

Promise OGOCHUKWU

What Can The Matter Be?

A cold pale sky and a soft breeze, a blast of trumpet as Nick blew mindlessly into it were all I could think of after I heard the shocking news. There was also the tremor of my fingers on the piano keyboard. I noted that Lizza was faltering as she played the harmonica. The sucking sound she made irritated me. Nick kept casting curious glances at me each time I missed a note or struck the wrong chord. When he got the chance to speak to me as soon as the choir practice was over, he leaned across and whispered, "The rumour is rife, but it's still rumour, you know. We don't know with absolute certainty that he did it."

"What difference does it make? It's true anyway."

"Have you confirmed it yet?"

"Can't you see that he didn't come to supervise the choir practice. Very unusual. The news is making the rounds in the church already."

"Did you notice that Whitney didn't show up either? She's been granting interviews. She's fast becoming a star. You would have been in the limelight now, if you had been brave enough to tell someone."

I shoved him off and began to walk away from the music room, from the saxophone and especially the cello which I preferred to the piano. I was made to play the piano only when Whitney was absent. I remembered the ugly expression on Lizza's face the day she told me I loved to play cello because I was black anyway. I had restrained myself from striking her because Fr. Bloomsbury never tired teaching us how wrong it was to hit one another. Instead, under pain of repeating himself, he patiently taught us to accommodate one another in love and charity - a lesson which was hard to assimilate. Even though I have always been quite hot-blooded, I did my best to tolerate all the young people who upset me, especially in church.

My sanctimonious mother, Nana Kofi, would always insist I be of good behaviour, especially in church. She would remind me she was from a family of nuns. Two of her sisters were nuns. The only reason she was not one herself was because my father swept her off her feet in time before she could think of going to the convent. After my father's demise, my stepfather came along. And she said my stepfather's love was so good she took an even bigger leap of marrying him, a non-catholic. But she was always quick to point out the fact that he became what she always knew he would be - a priest and pastor of one of the fast growing churches in the Diaspora. He never let anyone forget how international and spirit-filled his church was. He would subtly allude to the fact that he was a minister in this church only goes to show how very important and Godly he was regarded. One of the things my mother loved about him was that he was also so liberal he wedded her in the Catholic faith and even allowed her attend the Catholic Church as often as she wished. That he married her despite the fact that she had me for her childhood sweetheart who had to drown in the river the weekend he was to seek her father's permission to marry her was also what she counted as a plus for him.

It did not matter if I liked him or not. My mother didn't think my opinion counted. She didn't really regard me much. Not then. Not now. She simply made up her mind that I had no reason to dislike her choice of a husband especially since he was living abroad and was going to take both of us with him. I liked the fact that I was going abroad even though I cried at the departure lounge because I was already missing my friends. -Nyoka's mischievous wink when someone we had gossiped about passed by, the tell-tale sign all over Selasie when he stole my tom tom and looked away as I searched his pocket, the sideway glances of Kwesi when all of us burst out laughing as Kwesi's mother declared a whole carton of Indomie missing -. But I was consoled when I got into the aircraft and settled into its luxury. As it went up the sky and I wondered at the height it had attained, I hoped I would experience many beautiful things in England, make great

friends and grow to be an accomplished lady, like my grandmother, Tidaiya. I hoped also that I would one day fly a big aircraft like the one I flew in to arrive the United Kingdom.

It took me a while to get used to the intensely cold weather we met in London when we got here. People kept saying it never snowed so badly in London like it did the December we arrived and had to wade through eighteen inches of snow. But my stepfather, Kessie, took us out to a restaurant that night and filled my plate with some garden vegetable quiche while my mother ate boiled Irish potatoes and Brussels sprouts which my stepfather said was very good as he wolfed down Singapore noodles with whipped potatoes. It was that night I knew I would miss home food especially akplen and peanut soup as well as banko or kokonte and kontomere soup. My mother ate ravenously as though she had eaten that sort of food all her life. She was that kind of person. She would speak endlessly about how she preferred hotdog to kaakro and tatale, how she could bet that vanilla coloured custard was certainly better than koko. She would say it with her nose turned up as though koko smelt, as though she did not enjoy it when Grandma Tidaiya made it along with akara and told us she thought it was unfair to call akara bean-cake because akara would always be a better name for it.

