# CHAPTER 4

## Akosua

"By the time you're my age," said Miss Mensah, "you'll have forgotten practically everything you are going to learn in the next two years."

Geraldine put up her hand.

"Please, Miss, I'm Geraldine Blankson. Please Miss, if what you said is right, what's the point?"

"The point, Geraldine, is to separate the worthy from the unworthy. The worthy will receive a certificate that will entitle them to proceed to a university where, in due course, if they are diligent, they will receive another certificate. The unworthy, if they are girls, will look for a job that doesn't require too much brain power while they keep their eyes open for a suitable husband. What our educational system fails to do, Geraldine, is to give you an education. Over the next two years, I am going to do my level best to

do just that: give you an education."

We are in Form 2, with two years to go until we take our SHS exams. We do ten subjects, six core and four elective. Miss Mensah is the teacher in our elective Literature in English class. And this term she is also teaching us elective History because our regular teacher is on maternity leave.

"We have six periods a week together," Miss Mensah told us, "three for Literature and three for History. Five of those should be enough to cover your syllabus. In the sixth period … well, you'll just have to wait and see."

There are thirty in our class. To each of us she handed an A4 sheet with about forty names printed on it in alphabetical order of the surnames.

"Please print your own name and the date at the top of the page," she said. "Then put a tick next to each printed name that you recognise. Be honest. I might ask you to stand up and tell the class what you know about the persons whose names you've ticked. Right, you have three minutes. Go!"

Ama Ata Aidoo, Ghanaian writer; Yaa Asantewaa, Ashanti queen mother, no problem; Jane Austen, English writer. Then I ticked these names: Charlotte Brontë, Cleopatra, Queen Elizabeth the First, Anne Frank, Joan of Arc. Heh, I thought, all of these are women. What's this all about? Miriam Makeba, Winnie Mandela, of course I know them. Efua Sutherland, another Ghanaian writer, Florence Nightingale, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia, Queen Victoria, Oprah Winfrey.

"OK," said Miss Mensah, "now count how many

you have ticked and write the number at the bottom of the page. Then pass the papers to the front, please."

I had ticked fifteen. Fifteen out of forty six. If this was an exam, I would surely have failed. But, fortunately, it wasn't an exam. Akosua Annan is not used to failing exams.

This is Miss Mensah's list. See how many names you recognise. No cheating, mind.

Ama Ata Aidoo
Louisa May Alcott
Maya Angelou
Yaa Asantewaa
Jane Austen
Simone de Beauvoir
Aphra Behn
Margaret Bourke-White
Sarah Bowdich
Charlotte Brontë
Rachel Carson
Cleopatra
Marie Curie
Amma Darko
Angela Davis
Queen Elizabeth I
George Elliot
Anne Frank
Rosalind Franklin
Indira Gandhi
Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin
Zora Neale Hurston
Joan of Arc
Frida Kahlo
Rosa Luxemburg
Miriam Makeba
Winnie Mandela
Carson McCullers
Marilyn Monroe
Toni Morrison
Florence Nightingale
Mbande Nzinga
Emmeline Pankhurst
Rosa Parks
Nawal el Saadawi
Olive Schreiner
Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
Harriet Beecher Stowe
Efua Sutherland
Margaret Thatcher
Harriet Tubman
Queen Victoria
Alice Walker
Oprah Winfrey
Mary Wollstonecraft
Virginia Woolf

"This," said Miss Mensah, "is a somewhat arbitrary list of great women, some greater than others, of course, and one or two of them, in my opinion at least, rather nasty characters. An educated Ghanaian woman should be able to recognise practically every one of those names."

We giggled.

The next thing she did was to call us up to the front of the class, one by one, by name. This was our first session with her and she had met none of us before that day. That must have been why she'd made us write our names on the papers. Clever Miss Mensah.

I was sitting in the front row so my paper was on top.

"Akosua Annan," she said, and I saw her matching name to face for future reference. "Akosua Annan, fifteen ticks, not bad."

Then she showed us a little cloth bag and explained that it contained one folded piece of paper for each name on the list.

