

THE SECRET OF THE RAIN FOREST

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CHAPTER I

When Coky Cockroach was growing up he had 93 brothers and 67 sisters. This was good because it meant he always had someone to play with.

Even if ninety of my brothers thirst for my blood, he told himself, three will still toss a ball with me. Even if sixty sisters hate my face, seven will still fix me up with their girlfriends.

Coky and his large family lived in the walls of Willowgrove Project B, a large group of brick buildings owned by the city. He spent most of his time in a school library, eating book-binding glue and reading pages as they fell loose from the covers.

Reading took Coky's mind off the depressing fact that almost everyone in the world hated cockroaches.

Coky's father, Sam, ran a grocery store at night. That is, he ran *around* a grocery store. Pepe's Bodega it was called.

"I *love* the night shift," he often told his family. "It's dark and no one's ever there."

But one night a masked thief broke into the bodega and switched on the light. "And there I *was*," Sam told his wife and kids breathlessly the next day. "Exposed!"

"Did he try to step on you, Dad?" screamed seventy-six of his children.

"No, he took one look, yelled, 'Cockroaches, cockroaches!' and ran out the door."

"Hooray," cried Sam's kids, twirling their



feelers wildly. "Hooray!"

"You're a hero, darling," said his wife, Carol. "You saved the store."

"Darn right, and I'm going back this morning and ask old Pepe for a reward."

"Um," said Coky, who loved his father, "maybe you shouldn't, Dad."

"Discussion's over," said the older cockroach. Because Sam felt that when you have over a hundred children, with dozens more on the way, it's bad policy to start taking advice from any one of them.

So later that morning Sam went back to see the bodega owner. Pepe wasn't there, but his wife was.

"My husband's in the basement cutting the wilted leaves off the lettuce," she told him. "Care to wait?"

"Definitely," said Sam, seating himself next to the cash register. He waited about three seconds, which was all the time Pepe's wife needed to remove her shoe and smack him flat.

His father's sad and untimely death was yet another reminder to Coky that cockroaches weren't very popular in the world. Feeling depressed, he decided to go to the school library and eat the glue out of an entire encyclopedia.

In a few weeks Coky ate his way to volume "R," which is where he came upon the word "roots." Reading about roots, he learned that just as trees and flowers have roots to suck nourishment out of the soil, so humans have family "roots" going deep into their histories.

Coky learned that black Americans had family roots in Africa and white Americans had roots in Europe. Some American Indians even had their roots in China.

Knowing about their roots, and the contributions of their peoples to civilization, gave many



Americans feelings of pride and satisfaction.

I wonder if cockroaches have roots, mused Coky. If we do, and I could find them, maybe I'd learn whether cockroaches have ever made a contribution to life on the planet. If not, he sighed, perhaps we deserve to be stepped on.

Coky decided to go out in the world and seek his roots.

CHAPTER 2

When cockroaches travel on business or for pleasure they never take suitcases. That's because they don't wear clothes, use cameras, or brush their teeth. They don't take along dollars or pesos, or guilders or credit cards either, because wherever they go they can always find tasty things to eat and a place to sleep, for free.

All cockroaches need when they leave home are a suitable direction and an interesting traveling companion.

"To find our roots," Coky asked his Uncle Ralph, "should I go north, south, east or west?"

"Not north," his uncle warned him. "It's too cold for cockroaches, and a lot too clean. East, you'll drown in oceans, west you'd die of thirst in deserts."

"How about south?"

"*That's* the way," Ralph nodded. "Go to steamy South America, to Brazilian rain forests, where roach wings shine like rainbows in the air, where roaches slither inches deep in caves of bat guano."

"Brazil sounds like paradise," sighed Coky. "I'm sure to find our roots down there."

All Coky needed now was an interesting traveling companion. That would be Chameeka Simmons, his best friend. Chameeka was a seven-year-old little girl who lived with her mother and five sisters in the same building, three flights up.

Leaping into a drain pipe, Coky sped up to the third floor. There he found his friend playing on the floor with a doll.

"Hi, Chameeka," said Coky, jumping onto Chameeka's shoe. "Why aren't you in school?"

“Hi, Coky,” smiled Chameeka. “I missed the bus.”

“Why did you miss it?”

“My Mom didn’t wake me up.”

“Why not?”

“She’s sick again, I guess.”

“Then why didn’t Sissy or Tiffany wake you up? Or Marissa or Heather or Melany?”

Chameeka shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just too small to look at.” She looked around. “Have you seen my grandma? She’s supposed to come today and bring quarters for the washing machine. Mom gave all her quarters to ‘Doc’ for medicine again.”

“Medicine?”

“You know,” said Chameeka softly. She hated saying the word. “Drugs,” she whispered.

“Chameeka,” Coky said then, “would you like to go on a trip with me?”

Chameeka immediately put down her doll and stood up. “I’m ready. Where will we go? Brooklyn?”

“No, to the rain forests and bat caves of Brazil. I want to find out if cockroaches are as dirty and worthless as people say, or if we have some purpose on earth. My roots should tell me.”

“My mom says cockroaches are dirty and ruin everything. She doesn’t know my best friend is a cockroach. You.”

Coky was touched. “Let’s go, he said gruffly.

“Just a minute.” Chameeka walked over and peered into a broken mirror on the wall. Peering back was a little girl, small for her age, with two missing front teeth, terrible hair, puffy eyes, and peanut butter. “I have to wash my face,” she said.

“No you don’t,” Coky told her. “A little peanut butter looks good on everyone.”

Chameeka laughed. Her friend was funny. “The bathtub’s stopped up, but I can take a whole bath in the kitchen sink. You have to promise not to look.”



“I promise.”

So while Coky sat on the window sill and stared through the dirty pane at the dirty windows of the brick building next door, Chameeka climbed from a chair into the kitchen sink, and bathed herself and washed her hair as carefully as she could.

Just as Chameeka finished and was drying herself on a kitchen towel, her sister Sissy returned home. “Why didn’t you wake me up for the bus?” Chameeka asked her.

Sissy stared at her sister. “You were up half the night watching TV. I tried, but I *couldn’t* wake you.”

“Mom lets me stay up,” pouted Chameeka.

“Mom’s sick. Anyway, don’t blame *me* if you miss school and sleep in class and can’t read or do arithmetic.”

“You miss school all the time too,” Chameeka told her, examining a seam in the side of her dress that had started to split open.

“I’m twelve. I can go to school when I want.”

“Can not.”

“Can *too*. Now get out of here,” said Sissy crossly. “I need privacy.”

“I’m going south,” Chameeka said, struggling into the dress and hearing it rip some more. “I’m going to help Coky find his roots.”

Sissy gave a loud sigh. “You and that cockroach again! You know, Mrs. Cook says your friend is eating up the whole school library.”

“Not my Coky. He never would.”

“Well then his brothers and sisters are. Now take your cockroach and scoot. It’s too crowded around here anyway. How long will you two be gone? Forever, I hope.”

“Years and years,” Chameeka told her. “I’ll be older than you are when we get back, and a lot bigger. So watch out!” She started toward the door.

“Chameeka,” scolded her sister, “think a little. Traveling costs money. You’ll need food and a hotel room. You’ll need a bus ticket and a suitcase.”

“No suitcase. I don’t have nothin’ to put in it.”

“Sure you do. You have clothes. You have a toothbrush.”

“My clothes are all dirty. Grandma didn’t come with the quarters yet. And I can put my toothbrush in my pocket.”

“You are a pitiful child,” sighed Sissy, hugging her little sister and kissing her cheek. “Now go play your travelin’ game in the hall, and take your friend with you. I don’t want no Coky Cockroach watchin’ *me* get undressed.”

