The Dark Cl
Would you leave behind everything you’ve ever known and loved for a strange land, knowing it will break your mother’s heart?

The Story So Far Laye has led an idyllic childhood in a small village in Africa. He has just been awarded a scholarship to continue his education in France.

…I BEGAN TO DREAM ABOUT PARIS. I HAD HEARD ABOUT PARIS FOR SO LONG!

Then my thoughts returned abruptly to my mother.

“Have you told her yet?” I asked.

“No. We’ll go together.”

“You wouldn’t like to tell her yourself?”

“By myself? No, my son. Believe me, even if we both go we’ll be outnumbered.”

We went to look for her. We found her crushing millet for the evening meal. My father stood watching the pestle falling in the mortar. He scarcely knew where to begin. The decision he had had to make would hurt my mother, and his own heart was heavy. He stood there watching the pestle and saying nothing. I dared not lift my eyes. But she was not long in guessing what was up. She had only to look at us to understand everything or almost everything.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Can’t you see I’m busy?”

And she began pounding faster and faster. Continued →
“Don’t go so fast,” my father said. “You’ll wear yourself out.”
“Are you teaching me how to pound millet?” she asked.
Then all of a sudden she went on angrily: “If it’s about the boy’s going to France you can save your breath. He’s not going!”
“That’s just it,” said my father. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t realize what such an opportunity means to him.”
“I don’t want to know.”
Suddenly she dropped the pestle and took a few steps toward us.
“Am I never to have peace? Yesterday it was the school in Conakry; today it’s the school in France; tomorrow... what will it be tomorrow? Every day there’s some mad scheme to take my son away from me!... Have you already forgotten how sick he was in Conakry? But that’s not enough for you. Now you want to send him to France! Are you crazy? Or do you want to drive me out of my mind? I’ll certainly end up raving mad... And as for you,” she cried, turning to me, “you are nothing but an ungrateful son. Any excuse is good enough for you to run away from your mother. But this time it won’t be as you want. You’ll stay right here. Your place is here... What are they thinking about at the school? Do they imagine I’m going to live my whole life apart from my son? Die with him far away? Have they no mothers, those people? They can’t have. They wouldn’t have gone so far away from home if they had.”
She lifted up her eyes to the sky and addressed the heavens: “He’s been away from...
me so many years already! And now they want to take him away to their own land! . . ."

Then she lowered her gaze and looked at my father again:
"Would you let them do that? Have you no heart?"
"Woman! Woman! Don't you know it’s for his own good?"
"His own good? The best thing for him is to stay here with us. Hasn’t he learned enough already?
"Mother,” I began.
But she turned on me violently:
"You be quiet! You’re still just a little boy, a nobody. What do you want to go so far away for? Do you have any idea how people live out there? . . . No, you don’t know anything about it. And tell me this, who’s going to look after you? Who’s going to mend your clothes? Who’ll cook for you?"
"Come, come,” said my father. “Be reasonable. The white men don’t die of hunger.”
"So you haven’t noticed, you poor crazy thing, you haven’t even noticed that they don’t eat the way we do. The child will fall sick; that’s what will happen. And then what will I do? What will become of me? Oh! I had a son once, but now I have none!"
I went up to her and took her in my arms.
"Get away from me!” she shouted. “You’re no son of mine!”
But she did not push me away. She was weeping and she held me close.
"You won’t leave me alone, will you? Tell me you won’t leave me all alone.”

But now she knew that I would go away and that she could not stop me, that nothing could stop me. Perhaps she had known from the first. Yes, she must have guessed that this was a matter where there were wheels within wheels. They had taken me from the school in Kouroussa to Conakry and finally to France. All the time she had been talking and fighting against them she must have been watching the wheels going round and round: first this wheel, then that, and then a third and greater wheel, then still more, many more, perhaps, which no one could see. And how could they be stopped? We could only watch them turning and turning, the wheels of destiny turning and turning. My destiny was to go away from home. And my mother began to turn her anger on those who, she thought, were taking me away from her. But by now her anger was futile: “Those people are never satisfied. They want to have everything. As soon as they set eyes on something they want it for themselves.”
"You shouldn’t malign them,” I replied.
"No,” she said bitterly. “I shall not malign them.”
Finally her anger and her rage were spent. She laid her head on my shoulder and wept loudly. My father had crept away. I held her close, I dried her tears, I said . . . what did I say to her? Everything and anything that came into my head but nothing of any importance. I don’t think she understood a word. All she was aware of was the sound of my voice. That was enough. Her sobs gradually became quieter and less frequent . . .

continued ➟
That was how my departure was arranged. And so one day I took a plane for France. Oh! it was a terrible parting! I do not like to think of it. I can still hear my mother wailing. I can still see my father, unable to hide his tears. I can still see my sisters, my brothers. . . . No, I do not like to remember that parting. It was as if I were being torn apart.

