PROLOGUE

I am standing in my kitchen. John Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme' is playing. I've been listening to these songs since before I can remember. The melodies are in my blood. The fight and the freedom of the music is in me. I let it soothe me, speak to me in a language I understand. A rebellion is happening in the sound. I feel it. I hear it. *Change had to come. Have faith, soldiers.*

I had three parents – I guess that's what we call a gift. Moki, Don, Ahmadu: givers of life. My parents were rebels, all three bound in a history so long and painful it hurts. I've always been a rebel. My children and grandchildren have it, too. Those same creative channels I was brought up in have carried me all the way here. What they made is how we lived, how *I've* lived as I forged my own life. The music tells me that here is now.

Africa opens up under a sky shadowed by Swedish pine trees dressed in silks. Now, west London thrums on.

Last night I soaked a bowl of pinto beans. Today I wash them until the water runs clear, just as my mother taught me. Boil them hard for ten minutes, remove the froth. A sweet smell circulates through the house and, for a second, I'm climbing the stairs of a Lower East Side tenement building, a memory of boiling beans and hair grease like another song in another life.

I cut a head of garlic, drop the two halves into the pot, a whole Scotch bonnet pepper, a chopped onion and a handful of thyme on its stem. Memory, familiarity, doing things that we know; this rhythm of life I return to again and again. I understand how to do this, and it brings security in a world spinning out of my control. I need to create these small gifts, offerings to life, for my sanity and

for the people I love. I tip a can of coconut milk into the pot, stir and trust those pintos to do what they do. The beans want to be left alone, just a stir every now and then, with a wooden spoon that belonged to my grandmother, one of its corners worn away from a lifetime in the turn of her hand.

I live for love and music. These elements make life bigger, deeper, richer – but I know I cannot do it all on my own. I have always been a collaborator. To trust and to love is a strong survival instinct. I will not betray the trust of those I love, who helped me to become who I am today. But, with grace and respect, I also want to express some of the things that have happened. They are part of the journey.

PART ONE

MY MOTHER AND HER PEOPLE

One day, many moons ago in Norrland, or 'northland' – a large province in the very far north of Sweden – my great-grandmother Ida found a needle in a haystack. The family lived in a tiny hamlet called Bjurå in Norrbotten, the northernmost county of this northern province, just below the Arctic Circle. To the east lies the border with Finland; to the west is Swedish Lapland. Norrland stays black and white in the persistent winter darkness; in the summer months, it's flooded by endless sunshine. This pitiless environment gives its people a resilience and freedom of spirit. Even today, this remote northland feels quite separate from the rest of the country. There is a natural magic in the landscape. So few people live there, but it is home to many millions of trees. It is a place of legends. The forest whispers, deep and dark and knowing. Its hushed tones weave enchantment into the stories of my ancestors.

Ida's house is quiet with the hush of her five small sleeping children, my grandmother Marianne among them. It is time to go check on her cows and settle them in safely for the night. Ida walks across the yard to the summer barn. Inside are the six cows that are her livelihood. More than that, they are like beloved members of the family. The winter barn has a fireplace burning bright to keep them warm through the freezing nights. Now, though, in the summer barn, Ida needs to draw the dark heavy curtains to shield her resting herd not only from mosquitoes but also the relentless midnight sun.

She steps inside and softly pulls closed the curtains, casting a blue shade across the backs of the sleepy beasts. The swallows, nesting in the dark of the eaves, are also at rest. Every year, they leave

behind the sweltering West African heat, an intuition telling them that it is time to fly north. Straight up from Sierra Leone to Norrland, the swallow flies over 8,000 kilometres. The birds navigate the skies, sometimes covering more than 300 kilometres a day, never once touching the ground until, at last, they arrive with the light and promise of summer to nest in Ida's barn. I imagine them swooping low over her head in celebration and reunion, worms dangling from beaks.