CHAPTER 3

Out in the hall with Coky, Chameeka was worried. “Maybe Sissy is right,” she told her six-legged friend. “We won’t go very far without money.”

“No problem. How much do we need?”

“I guess a million dollars. People around here always say they need a million dollars for any little thing.”

“Follow me. There’s a million dollars in the sub-sub-basement.”

So Chameeka followed Coky down one flight of stairs, then down another and another. And another. As they descended, it got darker and the stairs got dirtier and smellier. Finally Chameeka stopped. “I’m afraid,” she told her friend.

“Don’t worry,” he reassured her. “It’s only dangerous if King ‘Doc’ Boss or one of his goons is around. But I don’t smell them anywhere.”

So Chameeka followed Coky until he stopped at a grey basement door.

“I’ll see if the coast is clear,” he told her, disappearing under the door. A moment later he was back. “You can go in. The light switch is just inside.”

Chameeka opened the door, pressed the switch, and her eyes grew round. A bare bulb hanging from the ceiling lighted a small room, its floor covered with empty soda cans, broken glass and dirt. There was a filthy table in one corner with awful stuff on it, some broken chairs, and a stained old mattress that was stinkier than anything she’d ever smelled.

“Great place, isn’t it?” grinned Coky. “Half my family vacations down here.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” said Chameeka, covering her nose with the hem of her skirt.

“Go ahead. No one would ever notice. Anyway, the money’s locked in that closet. The key’s hidden in that old shoe.”

Chameeka found the key and unlocked the closet. Inside were several cloth bags. Opening one, she looked inside. “It’s full of dollars,” she told Coky with round eyes.

“How many?”

“I don’t know. They’re in bunches with rubber bands around them.”

“Take a bag and let’s go.”

“But they don’t belong to us,” Chameeka objected.

“They don’t belong to anyone. This money is what King ‘Doc’ Boss took from a lot of people who live around here, people like your mom. How many dollars has your mom given ‘Doc’ for her ‘medicine?’”

“Zillions.”

“So you’re just taking some of them back. C’mon. Let’s go before ‘Doc’ or one of his goons finds us here.”

Alarmed at the thought, Chameeka grabbed one bag and ran as fast as she could out of the room and up the stairs.

“Let’s take a bus,” she told Coky. “I’ll give the driver one of the dollars.”

But when they got on the bus and Chameeka held out a bill to the driver, he frowned angrily. “You’re supposed to have *exact change*,” he told Chameeka. “How do you expect me to change a fifty-dollar bill?”

So Chameeka and Coky got off the bus. Chameeka looked at the money in her hand. “Five zero must be fifty,” she told him. She looked into the bag. “All the dollars are five zero.”

“So let’s take a taxi.”

They stood on the curb for a long time, but even when Chameeka waved, no taxis would stop for her. Then she saw a red sports car driven by Troy, one of her sisters’ friends. He pulled over to the curb when Chameeka waved at him.

“Would you drive me and Coky for fifty?” she asked, holding out a bill.

“No problem. Where’s Coky?”

“Here,” said Chameeka, pointing to her friend who was sitting on her shoulder.

When Troy saw Coky, his eyes grew big. “You gotta be kidding,” he said. “Stay outta my car, dirty girl.”

As she watched Troy drive off, tears ran down Chameeka’s face. “I *am* dirty,” she told Coky, “at least my dress is. And it’s too small. I have to buy a new one. Grandma always takes me to the thrift.”

“Let’s go,” said the cockroach.

On the way they passed a little shop selling children’s clothes. A red dress in the window caught Chameeka’s eye. “I really want that dress,” she told Coky. “And those red shoes. Do you think we have enough money?”

“To buy the dress or the whole building?”

“The dress, silly,” giggled Chameeka.

“Probably,” said the cockroach.

But at first the sales lady didn’t want to let Chameeka try anything on because her mother wasn’t with her. “You have to have money,” she said.

“I have fifty,” Chameeka said, holding up the bill.

“Well, that’s fine then,” smiled the lady in a more friendly way. “Just follow me to the try-on room.”

“I need a new dress because I’m going to Brazil,” said Chameeka, following the lady.

“That’s nice,” she said, helping Chameeka get undressed. “Are you flying?”

“Flying?” Chameeka looked at the woman a little sadly. She felt sorry for her because she was crazy. She pointed at her bare shoulders. “I don’t have wings. Didn’t you notice?”

“I mean in an airplane,” chuckled the woman.

“I knew that,” said Chameeka as smoothly as she could. “Of *course* we’re flying in an airplane.”

When Chameeka put on the red dress, the sales lady was pleased. “It looks lovely on you.”

“I need those red shoes, too,” Chameeka told her.

“All right. And I’ll give you free of charge some cotton socks and underwear and two love-bird berets for your hair.”

“Thank you.”

Before she left, the sales lady handed Chameeka a package containing her old clothes. The bundle was too heavy to carry along with the bag of money. “You need a suitcase for your trip,” she told Chameeka.

“Do you sell suitcases?”

The lady pointed to a shop down the street. “They sell them there. Ask for one with wheels so you can pull it behind you.”

The suitcase Chameeka bought was red, had four little rollers on the bottom, and a leash for pulling. She put her old clothes into the suitcase, and the bag of money. As she and Coky went back outside, Troy drove by again in his sports car.

“Hey,” he cried, slamming on the brakes. “You look great, girl. Did you lose that cockroach?”

“Yes,” lied Chameeka, because Coky was sitting on her new collar.

“Then hop in. Where do you want to go?”

“Brazil,” whispered Coky in Chameeka’s ear.

“Brazil,” said Chameeka, climbing into the car.

“Brazil’s in South America, so you’ll want the International Airport. That’s a long ways from here. You still got that fifty?”

“Yes,” said Chameeka, and gave him a bill.

Chameeka was hoping Troy wouldn't think it odd that a little girl had fifties, but he did.

"Not that I'm curious," he said, "but where does a kid like you get money like this?"

"My grandma gave it to me for my birthday," answered Chameeka, her heart pounding. She was starting to wish she'd never seen the money. First it had made her a thief, and now a liar. What if Troy told her sisters she had fifties? Her sisters would tell her mother and her mother would be awfully angry.

"I hope you're tellin' the truth," said Troy, "'cause they're sayin' on the street that some of King 'Doc' Boss' loot was stolen, about \$100,000. 'Doc's' real mad. When he finds the creep who stole his money, 'Doc's' gonna 'operate' on him."

"It wasn't me who stole it," said Chameeka, more scared than she'd ever been in her life. "It sure wasn't me."

CHAPTER 4

Chameeka was glad when they reached the airport. Soon she'd be far away from King 'Doc' Boss and his goons.

There were lots of people at the airport, unloading suitcases from cars and taxis onto the sidewalk. A man wearing a uniform asked Chameeka where her parents were. "We're going to Brazil," she told him.

The man pointed through some wide glass doors. "You see that long line of people where the sign says 'TICKETS?'"

"Yes," said Chameeka, not wanting to tell him she couldn't read the sign, but that she did know a long line of people when she saw one.

"Tell your folks they can buy tickets, get boarding passes, and check their bags right there. And you all better hurry because the flight to Brazil starts loading in twenty-five minutes."

Chameeka hurried toward the glass doors, but just as she was reaching out to push them the doors said "Uh!" and snapped apart like giant jaws.

She froze. "I don't trust those doors," she told Coky, eyeing them suspiciously. "I once got my finger caught in a door a lot smaller and slower." She stepped back and the doors said "Uh," again and jolted shut. She stuck a cau-

tious foot forward and they reopened. “Uh!”

She hesitated, back and forth. “Uh, uh,” said the doors. “Uh, uh.”

Chameeka stood a moment thinking over the situation. “Well,” she said at last, “I guess they won’t snap us because if they snap too many people the airplanes won’t have anybody to fly.”