As soon as we left the shores of Ghana, my mother began to speak English with inflected accent and reminded me very often that I had left Ghana and would do well to discard my thick Kumasi accent. When I looked at people longer than she considered necessary, she would remind me that I was starting to stare and that I needed to behave like the well brought up child I was meant to be. The next time we ate out, she tasted the Riesling first, sniffing the wine gently from a crystal glass and smiling broadly at the butler as she said, "Mmmmmn brisk, light and dry." She tilted her neck to the left as she waited for us to endorse her appraisal of the wine. My stepfather smiled indulgently and winked at me. I smiled too without knowing why. With relish she ate hot meatball sandwich and sprinkled grilled cheese on it. I marveled at the speed with which she adapted to our new environment and seemed to reign over it. I tried to copy her but I realized that her ways were a bit too cosmetic for me. I wanted to be able to say that I did not like marinated cucumber salad and preferred grilled kielbasa to honey baked ham on sourdough. But as years went by, I began to really love Scandinavian vegetables and salmon croquettes. When my stepfather asked what he would get for me on his way home, I began to happily ask for Lemon meringue pie and butterscotch pudding which he always brought home with the sort of glee that seemed to match my enthusiasm. Then my mother's stomach began to swell. She seemed quite elated and would often repeat that ours was a pretty joyous family.

I thought so too until that night my door handle got depressed and opened of its own accord. A flurry of snow blew in as a head appeared by the door and as I opened my mouth to scream, a broad palm covered my mouth and his voice flooded my ears, "Don't shout and disgrace your mother. Remember you are no longer in Kumasi. People don't shout around here. Be good and let me in. It will be nice and easy. And I will get you all you want. Just make a list of them." He was breathing heavily. He sounded desperate, his eyes roving all over my body.

"Let go of me! What do you want?" I asked conscious of the fact that people do not shout in London.

"Just to see what you've got down there. It'll be fun, I promise," he planted his knees between my thighs, pushing them apart.

"What are you doing? What have I done?"

"Shush. Be a good girl and shut your mouth nicely, my dear."

"Leave me alone! My mother won't like it."

"She might not, but you will, I assure you."

"What is it you want with me?"

"I'll show you nicely. And I will take you out and show you the city. I will make sure you go to school this Fall. Don't you want to anymore? Don't you want to make friends instead of being locked up in the house? You've been in the UK for a year now and you've hardly seen the outside of this house. Now, don't you shout, don't you shout! Remember the Cops, they'll come and get you!" He was now speaking under his breath and quickly too as though he was running out of breath and out of time.

Fear flooded my eyes as he said he would call the Cops if I screamed and woke the entire neighbourhood. I let him have his way. I closed my eyes all the while surprised at him as he promised again and again to make it worth my while, even as he forced shut my mouth and kept pushing something of his inside me. He was sweating profusely and acting like a mad fellow.

The moment he was done, he headed for the door and forgot to shut it behind him. The whole exercise was cheerless as I was partly in shock and overwhelmed with fear. It had snowed all night and I was cold and wary of the night not knowing what else it held. It did not help that he left me feeling like someone who had just experienced a theft, the magnitude of which I was neither aware of nor could fathom. But the weather improved the following week which brought sunlight and the beginning of a thaw. It was also that bright week he got me enrolled in a school and filled my palm with coins totaling twenty pounds which he told me to keep away from my mother's prying eyes. "And be mindful of letting anyone see it, Okay? Say nothing about this to anyone either in school or at home. I will always protect you at all costs."

I nodded thinking to myself that it was a little price to pay for going to school. In Kumasi my teacher had said I showed promise and could be bright if I was assisted. She said I had a great faculty for absorbing information and she encouraged me to read voraciously. When I told my teacher I was leaving for the United Kingdom, she urged me to make sure I continued my studies. I promised I would and since I arrived, I had been pleading with my mother to enroll me in school but she kept putting it off till she had put to bed. She said she needed someone to assist her and that I would resume school after she had weaned her child and was able to get a child minder.

I overheard her quarrelling with my stepfather when she learnt I would be resuming school.

"And what signal are you sending out there, Kessie? That you love Afua more than I do? Is that it? She is my child, remember?"

"Nana, calm down," came my stepfather's voice. "I've told you time without number that I am no longer comfortable seeing this child wasting at home when she should be in school."

"And did I tell you I didn't have plans for her to go to school?"

"We have been talking about it for a whole year now, Nana. She came here when she was eleven. Let her join other kids in school please so she won't fall behind educationally. My conscience can't take it anymore. This is your child for crying out loud, not some babysitter."

Then get me a babysitter, Kessie."

"I will hire one as soon as you put to bed."

That was how the matter was resolved. Or so it seemed. Pastor Kessie received thousands of invitations to talk to various groups in different branches of his church. He was a very persuasive and emotive preacher. He often cried, danced in the pulpit and he drew crowds who referred to him as a "powerful preacher." He was quite energetic too and jumped about a lot as he encouraged people to come to his healing ministry. Many who went claimed they were healed of their many ailments. His church members said he was an enigma and that he went about like his master, the Christ, doing good. On one of the few occasions my mother and I attended his healing ministry, I was taken in by the crowd that surged after him, reaching for the fringe of his garment. A woman sitting by me was very feverish and throwing up. But when he laid his hand on her the fever dropped and she was able to sing and dance all night. At some point, she turned, smiling fully at me, she said, "Pastor Kessie is awesome!" I could see she was overwhelmed with joy. I would have easily agreed with her if he didn't keep coming to me oddly any night he wanted to be with me. As for my mother whose cold stare and aloofness never really ceased to amaze me, I noticed that she only came alive when I did something wrong. She would not only frown at me but I would get a telling off. She would speak to me meanly as if I was the cause of all her woes.

