

TRACING JAJA

ALSO BY ANTHONY KELLMAN

Fiction

The Coral Rooms (1994)

The Houses of Alphonso (2004)

Poetry

In Depths of Burning Light (1982)

The Broken Sun (1984)

Watercourse (1990)

The Long Gap (1996)

Wings of a Stranger (2000)

Limestone (2008)

South Eastern Stages (2012)

Edited

Crossing Water (1992)

ANTHONY KELLMAN

TRACING JAJA



P E E P A L T R E E

First published in Great Britain in 2016
Peepal Tree Press Ltd
17 King's Avenue
Leeds LS6 1QS
England

© 2016 Anthony Kellman

ISBN13: 9781845232993

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted in any form
without permission

This is a work of fiction. All the characters
appearing in the stories are fictitious.
Any resemblance to real persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

CHAPTER ONE

The king arrived on the first day of March, two weeks after an invasion of rats on a St. George plantation prompted an early start to cutting the canes. The rodent assault would slow-up cropping, extend it into the rainy season, affect the sucrose content, and disappoint the Queen.

The Pylades, the steam boat on which the king arrived, sat for a time in Carlisle Bay, but he did not see the island as it slowly grew from an ocean-surrounded speck to an undulating mass of greenness, hills speckled with white houses, royal and coconut palms, and the shingled roofs of the city's coral-stone buildings. He saw none of this because of the ailments that made bed-rest a constant feature of his journey.

He knew he'd arrived only when he heard a loud knocking on the cabin door.

'We're here,' the officer said. 'Come.'

King Jaja rose slowly from the bed, steadying himself on the end of the frame. The officer stepped back into the passageway leaving the door slightly ajar. Jaja put on his black leather sandals and limped over to the peg for his admiral's uniform. Sixteen years earlier, Queen Victoria's consul had presented him with the uniform and an inscribed sword in appreciation of his military assistance during the Ashanti War. He'd rarely worn the uniform but had kept it immaculately clean. As he dressed, he scratched at his body, as if some sorrow lay under his skin that flamed like a burning hut. He seemed to bear a defeat that was more than individual.

The passengers on *The Pylades* now began to board smaller boats to take them to Bridgetown Wharf. When the boat carrying

Jaja pulled up at the wharf-side, the crowd lining the waterfront called out and cheered as they stared at the garb he wore. None had seen a black man dressed like this before. They were filled with questions, bright with pride and an inchoate sense that they were witnessing something about their origins, somewhat tarnished but lambent like the morning light flickering on the glazed wharf water. Their voices merged with the sounds of the sea, dying away from the king's hearing only when his carriage reached the city limit. Instead, the horses's hoofs were constant exclamations in his mind, which itched and flared like his body.

Half an hour later, the vehicle arrived at the gate of the Governor's house. The police officer standing in the white guard shed waved the carriage through. One of the guards got out and walked to the front of the house, to the verandah ringed with brilliant red hibiscus. He rapped the brass knocker on the white door that swung open almost at once. The Governor was expecting him.

The guard said, 'He attracted much attention, Sir. Especially among the common people. They watched his every movement, crowded about the carriage, much to our discomfort.'

Governor Sendall had assumed personal oversight for all the details of the king's detention and had arranged the Sunday dawn arrival to avoid the risk of the public spectacle that a Saturday arrival would involve. The authorities had made that mistake in St. Vincent where Jaja had been detained for nearly three years before his transfer to Barbados. He'd arrived in Kingstown Bay around noon when the markets were crowded with people. When news of his arrival reached them, they'd abandoned their buying or selling and flocked to get a glimpse of the king. Because of the pandemonium, the authorities had been forced to keep Jaja and his son Sunday on board the *Icarus* for another day.

The Governor looked away from the guard and out across the gardens, his glance settling on a row of mahoganies. Even with the precautions taken, Jaja's coming had evidently caught the attention of Bridgetown's rabble and word had spread.

'How is he?'