Then, protecting her head with one arm, she ran through the doors as fast as she could, yanking the leash so that her suitcase leaped along behind her.

Safely at the end of the long ticket line, Chameeka turned to her friend. “Coky, why do people go places?”

“Because traveling’s fun, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Chameeka sighed. “Could you tell me when the fun starts?”

Because she was so small, it was hard for Chameeka to keep her place in the line, but at last her turn came.

“I want tickets to Brazil,” she told the ticket lady, who had to lean way over the counter to see her. “For me and Coky.”

“Is Coky your daddy or your mommy?” asked the lady.

Chameeka knew she’d have to lie again. “He’s my daddy.”

“Can you point to him?”

Coky was right there on her shoulder, but Chameeka wasn’t going to make *that* mistake again. Looking around the lobby, she saw a man sitting on a chair reading a newspaper. “That’s him,” she said, pointing. “That’s my daddy.”

The ticket lady looked surprised. “Your daddy’s *white*?”

Chameeka shrugged helplessly. “Why not? Lots of daddies are white. Bridgit’s daddy is white. So’s her mommy.”

“Well, let me see your passport, dear.”

Chameeka turned her head slightly to the left. “Do I have a passport?” she whispered to the insect on her collar.

“This is getting complicated,” Coky said. “Thank her and let’s scam. Head for the rest room.”

“Thank you I’ll get my grandma,” Chameeka told the lady, and walked as fast as she could away from the ticket counter.

Chameeka was glad there were cut-out pictures of men and women on the rest room doors. “Sometimes they have *words* on bathroom doors,” she told Coky, “so I have to wait and see who goes in.”

“This whole trip would be a lot easier if you could read and do arithmetic,” Coky told her a tad impatiently.

“If I could read and do arithmetic,” Chameeka snapped back, “I wouldn’t be

stealing money and telling lies and going to Brazil with no Coky Cockroach.”

But after she'd said it, Chameeka saw she'd hurt her friend's feelings.

“I'm sorry, Coky,” she told him. “You can't help it if you're a cockroach, but I guess I could learn to read.”

Inside the rest room a lady was diapering her baby while another daughter stood and watched. The girl was just Chameeka's height.

“My name is Chameeka,” Chameeka said to the girl. “I'm going to Brazil to see some roots.”

“I'm Maria,” said the girl. “That's my mama and little sister, Julia. We're going to Brazil because we live in Rio.”



There was a sign on the wall. “Can you read that?” Chameeka asked Maria.

“Of course I can. I'm seven. I can read English and Portuguese. Can't you read it?”

“Of course I can,” Chameeka told her. “I'm seven too. Do you have cockroaches in Brazil?”

Maria stared at her. “Cockroaches!” she cried. “Icky yucky! There are zillions in the rain forest. People come and spray them in our house, but they keep coming back. She looked suspiciously at Chameeka. “Why? Do you like icky cockroaches?”

“Me?” cried Chameeka. “No way! I *hate* icky cockroaches.” And she gave Coky a severe glance. “Icky yucky,” she added for good measure.

“Don't push it, girl,” Coky warned, but this time he didn't feel hurt. He knew Chameeka was only talking like that because she wanted the other girl to like her.

By now, Maria's mother had finished diapering Julia. “I can't believe they made me buy a ticket for your baby sister,” she told Maria. “What a rip-off.”

“They made us buy a ticket for Julia,” Maria explained to Chameeka, “because mama has to put her in a safety seat.”

“Why?”

“In case the plane crashes, of course.”

“Crashes!” exclaimed Chameeka, her eyes darting sideways at Coky. “Nobody never said nothin’ about plane crashes!”

“It’s just in *case*,” laughed Maria. “I’ve been flying since before I was born and we never crashed.”

But Chameeka was worried. Maybe she should go home and forget about Brazil. Then she remembered she couldn’t go home. King ‘Doc’ Boss and his goons were probably waiting for her.

Just then an announcement boomed over the public address system.

“It’s time to board the plane,” Maria’s mother told her, “but first we have to go through security, so we’d better hurry.”

“What’s security?” asked Chameeka, following her new friend out the door.

“That’s when cops look inside your bags with a machine to see if you have any bombs or guns. They don’t let stuff like that on planes.”

“Coky,” whispered Chameeka frantically. “What if they find the money?”

“Don’t worry,” he told her. “Stay close to Maria and her mom and be ready for anything.”

CHAPTER 5

Chameeka did as Coky said, hoping people would think she was part of Maria’s family. Soon they came to a place where there were uniformed security guards. Chameeka was so scared she almost couldn’t breathe.

Maria and her mother laid their handbags on a rubber belt that fed them into an x-ray machine. A lady guard looking at a screen could see all the things inside the handbags, even Maria’s pencils, comb, and coin purse, and her mother’s lipstick. Meanwhile, Maria and her mother stepped through a metal detector arch.

“Go on,” Coky told Chameeka. “Do what they did.”

Expecting the worst, Chameeka set her suitcase on the conveyer belt and watched it move toward a rubber curtain at the mouth of the machine. But just as it did so, Coky was off her shoulder. In a flash he flew through the air and landed on the guard lady’s hand.

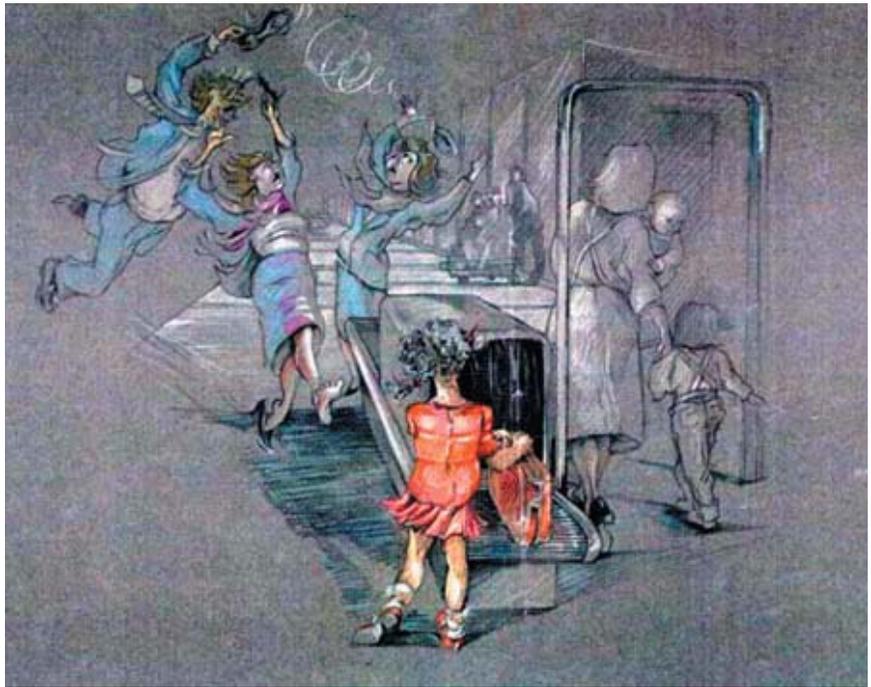
“Cockroach! Cockroach!” screamed the guard.

“Where? Where?” shouted everyone.

Ali Baba’s forty thieves armed with knives couldn’t have caused a greater panic. “Where?” cried the guards, pulling off their shoes and waving them about.

“He was on my hand!” Then she saw Coky on the x-ray machine. “There!” she cried. “Hurry. Squoosh him!”

But Coky jumped onto Chameeka’s suitcase as it came out the other side of the machine and a second later was safely back on his friend’s shoulder.



“Quick,” he told her. “Grab your bag and follow Maria.”