On one of the nights my stepfather came to my bed, I asked him if he was sure his wife was my mother. I complained that she wasn't demonstrative and never hugged me. He nodded and muttered something about the need for me not to hold it against her. He assured me that my mother loved me very much, that she was just being a little self-centered and erratic because she was about to have a baby and she was both afraid and anxious. He said she needed to be understood and forgiven.

Then I noticed he was coming to my room more frequently and that he had a way of being in a hurry to leave each time he had gotten enough of what he came there for. When he was with me, I liked it when he talked. I wished he would only talk and not lie on top of me. I liked all the gifts he gave me. There were so many of them: a near complete set of Harry Potter, a video game, shoes, clothes and a book on love and romance which he said I should keep out of my mother's reach. But I didn't like what he did with me perhaps because the pain that came with it never quite subsided. Yet I wished he would not be so much in a hurry to leave. It made me feel so lonely, so forlorn.

At home, I withdrew into myself. In school I was a loner. In the Catholic Church my mother and I still attended, I joined the choir and realized that I liked to play musical instruments. I derived much joy from them. And I went to Church quite often in order to play those instruments.

Rev. Fr. Van Stephen who used to be the youths chaplain in our church was a strange fellow. He had a stern appearance and spoke brusquely. He always insisted that things be done in certain ways - you sang only traditional songs, the traditional way, no theatrics. And when you came to the confessional, you made a penitential confession stating when you last went to confession and how many times you committed a particular sin. You got admonished sternly. You got a tough penance. Fr. Van Stephen would listen carefully as you recited the act of contrition. If you mumbled a word, he would make you repeat it and tell you just how costly your salvation was purchased. In a little while, the older women talked about his high-handedness, the fact that he hardly smiled at anyone, that he summoned the mass servers to the duties he assigned to them as though they owed him allegiance and that he would sooner do all the work in the parish house than share a joke with anyone.

So the older men got together and put their pen to paper stating his inconsiderate silence as though he were a hermit of some sort as his offence. They said his human relations was too poor and that no one could actually hear him at Mass as his method was too drab, making the Mass too mournful. It wasn't long before he was transferred to some place where nobody cared to find out. But it was certainly not his home town, somewhere in South Carolina. I came to mass one day and was told that Fr. Van Stephen was gone. I did not care really even though I was not sure I liked it when Whitney haughtily said, "Good riddance to bad rubbish." I thought those words were unnecessary. At the same time I thought I might have felt that way because Whitney was always acting as though she were smarter than everyone else and I hoped that by disregarding her words, she might be slighted.

The following week, a new priest arrived our parish. I could tell we all liked him. From the first day he set foot at the parish and word got round that we had been given a brilliant and handsome priest, I noted that we all wanted to be his friend. He would celebrate Mass joyously, making elaborate gestures as he drove home his points. Within a few days, he knew everybody's name. After Mass, he would stand by the door of the church sharing handshakes, hugs and pecks and blessing everyone.

He reorganized the choir and got the youths to participate actively in it. He made us play various musical instruments and he kept telling us we could be good with just about anything we were convinced of.

We giggled a lot when he was around and we used to compete for his commendation which he usually gave effusively with his deep, resonant voice: "Kelvin, that was a beautiful sound you produced there. Enrica, I strongly believe you'll make a great soprano soloist. That rendition was incredibly beautiful! Whitney, you are splendid with the tambourine. Lizza, your handling of the xylophone was exceptional. You should also try the guitar. I am sure you'll make something good out of it. You all need to be versatile."

I was hurt that he hardly mentioned me. I asked my stepfather to buy me the cello and he did. I did extra work at home to improve on my skill at playing the cello. After school, I played all evening. My mother grew curious about my new obsession for the cello. Of late she had been going on about the fact that Kessie was spoiling me, buying me too many things that took up my time so that I was starting to act as though my house chores were some sort of unbearable burden.

To this, my stepfather would remind her that I was only a child. “Let her be, Nana. As long as she does the work you give her.”

“Yes, but the way she does it matters too. See, this dishwasher needs a good clean! And look how untidy her room is, littered with all manner of things. I don’t want Maami Tidaiya to quarrel with me when she comes here. You knew how hard it was for me to take Afua away from her. She has always been afraid I would not give Afua much love and training because she believes my eyes are not fully open to my duties.”

“That’s precisely why I keep buying her things that will help her develop her mind and talents for which you fight me, dear.”

“No, I just think that you sometimes give her a little too much.”

“Trust me, I give just enough.”

“I hope so.”

