down, bruv.” Eli eased his hands into his pockets and as swiftly as he had darted into the clearing he darted out and crossed the road. He picked up speed when he saw a bus heading in the direction of Tooting.

“You’re not getting on unless you take that off mate.” Eli slowly eased the hood from his head and tapped his Oyster on the yellow reader. The light on the bus was startling, causing him to squint. He made a speedy scan of the passengers. He was relieved that he could count them on one hand. None were youths his age: a man of about fifty wearing a baseball cap was reading *The Daily Mail*; a lady, perhaps no older than his mother, with the same complexion, was huddled on one side of the back seat staring through the window. He passed a couple feasting on a box of KFC chicken and chips.

He sat on the other side of the woman on the back seat. Her reflection in the darkened window

made it seem as though she was looking back at him. He averted his eyes and looked out the window which was now a mirror reflecting his image and the woman who looked so much, he was surprised once more to be thinking, like his mother. Although he could identify everyone downstairs on the bus, he had deliberately chosen not to venture upstairs for he imagined that up there tigers waited to terrorise and then tear him into tiny pieces.