In Conakry the director told me that the plane would land at Orly.

“From Orly,” he said, “you will be taken to Paris, to the Gare des Invalides. There you will take the métro to the Gare Saint-Lazare, and then the train to Argenteuil.”

He unfolded a map of the Paris métro and showed me my route underground. But the map meant nothing to me. The very idea of the métro was extremely vague.

“Are you sure you understand?”

“Yes.”

But I did not quite understand everything.

“Take the map with you.”

I slipped it into my pocket. He looked at me.

“You’re not overdressed.”

I was wearing white cotton trousers, a sleeveless sports shirt open at the throat, sandals, and white socks.

“You’ll have to dress warmer over there. This time of year it’s already beginning to get colder.”

Post-Colonial Guinea

In 1958, France offered its territories an opportunity to vote on whether they would join the newly formed French Community. Guinea was the only territory to vote for immediate independence from France, and its assembly chose Sékou Touré as President. France retaliated by withdrawing all financial and technological support. Touré’s regime was a one-party dictatorship with no tolerance for free speech. Thousands of political dissenters were imprisoned in labor camps; hundreds perished. Camara Laye, author of The Dark Child, held various government posts but became increasingly at odds with the Touré dictatorship. Laye was imprisoned briefly and eventually fled to Senegal, where he spent the rest of his life in exile.

Touré on cover of Time Magazine, 1959.
I left for the airport with Marie and my uncles. Marie was going with me as far as Dakar where she was to continue her education. Marie... I got into the plane with her. I was crying. We were all crying. Then the propeller began to turn. In the distance my uncles were waving to us for the last time. The earth, the land of Guinea, began to drop rapidly away....

“Are you glad to be going?” Marie asked me when the plane was nearing Dakar. “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

And when we landed she asked me: “Will you be coming back?” Her face was wet with tears. “Yes,” I said. “Yes...”

I nodded yes again as I fell back in my seat, for I did not want anyone to see my tears. Surely I would be coming back! I sat a long while without moving, my arms tightly folded to stifle the sobs that wracked me....

Later on I felt something hard when I put my hand in my pocket. It was the map of the métro....

The African Experience

THE 20TH CENTURY SAW THE DECLINE OF COLONIAL GOVERNMENTS AND THE RISE OF AFRICAN LITERATURE, WHICH GIVES VOICE TO THE UNIQUE EXPERIENCES OF THE CONTINENT’S DIVERSE PEOPLE.

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<th>THE BOOK</th>
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<td><strong>THINGS FALL APART</strong> (1958) by Chinua Achebe</td>
<td>Achebe’s book describes pre-colonial tribal life. The protagonist, Okonkwo, is a prosperous, self-made man who struggles to balance change with tradition.</td>
<td>Okonkwo exhibits fatal flaws like those of a hero in a Greek tragedy: a fiery temper and a tendency toward cowardice.</td>
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<td><strong>SO LONG A LETTER</strong> (1979) by Mariama Ba</td>
<td>A Senegalese woman recounts her family history, describing the difficulty of being one of three wives and the daily concerns of raising 12 children.</td>
<td>Written in the first person as a letter to a childhood friend, Ba’s novel is a simple portrait of life that readers will find both exotic and familiar.</td>
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<td><strong>HOUSEBOY</strong> (1956) by Ferdinand Oyono</td>
<td>A young man in Camaroon, fleeing the violence of his native village, finds refuge in a Catholic mission. He becomes the servant of a missionary and his beautiful wife, on whom the young man spies.</td>
<td>Writing from the point of view of the young African man observing his white employers, Oyono sparked a scandal in colonial Camaroon.</td>
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In the box below, identify whether the excerpt is specific to culture and location or represents a universal theme.

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Rewrite the excerpt from *The Dark Child*. Use the same universal themes, but place the story in a different location and culture. For example, imagine that a high school student in rural Arkansas has been awarded a scholarship to study art in New York City. Try to find dialogue from the original story that will fit into your story as well. Include details specific to time and place.