YABA BADOE

ILLUSTRATED BY JOELLE AVELINO

MAN MAN AND THE TREE OF MEMORIES

A STORY OF DANCE, MAGIC AND LIBERTY!

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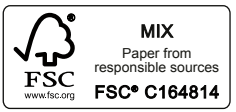

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ONCE, not so long ago, there lived a boy whose mother was suffering from an illness no one could name. Doctors and healers of all kinds couldn't explain what was wrong with her. Neither could they understand why, as she grew thinner and thinner, her voice started to fade.

The boy's name was Man-man, and his home was in London in a part of the city famous for its yearly carnival.

Late one afternoon, soon after his mum had taken to her bed, Man-man was practising his steps for carnival when a voice from the kitchen yelled: 'De pickney dem today *always* making noise! Man-

man, why you thumping and strumming? Why you *stomping* your feet on the ground?'

The voice belonged to his nan.

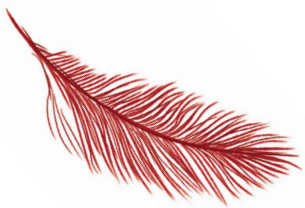
Fedora Roberts had arrived from Jamaica that morning to look after her daughter, Trilby, Man-man's mum.

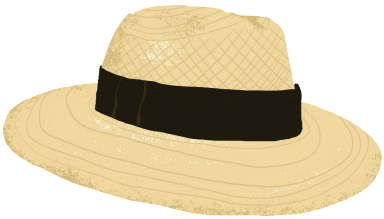
Man-man froze between steps, clenching his fingers to stop them teasing music out of the tables and walls around him. 'Today is *dread*,' he muttered.

Not only was his mum ill, she was wobbly on her feet as well. So wobbly she could barely walk. What's more, her voice was almost gone. That's why Dad had called Nan and begged her to come over.

That's how bad things were, for his dad didn't much like Nan. 'She too prissy-prim for her own good,' he always said.

Unable to practise in silence on wooden floorboards, Man-man slipped off his shoes and moving his weight from foot to foot, heel to toe, glided down the corridor. He tweaked his shoulders





and hips, jerking his neck from side to side, until, twitching like a robot, he reached his parents' room.

His dad was still at work at his barber shop while Pan, Man-man's older sister, was out with friends. Pan hadn't returned home since Nan's arrival. Neither had her tortoise shell cat, Smudge, who, more often than not, followed Pan's example.

Man-man tapped on the bedroom door and stepped inside.

'There you are,' his mum murmured. 'The minute I think of you, you come!' She smiled, a smile that tickled his skin like a prickle of sunlight in winter. A smile that made him grin, even though Nan had told him to leave his mum in peace.

'I have travelled *all* the way to England,' Nan had said when she'd seen the state they were in.

Clothes strewn on the washing machine clamoured to be washed.

A heap of takeaway cartons littered the kitchen. Smudge, nestling among them, snarled.

In the sitting room Nan had run a finger along a shelf before flicking specks of dust in the air.

'I have travelled all the way to England,' she repeated, 'to make sure that your mother rests. I will cook and clean and take care of you on one condition. You'll do what I say.'

Pan's eyes had flung daggers at Nan. Daggers that said: *I am nobody's slave*.

She'd flung daggers, then flounced out, Smudge behind her; while Dad, looking grim, had followed.

Unfortunately for Man-man, once Nan's eyes had drilled into his, he couldn't move. Even in his parents' room, he could still hear her voice and the furious squeak in it as she'd waggled a finger at him.

The finger seemed to jab him, for he took a step back. Yet, as soon as his mum lifted her duvet, with a skip and a jump, Man-man snuggled into her bed.

Fuzzy with sleep, she stroked his cheek and slowly inhaled him, as if his smell reminded her of all the things she loved and missed most in the world. She lapped him up like a camel drinking water after a long desert trek. Her forehead touched his, and Man-man gazed at his mum's face.

The plump curves of her cheeks had gone. Her eyes were dull with pain. And yet the more he stared into those dark eyes of hers, the more his mind tricked him.

Instead of seeing her as she was, he saw her as she used to be, how he wanted her to be: bigger, louder, healthier than ever; the very best mum in the world.

'You're snugalicious,' she whispered.

'You're snugalicious too.'

She held him, and breathing him in again and again, soft as a butterfly settling on his hand, she asked, 'I heard you practising. Have you got it?'

He nodded.