“Okay.” Walking as fast as she could, Chameeka hurried to overtake her friend. The machine had been scary, but if any goons were after her it would stop them from bringing their guns onto the plane.

Chameeka caught up with Maria and her mother as they stood on line to board the airplane. Maria’s mother handed three boarding passes to the lady airline attendant.

“One adult and two children?” said the attendant, staring in horror at the boarding passes because there was a cockroach sitting on one, waving his feelers at her. Trying not to scream, she tapped the pass on the wall behind her and the cockroach disappeared.

“That’s right, two children,” said Maria’s mother, meaning of course Maria and baby Julia. She hadn’t even noticed a little girl in a red dress standing close behind her.

“It’s a good thing you’re too small to look at,” chuckled Coky in Chameeka’s ear.

A moment later they were on the airplane. There were lots of seats, but some were already filled. Not wanting to be noticed, Chameeka took a seat far in the rear.

Slowly the plane filled with passengers. Three times Chameeka had to move because the seat she occupied was reserved for someone else. But finally

she found a seat that nobody seemed to want. It was next to a very kind-looking lady.

“Don’t you want to sit with your family?” she asked when Chameeka sat down.

“No,” said Chameeka.

“All right, then you can sit with me.” The lady asked a hostess to lift Chameeka’s red suitcase into the overhead luggage compartment and helped her fasten her seat belt.

“I’m hungry,” Chameeka whispered to Coky. “I should have brought a peanut butter sandwich.”

“I’ll take a sniff around.” It took Coky only seconds to follow his antennae to the plane’s kitchen. But nothing was cooking and the stainless steel counter tops were spotless.

However.... Coky waved his feelers. Another smell had reached him. Cockroaches! Wow!

His antenna nose led him to a tiny space under the food counter. There ten or twelve cockroaches were having a snooze. One, a crusty old roach, opened a bloodshot eye and examined the newcomer.

“I’m Coky,” said Coky.

“I’m Charles Lindbergh Roach,” said the other, getting slowly to his feet, “but you can call me Charlie.”

“Do you live on this airplane, Charlie,” Coky asked him, “or are you just going to Brazil?”

“The answer is, yes, I live on this plane. If this plane is going to Brazil, then the answer is yes, I’m going to Brazil. I go wherever the plane goes. I’m a flying cockroach.”

“How fascinating!” exclaimed Coky. “I’ve always wanted to meet a flying cockroach. Travel must teach you a lot. Do you know anything about our roots?”

“A little,” nodded Charlie, offering Coky a soft piece of Styrofoam to sit on, and settling down on a half-eaten grape. “I know that my great great great — etc. etc. — grandparents used to fly the mail between Chicago and St. Louis. That was back in the good old days, when airplanes were made out of wood, canvas and glue. No lousy airline food in *those* days — cockroaches ate the glue right out of the plane. Sometimes the wings even fell off. Those were the days!”

“I eat glue too,” cried Coky, “out of book bindings. I have a lot in common with flying cockroaches.” He sighed enviously. “What a life. Travel, adventure. You guys have it made!”

Charlie shook his head. "It's not all parties and pigouts. For one thing, airplanes today fly very high. The air up there is dry, and that's bad news. We cockroaches, as you know, love damp."

"I love damp," confessed Coky. "I *love* it. Damp and glue."

"Also, planes today are kept very clean and there's lots of roach powder everywhere. The roach powder's a lot tastier than the airline food, of course, but if you eat too much it'll kill you."

"My friend Chameeka needs a peanut butter sandwich," Coky told him. "Do you know when meals are served around here?"

"First we leave the ground," said Charlie. "When we get high enough and far enough so that nobody can jump out, they serve the food."

As he spoke, the sleeping roaches began to stir and waken. The old flyer listened a moment. "We're taking off," he said.

"I'd better get back to my friend," Coky told him. "Great talking to you." As Coky flashed back up the aisle, the plane rumbled and roared all around him.

Chameeka had exchanged seats with Mrs. Peregrine and was now sitting next to the window. Coky jumped onto her shoulder and looked out. "Hey, Chameeka, *look!*"

Chameeka turned her head. "Oh, Coky," she cried, "we're off the ground! We're *flying.*"

The plane flew higher. As it turned to the right, Chameeka could see the whole city below, every building, street and tree.

"Which is *my* house?" she asked Mrs. Peregrine excitedly.

"What's your address?"

"Willowgrove Project B."

The woman leaned over Chameeka so she could see below. "I think Willowgrove is that bunch of brick buildings right down there."

Chameeka looked where Mrs. Peregrine was pointing. That was where she lived, all right. She tried to figure out which windows in the brick buildings belonged to her apartment. Were any of her sisters at home? What would they think to know she was flying over their heads, going to Brazil?

Suddenly Chameeka wished she was home with her sisters. *They* were the lucky ones. They were home, together. Already she missed her family terribly.

"I don't know why they call it Willowgrove," Mrs. Peregrine was saying. "I see no trees at all around those buildings."

"There's one icky tree, but I guess it's going to die like the others did," Chameeka told her. "They call us Willowgrove because they want us to sound pretty, but we're not."

“Well, dear, that’s very perceptive of you,” smiled Mrs. Peregrine sadly. “But *you’re* pretty, and a smart little girl too.”

“I’m not smart,” Chameeka told her. “I’m seven and small for my age and I can’t read.”

“Then it’s about time you learned.”

Just then the plane turned the other way and the city disappeared. All Chameeka could see was blue sky and clouds.

“They should be serving food any time now,” Coky told her.

“Did you tell them I want a peanut butter sandwich?”

“I don’t smell any peanut butter,” he told her. “I think it’s a choice between chicken a la king and baked lasagna.

Chameeka sighed with disappointment. “Well, like my grandma says, ‘Thank God we’ve got anything to eat at all.’”

CHAPTER 6

The plane flew higher and higher and farther and farther toward the south.

After the passengers ate, the lights were turned off and a movie was played on a screen at the front of the passenger cabin. Chameeka was too small to see the screen over the seats ahead of her, so she went to sleep. While she slept, Mrs. Peregrine read a book she’d brought with her.

Coky shared some crumbs with Charlie, then decided to take a tour of the plane.

“The cockpit’s worth a look,” Charlie told him. “Straight ahead and up the winding stairs.”

“Great,” said Coky. “I’m gone.”

But Charlie stopped him. “A word of caution,” he said. “We roaches like to keep a low profile around here. Seeing cockroaches on a plane freaks out the flight crew and passengers.”

“They’ll never know I’m here,” Coky assured him.

“I mean *really*,” said Charlie. “Cockroach sightings can cause bumpy landings, labor unrest, strikes, groundings and massive doses of roach powder.”

“Gotcha.”

Following Charlie’s directions, Coky soon found himself in the cockpit. Two

pilots were sitting at the controls, a lady and a man. In front of the pilots and up over their heads were dozens of what Coky thought were gas, electric and water meters. But really they were compasses, fuel and oil gages, navigational instruments, altimeters, artificial horizons and things like that.

Remembering his friend's warning, Coky crept very slowly up to the front window. Wow! What a view! Earth and sea and sky.

Absorbed in the spectacle, he almost forgot where he was. Suddenly angry words filled him with terror.

"That's the third I've seen this month!"

"I'll get 'im."

His face pressed to the window, Coky heard the pilot behind him quietly release his seat belt and bend slowly down to remove his shoe. He didn't wait to hear more. He was *out* of there, *goodbye!*

As he fled, he could hear the lady pilot saying, "I don't care. *This* time I'm telling the union."

Oh, heck, thought Coky, racing back up the aisle. I never experienced a bumpy landing before, but I know I'll hate it.

CHAPTER 7

When Chameeka awakened from her nap, Mrs. Peregrine put away her book. "Well," she told her young friend, "we still have a long flight ahead of us. I used to teach school before I retired. Would you like me to teach you reading?"