Ida spreads some fresh hay on the barn floor, then slips out through the curtains and closes the door behind her. When she looks down at her pinafore, she sees that the needle she always keeps pinned there is gone.

Dread rushes through her. In the farmyard, flooded in the bright night sun, you could hear a pin drop, yet she had not heard her needle fall. Did she lose it when she bent over to pick up hay? She is in despair at the thought of what might happen to any one of her cows who finds it with their soft mouth. Hurriedly she retraces her steps, and long into the night that is an endless day she searches the barn. How many hours did she spend looking? Nobody knows. But in the end, and as the story goes, Ida found her needle in the haystack.

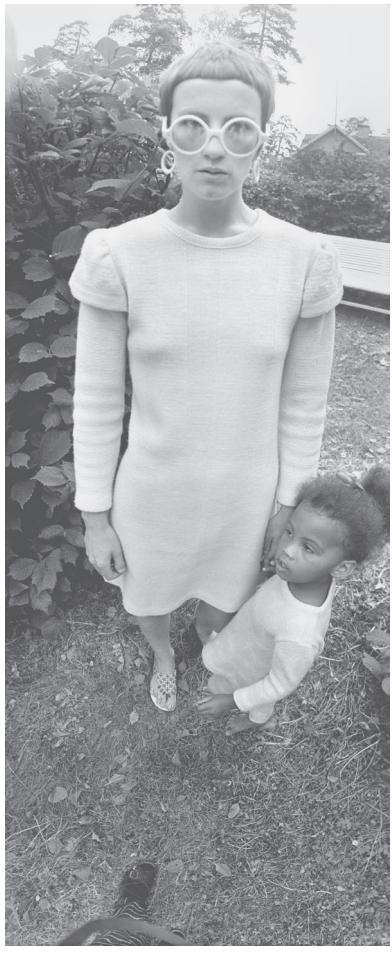
I like to imagine Ida with the warm breath of the resting cows on her face, carefully picking through the hay with meticulous determination, each strand like the filament of a life, or a death, as all around the forest whispers loudly.

•

My mother, Monika Marianne Karlsson, known as Moki, was born on 8 February 1943 in Koler, Norrbotten. Her father, Werner, my *morfar*, was one of nine children. He grew up on a farm at the opposite end of the country, in Finja, in the Gräsabygget, literally the 'grasslands', near Hässleholm, Skåne, the southernmost county in Sweden.

At sixteen, Morfar left home. After a spell as a farm labourer and then in the merchant navy, he took a qualification to work as a stationmaster on the railways. At twenty-five he was posted to Norrland, where he met and fell in love with my *mormor*, Marianne, Ida's daughter. A year later, when she was just nineteen, they married.

My grandparents moved often as my grandfather took up posts in different parts of the country. In Koler, the first place that Moki lived in was a beautiful black stationhouse with a red ochre trim. The plates rattled in their old oak dresser when the long cargo trains rumbled by. At night in bed, she would pretend she was in a sleeper car.



My mother, Moki, and me, *circa* 1966.

When she was barely two, her mother gave Moki her first pair of scissors, made of steel, small and very sharp. Marianne showed her how to hold them to a sheet of paper so that she wouldn't cut her fingers. By the heat of the wood-burning stove, the smell of the birch-bark kindling on fire, porridge and cinnamon in the air, Moki would sit shredding paper in the kitchen. It was like magic, seeing the paper separate, slicing a beautiful line: instant love. Next, she was handed a mail-order catalogue from which she cut out tiny household objects such as pots and pans, beds and chairs. She began to craft miniature domestic worlds.

In another time, in another kitchen with Mormor Marianne, I did the same thing. By then my grandparents were living in Rinkaby, Skåne, not far from Morfar Werner's family, in what had also been a stationhouse. The former waiting room was now a post office, run by my grandmother. I spent a lot of time in this red-brick house with the train tracks at the back. Mormor would settle me down with an old mail-order catalogue and some scissors and then go to work behind the post office counter on the other side of the wall. I was happy, lost in my own world, cutting out whole households, putting tiny paper kettles and toys, cups and tables, inside an empty box to make a home.