“You worry too much. Go to bed and get a rest, my dear.”

My mother would go to bed. Her podgy stomach resting languidly on her side of the bed as she lay on her back. I pitied her then because she could hardly work smartly. She got tired too often and her face and feet were all swollen. She looked twice her age with too many pimples bursting at the same time on her cheeks. When I first noticed the way she walked like someone with a wound around her lower abdomen, I was alarmed. I remembered that I walked like that when my stepfather first pushed his “sugar cane” as he called it, into me. But he took time to teach me how to walk straight like a lady. He said, “Yes, walk like a lady. Don’t you know you are a beautiful lady? Don’t bring disgrace to anyone around here by walking like someone with a wound between her legs.” He had examined me thoroughly and told me I was OK. When I showed concern over my mother’s condition and expressed my fear of becoming like her with that gruesome stomach that won’t let her lie down properly, he was alarmed and gave me some pills. Then he avoided me for some days during which I enjoyed some respite. But he soon returned with some funny looking transparent rubber which he wore over his turgid “sugar cane” as he complained about the “pull” he had “towards me.” He said I was privileged to be loved by him and that he would make sure someday, I would have all the music instruments I wanted. And if I still wanted to be a pilot, he would help to make it happen. I didn’t bother to know how he would accomplish all that since I was only just starting school and he gave me a lot of “don’t do, don’t say, don’t think” instructions which filled me with fear and kept me from making inquiries.

But I loved my cello and thanked him again and again for buying it for me, for prevailing on my mother to get me a lot of things. Ever since my mother got pregnant, she hardly noticed anything else other than her massive stomach which didn’t let her see beyond herself. Even though my stepfather was worried she might notice the way I walked when he initially started visiting me at night, my mother took no notice of the things that were of interest to me. I suppose she doted on me in her own way by occasionally asking if I had eaten, ensuring I ate up my baked beans, green peas and broccoli which would nourish my body and ensure I was healthy. She forced me to take siestas and read good books which she never failed to buy for me. She taught me good manners and worried endlessly about how I behaved in school and especially in church. But when she saw that I had become one of the Mass servers, she said the robe looked good on me and that at some point, she actually thought I did appear like one of those cherubs everyone imagined waited on the Lord Jesus.

At home when she told my stepfather about it, he chuckled and said something about how untraditional it was for the Catholic Church to allow girls parade the Lord’s sacred altar in the name of serving Mass. His face was very ugly when he said it and I realized then that he was a very ugly man with two of his molars missing. I wondered why my mother never noticed anything. Why she abided him. It grieved me that she did not take any offence at his utterance, that she probably did not even notice he expressed a negative opinion about her faith. No. About one of the ways of her Church. She merely sat there and rocked the baby in her hand gently, gazing in abstraction at the flickering fire.

That night when he came to me I began to cry and insist I was aching all over. He pleaded with me and said he was getting more attracted to me each passing day. I opened my mouth to scream as I couldn’t really care if he called the Cops on me. He mumbled something about the

fact that I was unkind, ungrateful and that I was not being fair. I pushed and pummeled him savagely. His eyes widened in surprise. "What has got into you?" he asked, withdrawn.

"I don't like you anymore," I retorted.

"Please be a good girl. I have been good to you. You don't need to be aggressive with me. Tell me what else I should get for you and you'll have it at the break of dawn."

I thought about it and shook my head.

"What have I done to you?" he sounded somber as he tried unsuccessfully to disguise the fact that he was cross.

I wondered at him. Then I said, "You said ugly things about a girl serving Mass, even when you knew I now serve Mass."

"Oh that. I am so sorry. By all means please go on and serve all the Mass you want. If there are things you need to do it pretty well, I'll get them for you."

I liked the little power I wielded over him at that moment. I waited until he made so many promises before I allowed him to snuggle up to me. I must have tasked him so badly that he indeed went into spasms as he danced crazily on top of me before he collapsed on me, breathing heavily. This time, he didn't leave in a hurry. He said he had fallen in love with me and didn't know what to do about it. I thought his falling in love with me meant he was going to be buying me more things and I felt it was okay.

He got me a music teacher and I practiced everyday at home and became really improved. It wasn't long before Fr. Bloomsbury singled me out for commendation which really made my head swell with pride. I even closed my eyes as I pulled the bow rhythmically, flaunting my skills especially as I had caught a glimpse of Fr. Bloomsbury earlier as he stared at me momentarily lost in admiration. In my belief, it was there and then that he set his heart on me. I thought I was the only one that saw that stare. But I was wrong. Nick saw it too and drew my attention to it as soon as the Reverend Father left.

"Afua, that was a brilliant performance," he imitated Fr. Bloomsbury as he drew my attention to his comments and gave me a knowing smile. "You really impressed him."

I couldn't help a broad smile. "Tell me, did I earn his commendation?" I asked hoping he would tell me the truth.

