he would drag his useless lower limbs out of the hut and sit under the muonde tree. He would not leave the tree till late in the evening when he would drag himself again back into the hut for his evening meal and bed. And always the boy felt a stab of pain when he looked at the front of his father’s wet urine-stiffened trousers.

The boy knew that his mother had something to do with this condition of his father. The tight lines round her mouth and her long silences that would sometimes erupt into unexpected bursts of red violence said so. The story was that his father had fallen off the roof he had been thatching and broken his back. But the boy didn’t believe it. It worried him. He couldn’t imagine it. One day his father had just been like any other boy’s father in their village, and the next day he wasn’t. It made him wonder about his mother. He felt that it wasn’t safe in their house. So he began to spend most of his time with the old man, his grandfather.

“I want you in the house,” his mother said, when she could afford words, but the boy knew she was saying it all the time by the way she tightened her mouth and lowered her looking-away-from-people eyes.

The boy remembered that his grandfather had lived under the same roof with them for a long time. He couldn’t remember how he had then come to live alone in his own hut half a mile from their place.

“He is childish,” he heard his mother say one day.

“He is old,” his father said, without raising his head from his work.

“And how old do you think my mother is?” The lines round his mother’s mouth drew tighter and tauter.

“Women do not grow as weak as men in their old age,” his father persisted.

“Because it’s the men who have to bear the children—so they grow weak from the strain!” His mother’s eyes flashed once—so that the boy held his breath—and then she looked away, her mouth wrinkled tightly into an obscene little hole that reminded the boy of a cow’s behind just after dropping its dung. He thought now his father would keep quiet, He was surprised to hear him say, “A man’s back is the man. Once his back is broken—” Another flash of his mother’s eye silenced him and the boy couldn’t stand it. He stood up to go out.

“And where are you going?” his mother shouted after him.

“To see Grandfather.”

“What do you want there with him?”

The boy turned back and stayed round the yard until his mother disappeared into the house. Then he quietly slid off for his grandfather’s place through the bush. His father pretended not to see him go.

The old man had a way of looking at the boy like someone looking into a mirror to see how badly his face had been burned.

“Ah, Zakeo,” the old man said when the boy entered the yard. He was sitting against the wall of his hut, smoking his pipe quietly, looking into the distance. He hadn’t even looked in Zakeo’s direction.

“Did you see me this time?” Zakeo asked, laughing. He never stopped being surprised by the way his grandfather seemed to know everyone by their footfalls and would greet them by their names without even looking at them.

“I don’t have to look to know it’s you,” the old man said.

“But today I have changed my feet to those of a bird,” the boy teased him.

“No.” The old man shook his head. “You are still the cat in my ears.”

The boy laughed over that and although the old man smoked on without changing his expression, the boy knew that he was laughing too.

“Father said to ask you how you have spent the day,” the boy said, knowing that the old man would know that it was a lie. The boy knew he would be forgiven this lie because the old man knew that the boy always wished his father would send him with such a message to his own father.

“You don’t have to always protect him like that,” the old man growled, almost to himself.