"Oh, yes," said Chameeka.

At that, Mrs. Peregrine reached into a traveling bag under her seat and brought up a spiral notebook and a pencil. "Where will we start?" she asked Chameeka. "How much do you already know?"

"I can count to twenty and I can say the alphabet. A, B, C, D, E, F, G...." And she recited the entire alphabet except L, which she always forgot. "That's about it," she shrugged.

"Wonderful," said Mrs. Peregrine. "That's a beginning. Let's get right to work."

Chameeka wiggled in her seat with excitement and grinned up at the grey-haired lady. She wasn't feeling sleepy at all. Maybe if she worked real hard she could catch up with the other kids in her class.

The big plane droned on through the sky. A flight attendant came by with soda and orange juice. Chameeka asked for a glass of each because the dry air made her thirsty. But aside from that, she and Mrs. Peregrine hardly looked up from their work.

“You’re doing beautifully, Chameeka,” Mrs. Peregrine would tell her pupil from time to time. And once she said, “I can’t understand why you weren’t reading and doing arithmetic a year ago.”

Chameeka didn’t want to tell her she always slept in class because she stayed up late watching TV, but there were enough people angry at her mom already. And anyway, it was her own fault too.

“Well, you seem very motivated to learn now,” Mrs. Peregrine told her.

“Oh, I am,” Chameeka told her. “I want to count a whole bag of fifties and know which bathroom is for girls when there’s no picture on the door.”

“I suppose those reasons are as good as any,” laughed Mrs. Peregrine.

Good reasons or no, learning was hard work. But the hours flew by and Chameeka was surprised when the pilot announced that their plane was about to land.

“Look below,” Mrs. Peregrine told her. “That’s Rio.”

Chameeka put her face to the window. Below was a city sitting on the shore of a sparkling blue ocean.

“We’re here,” she whispered to Coky.

But Coky couldn’t answer. He’d fallen asleep with his mouth open and the air had dried his throat.

After the plane had bounced twice — rather hard — and come to a stop on the ground, Mrs. Peregrine got Chameeka’s suitcase down from the overhead rack, kissed her goodbye, and quickly disappeared in the exiting crowd of passengers.

Grabbing her bag by the handle, Chameeka had to struggle through the crowded aisle to find Maria and her mother.

“In Customs they open all our bags and look through them,” Maria told her, as Chameeka followed them off the plane. “I hope you don’t have any contraband.”

“I don’t know. What is it?”

“Stuff people try to smuggle into the country. Of course, *we* never have contraband in *our* suitcases,” she added smugly.

“What if someone had a million dollars they’d stolen in a suitcase?”

“They’d find it in a *second* and they’d go right to jail.”

Maria’s words worried Chameeka a lot. “What if they find the fifties?” she

asked Coky as they stood in the Customs line.

“Fear not,” Coky told her. “I have my shtick.”

True to his word, just as an inspector reached for Chameeka’s bag, Coky jumped through the air and landed on his hand.

“Cockroach, cockroach,” shouted the inspector shaking his hand and flinging Coky halfway across the room. The startled cockroach landed upside down on the floor in a moving army of feet and suitcases on wheels.

Terrified, with no place to hide, Coky ran as fast as he could in several directions at once. Everyone in the place was trying to step on him. There was so much jumping around that the customs hall jived like a disco.

Chameeka wanted to call for help, but instead had the good sense to grab her suitcase and run out the door into the main terminal. Seconds later Coky joined her, out of breath but none the worse for his experience. Together they headed toward the exit.

“Oh, Coky, we made it!” cried Chameeka as the glass doors snapped shut behind them. “We’re in Brazil.”

For a moment she and Coky stood on the curb in front of the airline terminal, breathing in the warm, humid, late afternoon air which carried so many new odors, looking at the new sights and listening to the sounds of a different city.

Suddenly two men walked up. “Is your name Chameeka Simmons?” one of them asked.

“Y...yes,” she replied, staring at their faces with round eyes. The men looked very unfriendly.

“We have a message for you from ‘Doc,’” said the taller one, with a sneer: “Welcome to Rio.”

Then, without another word, he picked Chameeka up under one arm and her suitcase with the other, and placed them in the back seat of a grey limousine with black windows.

He and another man got in, closed the door, and the car slowly pulled away from the curb. Terrified at what was happening, Chameeka banged on the windows with her fists and shouted for help. Lots of people were outside, but no one paid her any attention because they couldn’t see her through the dark glass.

“I’m too small to look at,” she sighed finally, flopping back in the big leather seat.

She watched as one of the men reached inside her suitcase, pulled out a fistful of money, and waved it, laughing, at the people outside. Of course, nobody could see the money either.

“Don’t worry,” Coky said in her ear. “I’ll get us out of this.”

“Oh sure,” Chameeka whispered. “Like you got us *into* this.”

All the same, deep down Chameeka knew Coky hadn’t *made* her do anything. He hadn’t *forced* her to take the money or go to Brazil with him. She could have refused at any time.

Whatever happens, Chameeka told herself, I’m just as much to blame as he is.

This thought didn’t make Chameeka feel any better, but at least she was being truthful again. She promised herself that from now on she’d always be truthful, except with goons and kidnappers. She only hoped it wasn’t too late to begin.

CHAPTER 8

After leaving the airport, the car followed a wide freeway. Where were they taking her? The men spoke between themselves in a language neither she nor Coky understood. It was Portuguese, the language of Brazil.

“I think I’d like to go home now,” Chameeka said when there was a pause in the conversation.

The men looked at her, then laughed gruffly. “That ain’t for us to decide,” said one. “Who knows? Maybe ‘Doc’ wants us to ransom you. Your folks would probably pay a lot of money to get you back.”

“Money?” Now it was Chameeka’s turn to laugh. “Nobody’s gonna pay money to get *me* back,” she assured them. She crossed her fingers to protect her for the lie: “I can’t even read.”

The men looked at her in amazement. “You can’t *read*? How old are you?”

“Seven.”

“Seven years old and can’t *read*?” The men looked at each other and shook their heads sadly. “Nobody’s gonna pay much for a dumb kid like you.”

“Anyway, my mom doesn’t have any money. She gave it all to King ‘Doc’ Boss. You better let me go home.”

“We got the loot,” one goon shrugged to his pal. “Let’s let the kid out in front of some hotel.”

"I guess so," said the other. But then he frowned and scratched his head. "Wait a minute. How could a kid like her, who can't even read, steal a bag of cash and get all the way to Brazil with it?"

"It was easy," Chameeka told him. "I lied and lied and Coky helped me."

Inside Chameeka's collar, Coky hit himself on his forehead with his front foot. Why did Chameeka have to mention him?

"Coky? I knew she had to have an accomplice," one of the men said. He put his face very close to Chameeka's. "*Who...is...Coky?*"

"Go ahead," said Coky in Chameeka's ear. "Tell them the truth. Do it. Do it."

But Chameeka pressed her lips together. What if there was a can of insect spray in the car? One whoosh and Coky would be a dead cockroach.

"Who's Coky?" The man put his face even closer. Coky was itching to jump right onto his nose, but didn't. If the kidnappers panicked, Chameeka might get hurt.

"Coky's my cockroach friend," said Chameeka, too terrified to remain silent any longer.

"Your *cockroach friend!*" The kidnappers burst out laughing. But then they grew angry again. "We were going to let you go," one said, "but unless you tell us the truth, we'll have to take you with us to our camp."

"Coky *is* a cockroach," Chameeka told them. "That's the truth. We came to Brazil to find some roots."

But the men weren't listening. They spoke in Portuguese for a few minutes, then said something to the driver. After that they sat back silently, their arms crossed on their chests.