"You sure did."

"I am glad. I've been practicing at home."

At the Sacristy as we prepared for Mass, Fr. Bloomsbury held my gaze and smiled, his eyes appeared moist and very kind.

I smiled and wondered if he knew we all thought he was a very handsome English man. Even though we later heard his mother was a half-caste from South Africa, we simply marveled at the sheer loveliness of his features especially his straight nose, large, warm eyes and narrow, almost grim lips. I even wished he were my brother, someone I could look up to. I wished I could tell him about my mother's indifference and have him tell me if he thought as I did that I might have belonged to another mother who would pay me a little more attention. I knew I could never tell her about my stepfather even though I felt the need to tell someone. I wanted to tell Fr. Bloomsbury about the fear that tugged at my heart each night I prayed that I would not hear my stepfather's surreptitious footsteps as he crept into my room. I wanted very badly to discuss the fact that I felt quite lonely often and wished I were home with Grandma Tidaiya, with Nyoka, Kwesi and Selasie. I wanted to tell someone I didn't quite like what my stepfather did with me, that sometimes I wished I would not go home and that my heart skidded each time I felt that familiar depression of my door handle at night. That even though I was asked not to scream, I felt like screaming all the time in that house, at my stepfather, at my mother, at the washing machine, even at the easy smile on my mother's face as she bought me things and told me casually that she loved me.

"Day dreaming!" Nick whispered into my ears, startling me.

I picked up my robe and hurriedly wore it to catch up with the others who were already dressed for Mass and ready for the entrance procession. I fell in line at once, my hands clasped together in penitential grace.

I did not know that I looked dazed all through the Mass until Fr. Bloomsbury told me. But he also said something to which I did not know the response to give. "You are beautiful, child. You sure are. Can you see me at the Chaplaincy at four?"

I must have looked dumb at first before I began to nod. He moved away then as though he was shy, as though I made him shy. I felt somewhat elated that Fr. Bloomsbury said I was beautiful. That meant I really was even though no one had told me so before. My stepfather never really said anything about my looks. My mother merely concerned herself with discovering when I was untidy. On a number of occasions she even took pains to inspect my armpits to make sure they were clean. She smelt my clothes and sniffed my body to ensure I had no body odour. She always warned me not to disgrace her in any way as though she saw in me the tendency, however obscure, to dent her well groomed image - the well dressed, well mannered, elegant and quite sophisticated Mrs. Kessie Apia, wife of a reverend gentleman. She never bought me perfumes and roll on because she said I was too young to use them. I was glad she didn't notice I had been stealing her perfumes, spraying them into used perfume bottles, and dabbing my skin with them either on my way to school or church.

I was glad I was smelling really good the day Fr. Bloomsbury asked me to see him. I was impatient with the dull passage of time as we did our rehearsal in the left wing of the church. When Fr. Bloomsbury came to supervise us, he stayed too long pointing out areas that each person needed to improve on and he spent so much time praising Lizza over the deft manner she handled the banjo. He also praised Whitney for doing a fantastic job with the violin. He didn't say anything about how smart I was with the harp even though I really played well to impress him. I also didn't like the fact that he didn't let others know I was to see him at four. It would have been a big boost for me and would have raised my standing in the class even if it was only slightly. I thought about how he said I was beautiful in a shy manner and I wished I could tell everyone. I could imagine the envy that would be on Lizza's cute little face. I wondered if it meant that my face was also cute even though no one ever told me. Well I assured myself that even if Lizza's face was cuter - especially as I had heard one or two people, even Nick tell her she's got such lovely face and an abundance of wavy red hair -, I was the one that got invited to see Fr. Bloomsbury at the Chaplaincy. That was precisely why I was not happy that Fr. Bloomsbury didn't announce it, didn't say I had been chosen to visit with him at the chaplaincy. How could he have overlooked such an important event? It dampened my spirit a little especially as he stayed on until it was almost four. I feared he might have cancelled the invitation without even informing me. I was starting to look miserable when he said, "Afua, kindly keep the envelopes in my pigeon hole." He left without glancing back.

I was puzzled. I had no clue what envelopes he was talking about. His little utterance was not what I expected. It was bereft of the dignity it ought to bear. It had no sense of importance attached either to the message or the messenger. I sat back after everybody had left and tried to figure out where the envelopes he talked about were. I was still there when Nick ran back to tell me that Fr. Bloomsbury was asking after me.

"Who did he ask," I inquired.

"Lizza and me."

"And what did Lizza say?"

"Nothing," he shrugged.

"I bet she didn't like that she wasn't the one that was asked after."

"She offered to let you know the Reverend wanted to see you."

"She did?" my face lit up in excitement.

"You are getting quite some attention lately. Good for you."

"Would Lizza think so?"

He nodded.