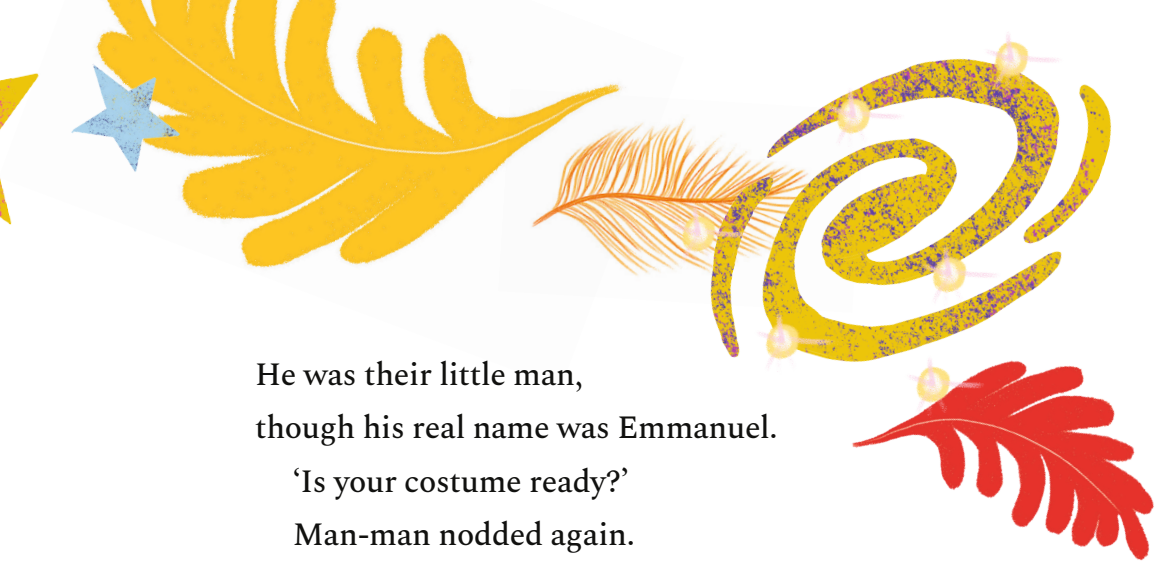
All day long he'd been distracted because he was busy working on his steps for carnival. This year at Notting Hill, he was going to take his mum's place and lead the procession. Pan would be at his side. He'd listen to the beat of his dad's sound system, feel the rhythm, and, when he was in its groove, he'd move.

'Will you dance me better, Man-man?'

'I'll dance you to the moon and back, Mum,' he promised. 'To infinity and beyond!'

'Wouldn't surprise me,' she smiled. 'You were dancing when you were small as a grub inside me, little man. We've been dancing ever since.'

This was a story his mum often told him.
And it was when she and Dad had
started calling him Man-man.



He was their little man,
though his real name was Emmanuel.

'Is your costume ready?'

Man-man nodded again.

Aunty Flo, a designer and seamstress, had been working on their costumes for ages. 'You can be anyone you want to be at carnival,' she'd said. 'A bird, a queen, a troubadour, a warrior. For one day and one day only, you can decide who you are and feel it deep down. Who will you be this year, Man-man?'

He'd whispered in her ear and grinned as her eyes sparkled.

'Mind the Queen of Revels doesn't nab you, boy,' she'd warned. 'Because once I've dressed you up, all eyes will be on *you*. And where we look, the eyes of the Revel Queen follow.'

In truth, it wasn't just what he wanted to be for a day that mattered. All the troupe had had a say.

One after the other they'd suggested a theme and then voted. This year they'd chosen 'Let Freedom Rain'. They were going to celebrate the freedom of Africans everywhere – from Port-au-Prince to London, Solihull to Salvador, Cape Town to Cairo, Zanzibar to Spanish Town, Jamaica. At the same time, they were going to honour freedom fighters of yesterday, such as Queen Nanny, Marcus Garvey, Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Martin Luther King and Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana.

His mum gathered her strength before speaking again.

Having learned how to catch the softest of her words, Man-man was ready when her question fluttered into the open. 'Who are you going to be at carnival this year?'

He caught her drift even though she sounded far away like someone lost in fog. What flummoxed him was the breathlessness between her pauses. With each gasp he felt the tug of his mum slipping away. A tug that wiped the smile off his face and brought tears to his eyes.

'My costume's a secret,' Man-man replied.

'You're not going to go as the Black Panther, are you?'

Outside a floorboard creaked.

Trilby placed a finger to her lips.

The doorknob turned. The door swung open, and Nan appeared.

A small woman with a round, pert face, she glared at Man-man, her eyebrow raised, and what at first seemed ordinary became extraordinarily large. Large like an orchestra of clashing cymbals and shaking tambourines. Nan loomed, an ogre, skin pale as topaz, a smattering of salt and pepper curls on her scalp.

‘I told you,’ she declared. ‘Told you, “Man-man, please let your poor mother rest.” Look at you now!’

His mum drew him closer. ‘Fedora, I called him. See how bright he’s made me?’

‘But, Trilby, we agreed…’

‘We did. But this is my time, Ma, and I need to spend it with my son.’

Nan nodded, even as her face fixed in a frown.

Once she was gone, Trilby tickled Man-man, whispering: ‘’Fess up, son. True, true, you’ve asked Flo to dress you up as the Black Panther, haven’t you?’

Man-man snorted. That had been his first choice, until his dad had pointed out that the kingdom of Wakanda was a make-believe creation of Marvel Comics and that T'Challa wasn't a *genuine* freedom fighter. Jules had explained patiently, while Pan and her pals had sniggered, teasing Man-man that the one African country he was desperate to visit didn't exist. He remembered the glance Pan had thrown him. How he'd shrivelled inside at what she could do to him with that glint in her eyes.

'Mum, like I said, my costume's a secret. You'll have to come to carnival to find out who I am, because before I can dance you better, you have to be well enough to watch.'

'So, I've got two weeks to mend body and soul and walk again?'

'You can do it, Mum. I know you can do it.'