The guard withdrew a thick string-bound document from the leather bag and handed it to the Governor. 'Documents from St. Vincent, Sir. Including reports on his health.'

When Sendall finished scanning the documents, creases appeared on his brow. He pursed his lips and then released them. 'You'd better get him settled in at Two Mile Hill. When he's rested and feeling better, I'll have you bring him over for a visit.' He looked towards the carriage but could see only the right elbow of the other guard and the head of its driver.

The carriage moved out past flamboyant budding red, rows of variegated immortelles, hibiscus courted by yellow butterflies, and sisal lances exclaiming like Jaja's thoughts. It passed through the gate and made the right turn up Two Mile Hill. The carriage, an English Victoria, was stylish, fashionable, all black except for the olive-coloured upholstery, with full suspension springs. The body had been elegantly finished by Thorn of Norwich. Its collapsible hood, when fully extended, covered the entire seating area and two brass lamps hung on each side of the driver's seat like closed eyes. It had been hired from George Whitfield, owner of the Central Ice House on Roebuck Street.

Jaja recalled his sojourn in St. Vincent: the crowds of people who looked like him on the quayside and their thunderous cheers as his carriage was rapidly driven away; the humiliating condescension of the administrator, Robert Llewelyn; the depressing conditions of the Captain's Quarters on the windy promontory at Fort Charlotte; the rented house on Egmont Street next to the public offices; the policemen always on guard, keeping the curious labouring classes at bay; another policeman accompanying him wherever he ventured from home; the place he'd been moved to on Upper Bay Street near the wharf, with its foul reek of molasses; then, a year or so later, the move to Middle Street and more stringent curfews – no leaving his residence for more than four hours at a time, sleeping only at his own residence, needing approval to go beyond Kingstown, and having to state precisely where he was going.

These measures had come after the authorities received word from a ship's captain that Jaja had offered to pay him well to take him to the United States.

The public events that Llewelyn arranged for him during his first year in St. Vincent were still sour in his mouth. He'd played along for a while, biding his time, knowing that they displayed

him in public only to play down the true nature of his confinement. He'd played the laughing black man as he recounted stories of the Ashanti War in which he'd aided the British and the wars with his old archenemy, Oko Jumbo. The island's small white elite were amused by his "charmingly picturesque" Creole speech. He'd worn that mask while looking for any opportunity to interact with local Blacks, thinking that one of his own race might help him to escape. One neighbour on Egmont Street became a good friend after he apprehended a man who'd stolen one of Jaja's gold chains and tried to sell it to another neighbour. It was this man, Seymour, who'd told Jaja about a vessel that made a regular stop at St. Vincent on round trips from the U.S.A.

After the discovery, the invitations to cricket matches, concerts by the police band, visits to Government offices, shopping in the leading city stores and private dinner parties at Government House all ceased. The British had thrown their own masks to the floor: Jaja was no guest but a political prisoner who posed a threat to sovereign England. But even if the invitations had been renewed, he'd have pulled back like a sea anemone from the temptation of their bribes. Towards the authorities he cast only sullen looks. He embraced hatred and this venom kept him alive; for over a year it kept him keen and quick.

His home became alive with people who looked like him, who understood his condition and respected his kingship. Their company lifted his spirits. For the first two years of his exile, the local black people had been unaware of the real nature of his presence on the island. The newspapers, owned by members of the merchant class, supported the lie of the king's voluntary presence. The truth was that on orders from the Secretary of State, Johnson, the vice-consul in Nigeria, had trapped Jaja on a British vessel under pretext of holding a meeting to settle a palm-oil trade dispute. Once aboard the vessel, Jaja had been brought to trial in Accra, a town that had no jurisdiction over him as a sovereign king, where he was convicted of breaking a treaty that outlawed other European nations from trading in the Delta hinterlands. The sentence? A hefty fine and five years exile. Britain had rejected his appeals and refused his request to present his case directly to the British Parliament.