The car drove and drove. It was getting dark. After several miles, as scared as she was, Chameeka fell asleep. She awoke once, just in time to see them drive through a gate in a tall fence. There was a white sign with black printing on the gate. In the distance some small airplanes were parked. The car drove up to the end of a wing and stopped.

Thinking she was still asleep, one of the men lifted Chameeka in his arms and climbed into the back seat of the plane. Two other men climbed into the front seats. The engine coughed, sputtered and roared, and the plane started to move forward.

A moment later, Chameeka and Coky were back in the sky.

CHAPTER 9

The little plane, its lights flashing, flew up from the darkening land into the last rays of sunlight high above the earth. As they flew, the land and sky grew darker. Soon the hills and forests were too dark to see. Then the only light came from stars, from the windows of villages and distant farms, and from the red glow of the plane's instrument panel.

Chameeka slept, exhausted from a day of excitement, travel and study. In her collar the wakeful cockroach kept guard, ready to shout in her ear and warn if danger threatened.

Hours later a car horn awakened Chameeka. She sat up startled and looked around. Where was she? In another car?

The night air was hot and steamy, like Willowgrove Project B in August. But there were no buildings here, no city, no sisters or grandma, just a dirt road, trees, and the distant barking of large dogs. In the headlight beams Chameeka saw another sign written in large black letters. Then the car drove on, past the sign and through a tall fence.

Asleep again, Chameeka didn't feel it when strong arms lifted her out of the car, carried her into a house, and laid her gently down on a bed. Overhead a ceiling fan spun with a dull whirring sound, but Chameeka didn't see or hear it either.

Soon it grew very quiet in the house, except for the fan and sounds of people snoring in other rooms and the distant screams and laughter of wild animals. Only Coky — and thousands of cockroaches and night insects of all kinds that lived in the house and around it — were wide awake.

As soon as he was sure Chameeka was in no immediate danger, Coky was out the door. What a paradise! The night air was like chocolate cake just out of the oven — so hot, dark and moist you could cut it with a knife. The sounds of unseen insects nibbling and a rain forest growing, filled his ears.

The smell of cockroach lay like perfume on the land.

"When will it be light?" Coky asked some roaches on the doorstep of the house. A friendly roach named Eduardo, who spoke with an accent, told Coky that daylight was only minutes away.

Coky decided that now was the time for Chameeka to escape, before the kidnappers woke up. Once she was safely inside the rain forest, those goons would never find her.

"I'll guide her to some humans who work a few miles away," Eduardo told Coky. "They'll get her home."

Coky awakened Chameeka by shouting in her ear. "Wake up! We're *outta* here."

"Okay."

Getting right up, Chameeka found her suitcase in a corner of the room. Inside it were her old clothes.

"I want to change," she told Coky. "Shut your eyes."

Puzzled, he did as she asked. "I thought that old dress was too small for you."

"It is," she told him, "but I don't want the new one. I don't want anything I bought with that money."

"But you might need some cash for the trip home," Coky argued. "Gimme a sec and I'll find out where they stashed it."

"I don't *want* it," Chameeka told him firmly. "It's bad money. All it can buy is misery."

"It's your army," shrugged Coky.

A few minutes later Chameeka and her friend slipped out the front door. Coky introduced her to their guide, Eduardo. "You might have trouble seeing me on the forest floor," Eduardo told her, "so I'll cling to the hem of your dress and shout directions."

"Okay," Chameeka nodded. "I'll follow my hem."

They then entered a very warm, damp forest of very tall trees. The strange thing about the forest was that none of the trees seemed to have any branches or leaves, just tall trunks.

"Oh, look!" cried Chameeka suddenly. Beautiful little creatures with colorful wings danced in the air. Fairies, she wondered? Then, remembering there was no such thing as fairies, she decided they must be butterflies. "I've never seen a real butterfly before," she told Coky and Eduardo. "They're beautiful!"

"There are lots of butterflies in the rain forest," Eduardo told her, "but these guys are cockroaches."

"*Cockroaches*," cried Chameeka in amazement.

"Wow," said Coky, feeling a strange sense of pride. "No kidding?"

"What you see here is nothing," continued their Brazilian friend. "There are thousands of *kinds* of cockroaches in the rain forest."

Leaning happily against Chameeka's collar, Coky sniffed the air with his antennae. "I can almost *smell* my roots," he told her. "They smell like a world full of eating, breathing, fluttering cockroaches."

"I like this idea of looking for our roots," Eduardo told him. "Now that your friend is safe from those bad men, I'll take you to visit the oldest, biggest, wisest cockroach of us all."

"Who's that?"

"The head of the *Blaberus giganteus* family. They mostly live in leaf litter on the forest floor, but Old Blaberus, as he's called, has moved up. He'll answer any questions you have."

"Will he tell us where to find a subway?" asked Chameeka. "Or a bus going home?"

"Is that all?" laughed Eduardo.

"No," she admitted wistfully. "Maybe a peanut butter sandwich."

"I'm sure he'll arrange for you to eat and drink," Eduardo told her. "Old Blaberus lives in the canopy. It's like another country, a rich, beautiful land."

"Is the canopy far?" asked Chameeka who was feeling very hungry.

"Only a hundred feet from here," Eduardo told her. "A hundred feet straight up."

Tilting back her head, Chameeka saw, far above, a thick tangle of branches and leaves that completely hid the sky like a roof.

"These are funny trees," she told Eduardo. "Where I live the trees don't have roofs. *Houses* have roofs."

"There are so many trees here," he explained, "that they all struggle to grow tall and put their leaves in the sunlight. When they arrive at the top they spread out their branches and become part of the canopy. The canopy is a place with water and plenty of sunshine, flowers, insects and animals."

Chameeka walked on, deeper into the shadowy forest, the two roaches clinging to her dress. She was glad that every step took her further away from "Doc's" goons.

"Left," Eduardo would call from time to time, pointing with his feelers. Or, "Right." Sometimes Chameeka would trip over a root and land face down on the leaf-littered forest floor.

Then a special tree caught her guide's eye. "That's a waxy-leafed Bromeliad," he told them. "These trees hold gallons and gallons of rain water in their 'tanks.' They use the water to make compost from the leaf litter."

"What's compost?" asked Chameeka.

"Compost is what trees eat," explained Eduardo. "Mainly, we're talking about

rotten leaves. Trees don't have mouths, so they have to wait until the leaves lie around awhile and get chewed up by insects and animals and broken down into something small that they can absorb through their roots. Rain water helps the leaves decay.

"Old Blaberus lives up a Bromeliad," Eduardo continued. "He's got a really nice fern garden. You'll see."

"But how will I get up there?" asked Chameeka. "None of these trees has branches low enough to climb. I'll need the tallest ladder in the world."

"I have no ladder," said Eduardo, "but I do have a friend who owes me a favor. She'll get you up to the canopy in nothing flat."

His words worried Chameeka. "You don't mean she's gonna *scare* me up there, do you?" she asked. "I'd have to be awfully scared to get up one of these trees fast without a ladder."

Eduardo laughed. "My friend is very tall. She'll let you walk up her neck."

"Is she a giraffe?" asked Chameeka hopefully.

"No, a boa."

"Noaboa," repeated Chameeka. The word sounded nice. Noaboa. "Where does Noaboa hang out?"

"Would you believe right *next to you*?"

"Next to..." Chameeka looked sideways, but all she saw was an old vine. She looked closer. A fat vine with dark markings. And a head. "Aiii!" cried Chameeka, running behind a tree. "That's a snake."

"You guessed it," said Eduardo. "She's a boa constrictor named Natalie. Let her sniff your skirt."

Paralyzed with fright, Chameeka stood very still while the serpent's nose approached her, moving slowly back and forth over and around her like a metal detector at school. Then Eduardo leaped onto Natalie's head and whispered in her ear.