"Akosua, put your hand into the bag and take one.

"Who did you get?"

"Sarah Bowdich," I replied. "Never heard of her."

When the rest of the class had followed suit, she said, "What I want each of you to do during the next couple of weeks is to research the woman whose name you have drawn. You may not find much information in the school library, but there is always the Internet. No cut and paste, please. This exercise is not for marks. It has two objectives: the first is to introduce you to research methods; the second is for you thirty young women to link up with thirty other women who have done great things in one way or another. I want you to write a short critical essay about your subject. Include a portrait if you can find one. Who was this woman? What were the challenges she faced in her life and what success did she have in dealing with them? Do you think we should remember her (if she is dead) or celebrate her (if she is still with us), and if so, why?"

She said we should send our essays to her by e-mail and promised to circulate them. The writers of the first three she received would be rewarded with an invitation to read their essays in class.

"If they're any good, and I'm sure they will be, we might publish them on the school web-site. Then we'll make time, perhaps over a weekend, to discuss our findings."

There were still a dozen or so women in her little bag, or at least their names were. She offered them to us but there were no takers. I gave it some thought but decided against it. I was going to have my work cut out if I wanted to discover anything about this unknown woman, Sarah-What's-her-name.

Then the bell rang. As we filed out of the class, chattering as we always do, Miss Mensah called me aside.

"Akosua," she said. "You drew one of the most obscure names. After her husband died Sarah Bowdich was known as Sarah Lee. See what you can find and then come and talk to me. I have some rare material about her that you might not

find on the Internet."

"Yes, Miss, thank you, Miss," was all I could think to reply.

Outside, under the mango tree where we often sit during break, the girls were all talking at the same time.

After lights out that night I lay and thought about Miss Mensah and how lucky we were to have such a charming and clever woman to teach us. We generally give our new teachers a hard time, but she seemed to have won our hearts without really trying. And then I had a great idea. I would add one more name to the list: Miss Mensah's. I had heard my father talking about someone's Little Red Book and someone else's Little Green Book. I would make a note of Miss Mensah's wise words and record them in a Little Blue Book. Why blue, when it's usually pink for a girl and blue for a boy? Miss Mensah, I thought, has the mind of a man. And then I fell asleep.

This is what I read to the class a week later.

Sarah Wallis was born in England in the year 1791. Little is known about her early life until, at the age of 22, she married Thomas Edward Bowdich, who was about the same age. She must have just had her first child, or still been pregnant, when her new husband left for Cape Coast. That's right, our very own Cape Coast. Mr. Bowdich was employed by the African Company of Merchants that was based in the Castle. Note that in spite of the name, those merchants were all Europeans. His job description was "writer." In those days all letters were written with quill and ink and copies also had to be written out. I guess that means that he was a clerk or a secretary. He had got the job through his uncle, Mr. John Hope Smith, who was a senior official in the Castle and later became the Governor. Today we might call that nepotism.

Sarah, who according to the English custom at the time, was now known as Mrs. Thomas Edward Bowdich, must have got fed up waiting for Mr. Thomas Edward Bowdich to fetch her, so she went to the port of Liverpool with her baby daughter and looked for a ship, a sailing ship of course, bound for Cape Coast. When she couldn't find one she decided to go instead to Freetown in Sierra Leone where the English had set up a sort of colony for freed slaves. There were twenty-six men on the ship, including the captain and one other passenger, and a whole lot of live ducks and chickens and the like to provide them with food on the long voyage. Sarah was the only woman on board. I wonder how she managed. I mean for privacy. I guess the toilet facilities on the ship must have been pretty primitive. And how often did she get to take a bath? There is no way of knowing.

A Royal Navy ship of the anti-slave trade patrol took her from Freetown to Cape Coast. When she got there (or should I say "when she got *here*"?) she found that her beloved Thomas Edward had left for England. Her trip from Liverpool to Cape Coast had taken three months. She must have been even more thoroughly fed up when she arrived to meet Mr. Bowdich's absence, as we say. It was lucky for her that Mr. Hope Smith was around to look after her. He was stationed at Anomabu so she went and stayed with him there.