That lifted my spirits - the fact that I got something I knew Lizza would wish for. It also made me feel a little warm towards her, to learn that she actually meant to come looking for me. I told myself that I was going to smile a lot more at her and do my best not to feel awry when she beat everybody to the guitar.

I hurried off to the chaplaincy and was almost there when it dawned on me I had not yet given a thought to why I was needed there, what I would say and how I would behave. I had been to the chaplaincy only three times since I started attending Mass at St. Paul's Catholic Church. On the three occasions, I went in the company of other members of the choir and we sang to the delight of the bishop and the delegates he came with. Today, I was going alone and feeling somewhat awkward.

It was that day I realized the building had a penthouse where Fr. Bloomsbury lived. It was at the penthouse I saw him. He was seated in the pantry when I arrived. A broad smile spread over his face as he asked me in. I settled in one of the settees in the living room of the Father's house. "Come and sit with me," he invited with a winning smile. I went and sat with him and he held my hand.

"What have you been up to lately," he asked.

"I have been developing my skills," I responded shyly because he was looking at my lips.

"You've got such full lips. Has anyone ever told you they are inviting?"

I was taken aback by his blatant admiration. I knew no one ever did and I told him so.

"They are terrific. Perfect!" he said as he got up and began to go towards the dining section of the living room. From there he asked, "What shall I get you, a Coca-Cola or Malt drink? There is also Pepsi and pineapple drink?"

I kept wondering to what I owed this attention. I was glad to be its sole recipient. My back began to gradually relax on the soft backrest of the settee as I said, "Pepsi please."

"On the rocks?" he teased, letting out a soft chuckle.

"No father," I found myself smiling broadly as he winked at me from the dining area.

I shook my head.

He served the Pepsi, filling my glass gently after which he held the glass to my lips and asked me to take a sip. I did and was startled by his next words, "Can I kiss your luscious lips?"

"Father!" the word escaped my lips before I knew it. The drink in the glass I held spilled on me.

"Yea, Fatheer," he repeated. "Why don't you just call me Tom. That's my name, you know. I do have a name and I am just like you -human," he whispered the last word and smiled broadly. "So, give me a kiss, if you don't mind." I told myself that would have to be an advanced form of a holy kiss especially as he waited and got my nod before he leaned over, kissed me long and deep, his tongue warm, intimate, probing. It totally relaxed me and I found that I was no longer shy. I was curious but not afraid.

"Have you been to confession lately," he asked licking my neck.

"No, been a long time I went."

"I find we'll be better off if we avoid putting it off often."

"But I can't go to confession now."

"No, no, not now. I can't hear it either. Say no more, come and sit on my thighs. You are such a dashing young woman."

I liked the things he said and the gentle and kind manner he said them. They really made me feel special. Even the way he did what he did with me later on was so gentle and tender as he kept whispering into my ears until I experienced a frisson of joy which pleased him greatly. I was nonetheless responsive to his affection and I felt that in him was everything a girl could possibly desire. I held him the way I had seen my mother hold my stepfather in one of their private moments. I had seen them because I sneaked up to the pantry and peeped through a tiny hole on their door. She was all wrapped around him, with her head resting on his shoulder, her lips forever kissing his chest. The first day I saw them I was upset that my stepfather could be that gentle with her and rough with me. I kept sneaking up there to see them when they were alone in their room. But I stopped only after I narrowly missed being caught by my stepfather who suddenly leapt out of bed and said he was going to get some wine from the refrigerator.

"What are you thinking about?" Father Bloomsbury asked.

"Father, I really do want to go to confession now," the words tumbled out of my lips unchecked.

“Please, please dear,” he clasped his hands pleadingly; “I know I can trust in the love of God and his mercy, but this is a bit too much for me. He is a just and holy God as well. In fact woe betide anyone who dares to trifle with his justice and holiness. Pardon me. I am afraid I can’t hear your confession right now. I myself, am in dire need of one,” he said, his eyes growing dim as though he was holding a conversation with someone else.

“But I need to tell you something, Father,” I said drawing up my skirt to cover my nakedness.

“Afua dear, please don’t insist. Just lie down beside me and be calm.”

“No, I don’t mean that sort of formal confession. I just want to tell you what I have been up to lately.”

He gave me an indulgent look and shrugged as though he was only just beginning to understand that I did not quite have the sort of matured mind that would appreciate his sudden need for silence.

I told him about what I was doing with my stepfather. I told him about my insensitive mother, the drab house I lived in and how I missed my friends. I told him also that I found solace in singing in the church. Then I told him that I liked him very much.

He drew me to himself as though he meant to console me, as though he thought I had been through a lot, as though he didn’t know what to do with me. I was not sure what he was thinking as he just held me, saying nothing, caressing the blade of my right shoulder, squeezing it after a while with a faraway look that defied reading.