The boa nodded gracefully. Lifting her long neck toward the tree, she slid the first length of her body around its tall trunk.

"Just walk up her," Eduardo shouted down. "Hold onto the tree and walk up her."

"I can't!" cried Chameeka, terrified.

"You *can*," Coky urged her.

I must be *crazy*, Chameeka told herself, stepping gingerly onto the snake's rubbery back. Hugging the tree with both arms, she inched sideways and upwards until she reached the snake's head. "Now what?" she asked. But before

anyone could answer, the snake began to move under her feet, oozing up the tree trunk.

Chameeka felt her grip on the tree loosen. She was going to lose her balance and fall!

But instead of falling, she sat down...right on the snake's tail which Natalie had brought up to give her a seat.

"Oh, thank you, Natalie," said Chameeka, grateful to ride the rest of the way in comfort.

Soon they reached the canopy of branches and leaves. "Grab a branch," Eduardo told Chameeka, and step onto it."

When Chameeka had transferred her weight onto a branch, the snake bent herself all the way backwards and dropped quickly out of sight.

"I hope she won't forget where she left us," Chameeka told Coky, climbing up through the branches toward the light. "I'll need her to get me down again."

"Getting back down is never a problem," laughed Coky.

"Thanks a lot," Chameeka replied.



CHAPTER 10

A moment later Chameeka's head popped through the canopy of leaves. "Oh!" Sunshine and blue skies. With twigs and vines pulling at her dress, she climbed out of the green tangle and stood upright on a sturdy branch.

There, like a giant in a story book, she looked out over a vast land of tiny fern forests and mossy ponds where frogs and salamanders splashed. Birds, butterflies and roaches flitted everywhere, like colorful confetti thrown into the air.

But she couldn't walk forth into this strange, new land. One wrong step and she risked wiping out an entire village of tiny creatures, or falling a hundred feet to her death.

"Chameeka Simmons, I presume?"

Chameeka looked down. At her feet was the largest bug she'd ever seen. Shimmering gold, with black spots on its wing, it was bigger than her hand, almost as big as her foot.

"I'm Chameeka," she told it. "Are you Old Blaberus?"

"That's right," replied the head of the *Blaberus giganteus* family, raising his wings slightly in greeting. "I've been expecting you and your friends. Welcome to my hundred ninety-ninth birthday."

"I didn't know it was your birthday," said Chameeka. "On the plane I learned counting to a hundred, but a hundred and ninety-nine sounds very old."

"Older than you think," he smiled, winking at Coky. "Why don't you all take seats?"

Seating herself on the canopy wasn't easy, but after crashing about a bit, and almost falling through the branches twice, Chameeka finally found a comfortable spot.

Coky was very impressed by the fern garden. "I love it," he told Eduardo. Seating themselves by a little pond half filled with sweet-smelling compost, the two cockroaches dipped their hind legs in the water happily.

Chameeka was glad to find lunch had been prepared, a tasty salad "part fruit, part root, part leaf, and part beef."

"Anyway, we *call* it 'beef,'" her elderly host smiled mysteriously. "Jungle beef."

Chameeka, who was almost hungry enough to eat Coky, decided not to ask what jungle beef really was. She didn't want to make a mess by throwing up.

While Chameeka ate her rain forest salad, Coky came straight to the point.

"I've come to Brazil to find my roots," he told Old Blaberus. "I want to know whether cockroaches deserve being whacked with shoes, or if we serve some purpose on earth."

The wise old insect nodded. "Cockroaches," he told Coky, "were on the earth long before human beings. Humans have been around for perhaps 2 million years, and shoes for maybe ten thousand. But cockroaches have been on this earth 350 million years."

"Three hundred and fifty million years!" exclaimed Coky. "Wow! What've we been *doing* all that time?"

“Our duty, of course. Chewing and digesting. Eating and being eaten. Since the beginning, roaches have eaten many things — leaf litter on the forest floor, pterodactyl guano, termite and reptile eggs, and eventually moth larvae and dead mammals. In turn *we* were eaten by wasps, mites and eventually monkeys.”

“Monkeys!” cried Chameeka. “Monkeys eat icky cockroaches?”

“Why not?” asked Old Blaberus, who fortunately didn’t know what “icky” meant. Cockroaches are part of the Food Chain which is an important part of the Cycle of Life. From all this eating and digesting comes compost for trees and plants. And can you just imagine how much carbon dioxide is produced when billions of cockroaches exhale? Plants breathe in that carbon dioxide. It makes them grow. Cockroach breath has helped cover the earth with forests and jungles.”

“Well, there’s your answer,” Eduardo told Coky. “Cockroaches *do* serve a purpose on earth. We help make compost and carbon dioxide.”

“That’s fine for plants,” replied Coky, “but I’m not worried about *trees* stepping on me. What good do cockroaches bring *humans*?”

Old Blaberus smiled. “Without plants,” he told Coky, “humans would have no oxygen to breathe. So by helping plants to grow, you also help humans.”

Coky was amazed. Then cockroaches *did* have a reason for being on the earth. They *did* have roots deep in history, and a proud story to tell. But something still bothered him.

Eduardo saw his friend frowning. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“The matter is,” Coky told him, “I’m not part of the Cycle of Life. Coky Cockroach doesn’t chew leaf litter and bat guano and make compost for forests. I live in a housing project wall and eat glue out of books.”

Chameeka stared at him. “Coky, *you*?” she cried. “*You’re* the one eating up our school library?”

Coky hung his head.

“I can’t believe it,” scolded Chameeka. “Mrs. Cook the librarian’s always complaining about pages falling out. And it was *you* all the time.”

“Chameeka,” cried Coky, “I *love* eating glue. I *love* reading pages. Why should a cockroach with a brain like mine run around a bodega all the nights of his life? No! I need food for *thought*.”

“Well,” huffed Chameeka, “if you’re so smart, you better do something less destructive with your life. Then maybe people will like you.”

“But what can I do?”

Chameeka shrugged. “I don’t know. *I’m* not a cockroach.”

Coky turned to Old Blaberus. “O.B.,” he said, “times have changed. There

are zillions of cockroaches like me who aren't part of nature. We eat glue and trash, run around drains, make people crazy, and give kids asthma. Isn't there some worthwhile occupation for city cockroaches?"

Old Blaberus was about to reply when an odor on the breeze caught his attention. Chameeka smelled it too. "Is that smoke?" she asked.

But the ancient insect didn't need to reply; Chameeka's answer was already spread halfway across the sky, a great, grey plume of smoke.

"Men are burning the rain forest," said Old Blaberus sadly. "Our work of millions of years is being destroyed."

"But *why?*" gasped Chameeka.

"For farmland. So that humans can raise cattle for something called hamburgers."



"But that's *good*," said Chameeka. "Hamburgers with catsup are *good*."

"Perhaps, but the rain forest can't grow back after it's been burned. After a year or two of cattle grazing, the land turns into desert. If mankind doesn't stop, soon the entire Amazonian rain forest, with its insects, animals and oxygen-producing trees will be gone forever."

But Chameeka's first worry wasn't trees. "Will the fire come here?" she asked, looking around nervously for Natalie.

"That depends on which way the wind blows," said Eduardo.

"Then maybe we better go." Chameeka turned to their host. "Will you come with us, Old Blaberus? You can ride on my hem."

"I don't think so," said the ancient one. "Today I'm one hundred and ninety-nine. Cockroaches only live to be two hundred, so what's the use of running?"

"But a year more is a *lot* to live," Chameeka told him. "Sometimes I feel I've been seven years old *forever*. If you stay alive, maybe Coky and I can come back for your next birthday."

"Then you'll have to come back tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll be two hundred."