After Mr. Bowdich returned to Cape Coast he was sent on a mission to Kumasi. That was in 1817. He was away a long time, so again Sarah was on her own. Sadly, their baby daughter died while he was away. The nature of malaria was unknown at that time and the cause of the child's death is given merely as "fever." In those days the Gold Coast was known as the White Man's Grave. In Kumasi Mr. Bowdich made Ashanti friends and subjected them to a barrage of questions about Ashanti history and culture and religion. He made drawings of the most important buildings in the city and kept detailed notes of all he saw and heard. While he was there the Asantehene, Nana Osei Bonsu, made him the gift of a girl whose name he gives as Adua. I guess she was called Adwoa, a Monday born. The British had made the slave trade illegal in 1807, so this transaction puzzles me. Mr. Bowdich also "collected" a number of gold objects that are still in the British Museum in London.

In February, 1818, Mr. and Mrs. Bowdich left Cape Coast to return to England. It seems that they took Adwoa and a 16-year old boy with them as servants. Their ship had to head south first, to Gabon, to load a cargo of timber and to catch the south-east trade winds. Sarah writes that while they were on board, the fair copy of Mr. Bowdich's book, *Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee,* was written. At least one modern authority thinks that she is likely to have helped her husband in writing this work. During their return voyage pirates from a Spanish slaving vessel boarded their ship. Sarah writes that their "black servant-girl," presumably Adwoa, cried bitterly, "for she fancied she should be again forced into slavery," but all the pirates stole was the ship's stock of food, leaving them to face near starvation before they reached England.

After the publication of Mr. Bowdich's book the couple moved to Paris where they studied with the French scientist Baron George Cuvier. They both learned Arabic and Sarah became a skilled artist, specialising in scientific illustrations.

In 1822 the couple set off on another voyage to Africa. They took their two small children with them. Due to poor winds, they missed a connecting passage at the island of Madeira and had to wait there for fifteen months. Sarah had another baby there. In all she had five children of whom three survived. They eventually reached Bathurst (Banjul) in the Gambia, but just six weeks after their arrival Mr. Bowdich died of fever.

An obituary to Mr. Bowdich had this to say of Sarah: "Mrs. Bowdich was the companion of his travels, the sharer of all his perils, nor less the ardent participator of all his hopes, and in her affectionate arms he breathed his last. Herself endowed with every accomplishment that could render her the worthy associate of such a spirit, she entered with enthusiasm into all his views, and assisted with her talents many of the most scientific of his operations. Nor is there a living pen better qualified than hers to do justice to his memory."

Sarah was now a widow with three infant children and no resources to call upon except her knowledge and her talents. She supported herself and her children from the meagre income she earned from her scientific writing and illustrating. Over the next ten years she published, in instalments, *The Freshwater Fishes of Great Britain.*

Each instalment had four printed illustrations. Since colour printing had not yet been invented, she added colour to every single print using water paints and gold and silver foil.

This is a print of one of her pictures of a fish. (I held it up for all to see. There were gasps of admiration.)

Then, in 1825, Sarah was invited to contribute a story to a Christmas annual called *Forget-Me-Not*. (An annual was a book containing entertaining stories and pictures, published once a year to be given as a Christmas present.)

Her first story, *Adumissa* (whom she has a Cape Coast man describe in pidgin as one "who pass all woman handsome that black man ever saw … men die for her—they like her too much") was so successful that it started her on a new career as a writer of short stories.

The next year she wrote *Amba, the Witch's Daughter* to expose "the barbarous feeling which exists in great force against supposed witches, in all the parts of Africa which I have visited."

Her third story, *The Booroom Slave*, fascinates me. It tells the story of Inna, the bright but spoiled teenage daughter of a Bron chief who ventures alone into the forest near her home and is captured by agents of a vengeful rejected elderly suitor. Inna's brother Kobara and his friend, Inna's fiancé, Miensa, search for her but in vain. She is taken to Cape Coast to be sold but escapes and tries to find her way home, avoiding human contact for fear of re-enslavement. Paddling upriver in a stolen canoe, she encounters a party of whites, led by (I guess) Mr. Bowdich, who delivers her to an "English female," the narrator of the story. The narrator in due course teaches Inna English and some of the skills appropriate to a maid in a middle class English home. She also promises Inna that if she accepts the Christian God, He will see to it that she returns to her family. In due course Kobara and Miensa arrive in Cape Coast on a trading mission and Inna is re-united with them. They take her home to Bron, where she and Miensa live happily ever after. It's like a fairy tale.