Then I began to wonder what would happen if someone came there and saw me in his arms. Even though I was proud he invited me to the penthouse, I was not sure I could still hold my head high should I be discovered in his arms. I told him what I was thinking and he said something about my being right. He added though that he had taken care of such eventuality. Thereafter he lapsed into silence again. Time passed and he later managed to rouse himself even as I stroked his very hairy chest, my head resting on his shoulder.

“You are a sweet child,” he muttered.

“Aren’t you going to say something about what I told you?” I propped myself up on one arm in order to get a glimpse of his face which remained calm.

“I am afraid I am not fit even to give you advice,”

“But give me all the same,” I nestled to him.

He began stroking my hand again, “I would like to tell you what I would tell myself, “Don’t do it again”. I know it’s hard but we need to keep trying not to give offence to people, to God.” Then he seemed to be speaking to himself, “I know the importance of chastising the body. And believe me, I have been dealing with this obstinate and insatiable body all my life, starving it, punishing it by engaging in all manner of self-denial, but it is pretty stubborn. It always devices new ways of indulging itself. Yet I have to take responsibility because I am the one who should be in control. I should steel my will and fight all my battles, particularly those of the flesh. I know. I know. I have stifled my spirit-man and have been overfeeding the mortal man. What a shame indeed.”

“You started saying something to me,” I interrupted him.

He gave me a peck on the right cheek and smiled, “What do you know, child!”

“Enough to know I don’t want my stepfather anymore,” I tried to look serious. I wanted him to see that I could act maturely.

“Why?”

“You just said it was wrong. I shouldn’t do it again. I read somewhere that such a thing attracts retributive justice.”

“But you know that retribution does not always come in this lifetime. Let’s avoid wrongdoing for the offence it gives rather than the punishment it attracts.”

“My problem is that I do so many things that are wrong. You just pointed out one of them.”

He held me to himself, “Yes, it’s easy to point out things that are wrong, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“But you’ve got to see why it is wrong and be convinced about it. And I don’t want to saddle your little head with St. Paul’s teaching about the body being the temple which should not be desecrated and all that. No, I don’t want to go into anything of that sort. But did it *really* feel right, what you did with your stepfather, what we just did? The truth is it *really* doesn’t. I don’t know what you think, but when you give it profound thoughts, you’ll agree with me that it isn’t something we should be proud of really. Sure, sure on the spur of the moment, I enjoyed it absolutely. You probably did too, I hope?” He gave me the sort of look that was desperate to assure itself that it had not been completely taken over by the devil. He wanted to be certain I had a good time as much as he did to which I nodded vehemently. I liked listening to him. I thought he was scintillating with wit. In any case, sitting quietly and listening keenly is one of my many accomplishments. So I gave him my full attention.

“Would I do it again, I hope no. Would I like to do it again? Certainly yes,” he answered coldly, calmly, looking into my eyes. “Such is the level of the idiocy of the flesh. Shall I continuously strive to resist this surging idiocy? Oh yes. And will I succeed? Who knows? I pray so because I *really, honestly* want to succeed.”

“You mean you don’t want me anymore?”

“Far from it, my child. I want you even now.” He chuckled, “Aaah, the body is terribly vulnerable, totally unreliable. It constantly seeks pleasure and comfort. That’s why it needs a wise mind to take charge, a powerful mind to tame it. St. Augustine fought fiercely against his body and disciplined it. I’ve got to sit up and face my struggles considerably. Give us a kiss and let’s get something to eat.”

He made turkey croissant sandwich for two and we ate in silence. Before I left, I asked him when he would like to “see” me again. Even though he hesitated, he told me we would see the following week. Then he asked me to keep him in my prayers.

The following week as we made love rather wildly, my supple, smooth brown skin, a sharp contrast to his very light, tight skin, it seemed to me that he had overcome his little sense of guilt as he didn’t say anything about St. Paul and didn’t even ask me about my stepfather. Instead he gave me loads of books on self-development and he made me promise to study them and act upon them. Even though I was not his equal in intelligence I was most willing and determined to improve. Our next appointment was in a fortnight and I asked him why. He said they had a diaconate meeting that week and again he asked me to pray fervently for him as he was going to be preaching a retreat as well. I studied those books diligently, rising even at night to try and assimilate them. I assured myself that I was going to keep the promise I made to Fr. Bloomsbury by also applying the knowledge. I did not want to fall short of his high standards. Before long my mother began to tell me that she could feel the effect of my learning in school. My class mates would ask me who my home teacher was so they could recommend her to their parents. My class teacher began to award me impressive marks and Nick stopped me several times to repeat the same words, “You haven’t told me which of the Angels has been coaching you. Girl, you’re well improved in every way. What have you been feeding your mind with?”

Even Lizza stopped short one afternoon, after I played the guitar with renewed dexterity, and said, “Afua, the way you are going, you certainly will represent the entire province not just with the cello but every damn musical instruments. How do you do it?”

I shrugged and said, “I’ve been reading a lot lately and practicing.”