His words didn't make sense. "You'll be two hundred years old *tomorrow?*"

she asked.

“Two hundred *days* old. Cockroaches live two hundred *days*. Tomorrow will be my two hundredth *birthday*.”

Chameeka stared at Old Blaberus as his meaning hit her. Of course he didn't want to run from the fire if he was going to die tomorrow anyway.

“But still, that's *terrible*,” she cried.

Old Blaberus smiled. “It's the destiny of us all,” he told her. “We are *all* part of the Cycle of Life. Death is part of it too.”

“Natalie's here,” announced Eduardo just then.

Sure enough, the snake's head was poking up through the branches.

“When Natalie smelled the smoke she knew we'd be needing her in a hurry,” he told Chameeka. “We better go.”

Bidding farewell to Old Blaberus, Chameeka climbed onto Natalie's tail, her two friends clinging to her dress. A fast ride and they were back on the ground. Chameeka patted the boa's head. “Goodbye, Natalie. Thank you very much for the lift.”

Her words ended in a cough. The smoke had already reached them. With Eduardo shouting directions, Chameeka ran and ran until they reached a place upwind of the fire. They were no longer in danger and from there it was only a short walk to the camp where humans lived and worked.

When the people saw Chameeka coming out of the forest, her clothes torn by twigs and her hair and face dirty, everybody rushed to help her. Since no one spoke English, they offered her food and water, and made signs for her to sit and be patient, pointing at the sky. Thinking they wanted her to pray, Chameeka politely put her hands together. “I'll pray for the A train,” she whispered to Coky. “It's an express.”

After a while, Chameeka heard the sound of an engine. Soon a small airplane landed on a dirt road right next to the camp.

The pilot of the plane spoke only Portuguese and ‘pilot English’. “Roger,” he said. “Understand you are declaring an emergency. Destination Rio.”

“I'll say goodbye now,” Eduardo told Chameeka and Coky as they prepared to board the little plane. “Get home safely.”

Chameeka and Coky thanked their friend for all his help. Then Chameeka fastened her seat belt, the pilot pushed in the throttle, and the plane climbed up the sky.

CHAPTER 11

Before reaching Rio, the pilot radioed ahead. When they landed, a police car and ambulance were waiting.

“I don’t need you,” Chameeka told the medics. “I’m fine.”

But they examined her anyway, because medics never trust what people say about themselves. After bandaging some cuts and scratches on her arms and legs, they let Chameeka get into the police car which drove her to the airport. As they drove up to the terminal, Chameeka saw her grandmother standing on the curb.

“Grandma!” she cried, running with outstretched arms. A moment later she was wrapped in a warm embrace.

Her grandmother was crying. “We were so worried about you, baby,” she told Chameeka. “Your mama wasn’t feeling good enough to come, but when they told me you were kidnapped and they’d pay my ticket down here, I had to come and bring you home.”

“How did they know I was kidnapped?” asked Chameeka in amazement. “I shouted and shouted but nobody saw me.”

“That lady over there saw them put you in the car.”

Turning, Chameeka saw Mrs. Peregrine. She ran to her teacher and hugged her.

“The car was gone before I could get out my glasses and read the license number,” Mrs. Peregrine said. “Luckily you had told me your name and where you lived. I can’t imagine how you got all the way to Brazil by yourself.”

“I wasn’t by....” But she decided not to try and explain. “Did they catch the goons?”

“Not yet,” said a policeman standing nearby who spoke English with an accent. “Do you know anything that could help us find them?”

Chameeka thought and thought. She told them she’d flown somewhere in a very small plane, but couldn’t describe the plane or where it had taken her. “There was a sign with writing on it at the airport.”

“What did it say?”

“I don’t know,” shrugged Chameeka.

“Try and remember,” said Mrs. Peregrine. “I know you can read because I taught you. Now think very hard. Even if the words were Portuguese, just pronounce the letters like you saw them.”

So Chameeka closed her eyes and thought as hard as she could. After a moment or two she remembered the letters on the sign and told the policeman what they’d said and he wrote it in his book.

“You see, Chameeka? I told you you could read!” cried Mrs. Peregrine. “It just takes trying real hard.”

“There was a sign at the other airport too,” Chameeka told them. After thinking very hard she remembered what that sign had said also.

“We’ll find those kidnappers now,” said the policeman, shutting his notebook. “And they’ll lead us right to King ‘Doc’ Boss. There’s a ten-thousand-dollar reward out on this gang. I’ll do my best to see that it goes to you, little lady.” And the officer patted Chameeka on the head.

Chameeka, her grandmother, and Mrs. Peregrine were very happy to hear of the reward, and they all hugged each other, laughing and crying.

“Mrs. Peregrine,” said the grandmother, “I’d swear that child has grown an inch since I last saw her. Or do you think she’s just standing taller because she’s proud of what she’s done?”

Mrs. Peregrine smiled fondly at her student. “Maybe both,” she replied.

Just then a television crew arrived with their cameras. “What will you do if you get the reward money?” the TV reporter asked Chameeka, smiling at the camera.

Chameeka thought a moment. “My mom’s sick,” she told the microphone. “I’ll pay for her to get well.”

“And the rest of the money you’ll save for college,” Mrs. Peregrine prompted.

“I was *going* to say that,” laughed Chameeka, stamping her foot. “But even



if I don't get *any* reward, that's okay too."

"What?" gasped the TV reporter. Then she grinned at the camera. "Chameeka says it's all right if she *doesn't* get the reward money." Unable to understand why anyone would not want ten thousand dollars, she frowned down at Chameeka. "Why is that?"

"Because the *important* things are, we found the roots and the Cycle of Life, and King 'Doc' Boss will go to jail, and I learned to read, and a lot of other things."

The TV reporter didn't know what to say, so she grinned blankly at the camera. "This is Barbara Waters, TV News, Rio."

CHAPTER 12

Because they were tired and it would be a long flight home, the mayor of the city invited Chameeka and her grandmother to spend a few days in a beautiful hotel by the sea, all expenses paid.

It was nice, but Chameeka wished her sisters were there too; it was lonely in that big bed and that big, shiny bathroom all by herself.

Of course, Coky was a guest too, although nobody but Chameeka knew it. Most of the time he moped around and stayed to himself. Chameeka asked him why he was so sad.

"I'm tired of being hated by everyone," Coky told her. "But what can a city cockroach do to make people love him? I'm trying to think of some way to help plants, but there's not even a tree where we live, much less a rain forest."

"Yes there is. There's that icky tree down by the corner. The others they planted all died." She sighed sadly. "I guess that one will die too."

"It wouldn't have to die," said Coky angrily, "if someone took care of it, gave it compost, and dug up the soil around its roots."

"Cockroaches could do that," Chameeka reminded him. "You could chew up the leaves under the tree and make compost. You could breath carbon dioxide on its branches."

"I prefer eating glue and breathing on pages while I'm reading them," Coky told her.

But her words made him think. Actually, the leaf litter he'd tasted in the

rain forest hadn't been all that bad. And now that Chameeka had learned to read, it might be better if he didn't chew up any more of her school library books.

"Okay," Coky told her, "I'll do it. I'll adopt the tree."

"Oh, Coky!" cried Chameeka. "That's wonderful."

"And I'll put the word out on the street about our roots, so that other cockroaches will help too."

"*I'll* help," Chameeka promised, snuggling happily against her grandmother's side. "Maybe if you guys save the icky tree, people won't hate cockroaches any more. They'll say, 'Cockroaches have old, old roots. Cockroaches are part of the Cycle of Life too. Hooray for Coky Cockroach!'"

"I hope I live long enough to hear that," chuckled Coky, climbing into Chameeka's collar where he curled up comfortably. "But I doubt I ever will. Not even if I live to be two hundred."

THE END