Sarah tells us that "The history of *The Booroom Slave* is taken from the narrative of a girl who came from that country, and waited upon me: from her lips were many of the details noted, and to them nothing has been added but what is in strict consonance with the scenes spoken of, and of their inhabitants." That girl might well have been Adwoa, Nana Mensa Bonsu's gift to Mr. Bowdich. The Bowdich's took the real Adwoa to England with them but what happened to her there is a mystery.

*The Booroom Slave* was republished in 1835 in a collection of Sarah's writings entitled *Stories of Strange Lands*. In her introduction to this book Sarah claims that "… every story is founded on truth; every description of scenery, manners and customs, has been taken from life," and "as much of the language of the actors has been preserved as is consistent with civilised ears."

Sarah died in 1856 at the age of 65. An obituary in the *Literary Gazette* said that "she was beloved by all who knew her. Her talents she used unweariedly, unselfishly. Her spirit was oppressed by no pride of intellect or vanity. She bore up

like a heroine under burdens which would have prostrated most women, and all from a natural impulse of love and duty."

I've told you who Sarah Wallis-Bowdich-Lee was and described some of the challenges she faced in her life and how she met them. At a time when the English treated their women as second-class citizens, she was a successful explorer, scientist, writer and story-teller. Although she wasn't one of us, I mean she wasn't a Ghanaian or even an African, she was here, right here in Cape Coast, nearly two hundred years ago. I think we should recall her from obscurity and honour her memory.

I'd practised reading this. It took me about ten minutes. Too long, I thought. They'll be bored and start fidgeting. But when I finished they started clapping. I was astonished. Then Geraldine stood up, still clapping. Ama Osei followed and then all the rest of the class. They gave me a standing ovation. It made me feel so good, especially when Miss Mensah also stood up clapping.

Ama Osei was next. She had drawn Queen Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen. I guess that what we were all interested in was the virgin part but Ama didn't go into that. She won a polite round of applause.

Third was Geraldine. Her famous woman was Maya Angelou, an African-American writer who lived in Ghana in the time of Kwame Nkrumah our first president and wrote about her experiences in a book called *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*.

I don't know much about those times and since Miss Mensah said that there was a copy of Ms. Angelou's book in our school library, I have decided to borrow it. Geraldine says that at the age of 83 the lady is still alive and still writing. Perhaps we should invite her to pay us another visit before she dies. Just a thought.

"All three of you have done an excellent job," Miss Mensah said, "but there is more to do. I don't want you to treat these women as heroines, at least not until you have persuaded yourselves that they deserve that title. These are some of the questions I'd like you to ask about each of your subjects: What sort of society (or societies) did she live in? Sarah Bowdich lived most of her life in England but she also lived in France and right here in the Gold Coast. Maya Angelou lived in Egypt and in Ghana before returning to the United States of America. So, ask yourself, how did women fit into each of these societies? How did your woman relate to the men in her life? Was she free to develop all her talents? What connection, if any, did she have with Africa? What can we learn from studying her life? Is her life relevant to your own? If so, how?

"Now it so happens, quite by chance, that each of our first three women has a connection to the theme we're going to tackle next month, which is the Atlantic Slave Trade. Queen Elizabeth the First of England had her dirty fingers in the pie right at the outset, profiting from her investments in the slave trading missions of the notorious pirate Captain John Hawkins; Sarah Bowdich lived in Cape Coast Castle just ten years after the last slave was sold there; and Maya Angelou is the descendant of enslaved Africans who might well have been shipped from our own shores. Think about them when we deal with the Atlantic Slave Trade in our

history classes and when we visit Cape Coast Castle next month."