Now, in the carriage, as he absorbed the green shade flanking the roadsides, Jaja felt a small quickening inside him, like that which chewing a kola nut brought. He inhaled the slow breezes and became aware of how much less he was coughing. Perhaps this hint of alacrity, this apparent improvement in his health, was merely the result of coming to a new place. Whatever the cause, it didn't matter.

As the carriage crawled up Two Mile Hill, one of the guards asked him if, in a few days, he would feel able to accept an invitation from the Governor. Jaja said he would. The guard told him that George Washington's half-brother, Lawrence, had been sent to Barbados nearly a century-and-a-half earlier as a treatment for consumption and that the climate had healing properties, particularly beneficial for diseases of the chest. Jaja suspected the guard was exaggerating, but he had to admit that the air seemed good and that he was already feeling some relief.

The property at Two Mile Hill more than met his needs. In fact, Walmer Cottage far exceeded them. He didn't need a house with so many bedrooms, public rooms, and servants' rooms. Yes, he was a king, but his current circumstances and his nature led him to value frugality. He had not become a king through lavishness, but through his sharp wits and restraint. Taking only well-judged risks, he had risen from being a slave to becoming an eminent tradesman with the Anna Pepple household at Bonny. Slavery's only denial was kingship in the city-state where he had once been a slave. This was why he left Bonny and set up his own kingdom in Opobo, near the banks of the Imo River.

He felt sure Walmer Cottage had been chosen by the British just to extort six pounds five shillings in monthly rent from him, nearly double what he'd paid in St. Vincent. His allowance of eight hundred pounds, permitted by the British and provided by his chiefs in Opobo, would be sent directly to the Barbados Governor who would withhold his rent and miscellaneous expenses that included the care of the his pet dog, Oko Jumbo, maintenance of his carriage, two horses, and a cow. As he got out of the carriage and walked across the pebbled yard, Jaja took in the sheds that lined the back of the two-acre lot. The coach house

stood at the far left so that one drove directly out of it along the curving driveway to the Two Mile Hill Road.

He would have needed accommodation like this if any of his wives, sons and servants had been with him, but he was alone. Four months earlier, in St. Vincent, his youngest wife, Patience, had refused to accompany him to Barbados, threatening suicide if she was forced to go. His son, Sunday, had left for study in England. In St. Vincent, servants and relatives had occasionally come from Africa to visit him. Now, as he recalled the modesty of his residence there, his mistrust of the authorities' motives in lodging him at Walmer Cottage heightened. This mistrust increased further when, next morning, the officer who had accompanied him told him to expect another payment to be withheld from his allowance. First Secretary, who would deal with his affairs on behalf of the Governor, would inform him about this.

CHAPTER TWO

Becka heard a knock on the door of their two-room chattel house, and she looked up from the pot she was stirring. Her sister, Frances, was sweeping a corner of the room's dirt-floor. Through the doorway to the bedroom, she could see her ailing mother lying flat on her back. She and Frances had been looking after her since their father died three years ago and their older brother, Fred, had left for Panama to fend for himself. Their chattel stood two miles south of the plantation from which their surname, Jordan, had come. Becka's father had been born there a year before slavery ended. Her grandfather had died on the plantation and had taught his son coopering, the trade he'd lived from all his working life. Mr. Jordan had managed to save enough money to move into the tenantry, though he'd remained bound to the plantation for work and the estate still owned the land on which their chattel stood. Becka had been born in 1872 when her father was thirty-nine years old, and as the youngest she'd been his favourite.

'Mornin'.' A young woman in a maid's uniform and bonnet stood on the makeshift coral-stone steps.

'Patsy, how you? How de baby – my little man?' Patsy lived in the same tenantry and had also worked at Jordan's.

'I awright, Becka. An de baby awright too. Eight months and growing good. How you mudda?'

'Nuh worse. But tings rough, yuh know. Not much wo'k dese days.'

Patsy took a white cloth from between her breasts and opened it to show two phials. She held up the larger of the two and said, 'Gi' dis to she two times a day after she eat. It gwine clean she blood good-good.'