When Moki was four, she taught herself to read by cutting out letters and words from newspapers and gluing them next to the household objects from the catalogues. She never lost her fascination with and passion for words. Later in life she would sometimes spend all day in bed reading, eating peanut butter from a jar, with me and my little brother, Eagle-Eye, content beside her.

It was Moki's Aunt Gertrud who introduced her to the world of fabrics, threads and sewing machines. Gertrud worked as a dressmaker and would order the Paris fashion magazines to copy the latest modes, and she also created her own designs. In her parlour, Moki could delve into baskets full of fabric scraps from which she would make dolls and wonderful creatures.

Just before Moki turned five, my grandfather's work brought

Me and my brother Eagle-Eye playing at our grandparents' former station-house in Rinkaby. Moki and Mormor sit behind us, with Tipp the poodle.

the family south to Södervidinge, on the west coast of Skåne. Again, they lived upstairs in a stationhouse. It was the happiest era of Moki's childhood. Her mother would tell her not to leave their yard, but as soon as she could Moki would escape and go exploring in the village, knocking on people's doors and asking to visit. She discovered three old sisters in an old house, singing quietly and making exquisite gloves from the softest kidskin for the aristocracy; the blacksmith hammering horseshoes and the blacksmith's wife who gave her coffee, forbidden at home and which she loved; a man who made sundials and astronomical clocks; a chicken farm where two women from Japan sorted the newly hatched chicks. She went round the houses asking for old magazines, which she brought home and cut up with her scissors. Then she returned and sold her collages to the villagers. One time, someone came to the house and told my grandfather that they had bought 'such a lovely collage' from Moki. He went berserk. The idea that people might think

A young Moki with her cousin in Norrland.

they needed the money made him angrier than Moki had ever seen him. Much later she said it was probably the anxiety from this experience that made it hard for her to engage with selling her work.

In 1950, when she was seven, Disney's *Cinderella* was released. Watching the famous scene where, as Cinderella sleeps, the birds and the mice get busy with scissors, tape measure and needle and thread to fix up her mother's old dress, transforming it with pink ribbons and bows so that she might, after all, go to the ball, Moki was transfixed. She knew this was what she wanted to do. A dream began to form.

After the magical discovery of reading, Moki found school a disappointment. She was more interested in snails and butterflies than in humans. She spent most of her days after class on her own, outdoors in the forest. Dressed in dungarees, she would go out riding on her bike, a shoebox attached to the pannier rack to collect insects. For a while she had a pet hedgehog called Totte.

In 1962, when she was nineteen, Moki moved to Stockholm to attend classes in cutting, patternmaking and drapery. The haute couturier Rune Ullhammar had offered her a design apprenticeship, but when she got into Beckmans Designhögskola, an alternative art and design college in Stockholm, she moved on.

Young, talented and passionate, Moki was having the time of her life. In the early sixties, Stockholm was a hub of cultural innovation. She and her artist friends made things happen. She went to see all the musical greats, the young kings, masters of jazz, mostly at the city's Golden Circle, a club that hosted experimental players including Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and, later, Don Cherry's group. There she hung out with people like Albert Ayler, a young horn player who, Don said, sometimes played so deep that he spat blood. Moki and Albert became friends, and he often came to her studio to practise while she worked. People gravitated to Moki's apartment for vibes and for music. Mostly, though, they came for her.

I love hearing her friends talk about her: fun, creative, central. She had a great record collection, and she always looked fabulous. She cut her hair very short. She did it one night herself. She made a short leather skirt the colour of red wine, with a matching short top that buttoned at the back. Moki was cool, so people wanted to be around her. She had her own little circle.

Then, she met my father, Ahmadu Jah.