“What sort of books?” she asked.

“I read Zigar, Robin, Clancy, Twain.”

“You do? But I read them too.”

“I don’t just read for the knowledge. I live the knowledge.”

“What do you mean? Don’t be haughty,” she sounded piqued.

“If I am, real success will elude me. And I mustn’t let that happen,” I said.

“I am quite impressed, Afua. Thank you.”

“You sure are welcome.”

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Three months have gone by since I stopped seeing my stepfather. I could see he still couldn’t believe it and still hasn’t accepted it especially as he kept going on about the love he felt

for me even after my mother had put to bed two lovely boys and named them Oko and Atsu respectively. Perhaps what hurt and at the same time strengthened me was the way he kept lamenting about all he did for me. Sixteen times, he called me an ingrate and said he made the mistake of bringing me over to the United Kingdom. He said that if he was not a man of God, he would not keep me any further in his house since I spurned his kindness and generosity. But he did keep quiet when he sensed my mother's movement around the house. He certainly didn't want her to learn even of his anger at my ingratitude.

He began to stay out late, choosing to spend more time at the church than the house. He did get the nanny - a middle aged woman - he promised my mother. He seemed to have taken his preaching ministry very seriously too as he was always away on a preaching tour. Then my mother began to give him problems. She began to complain that he was hardly home. She began to insist that she would accompany him on some of his trips. At first he gave so many reasons why he couldn't go with her -the children being very tender, the many risks involved in his job, the many hazards of travelling, how bored she would be waiting endlessly in hotels for him to get back, the cost of taking a nanny along with the kids. But my mother insisted there was nothing better than being with him even if it meant she was going to go through the ball of fire to stay with him.

Then one day he said, "And this daughter of yours, aren't you bothered about what becomes of her if you have to leave her here as you hop from place to place with your husband?"

"You should think of that, Kessie, you know," she said in a matter of fact manner.

"I have been thinking of that even though neither of you know it," he blurted out.

"It beats me that you are speaking of it in that manner," she sounded serious in a casual way.

"Well, you should care what happens to her when you are away, you know," he said pointedly.

"Not only when I am away, Kessie," she walked up to him and stood right in front of him with a deliberateness that suggested she was not as complacent as he thought. Then emphatically, she flung these words at him, looking him in the eye, "I do bother about what happens to her even when I am here, you see. In ways you do not know yet, I care about what happens to her right under my nose. And if you are waiting for my reaction, I can tell you right away you'd not like the taste of it."

My mouth hung open. I saw my stepfather's did the same temporarily too even as he managed to say something which sounded quite incoherent.

My mother turned and went upstairs to her room. My stepfather did not go out that evening. I was gripped with fear as I kept telling myself that it was very possible my mother knew all along. Good God! She wasn't fooled! Or was she? I knew I could be wrong. I earnestly hoped I was. I couldn't fathom how it was that she took things coolly.

I stayed in my room waiting to be summoned but no one summoned me. I told myself that nobody could understand my mother let alone predict her. I began to feel awed by her and could not tell if it was respect or love I was starting to develop for her. I watched the way she looked at me, listened to the tone of her voice when she talked to me, watched out for the way she sent me on errands and I observed that nothing much had changed. It made me wonder a great deal at her, for somehow I was beginning to feel she was not altogether laidback, insensitive and careless.

I think my stepfather probably realized this earlier than I did and was so deeply affected by this realisation that he became a lot more cautious. He started avoiding me as much as he could, and he began to spend more time with my mother so that many times, I wondered if his preaching ministry was not suffering. But he didn't seem to mind that it was, as he did say to my hearing that he had been training a lot of assistants lately and he wanted to give more time to ensuring stability in his family.

I was glad that whatever was going on in my house did not affect my program in the church. For reasons known only to my stepfather, he still bought me things he felt I needed. Only this time, he would give them to my mother to give me rather than the way he used to do it which was to give me and I would then show them to my mother who would thank him and say something about the fact that he was bent on spoiling me.

Sometimes I really pitied my stepfather especially when he was not angry with me, when he was not cursing under his breath, when he would occasionally pull me aside, by the toilet door and snatch a kiss and tell me that I was denying him pleasure because I couldn't imagine how much he was in love with me. He kept insisting he had made his feelings towards me abundantly clear and did not understand why I refused to be "his little girl". He even told me that if it were possible to marry me, he would have loved to. He said he sometimes wished he were a Muslim with such liberties to marry up to four wives provided he would love and care for them dedicatedly. It never ceased to amaze me that he could think of such a thing as marrying me when he was married to my mother with whom he appeared very much in love, especially when they were together. He would lick her all over, tirelessly whispering his unending love. It used to make me both sad and happy. But now it made me really happy for my mother, that she had a man who could love her like that. I was glad too that I had a man who loved me like that. I couldn't bring myself to tell my stepfather that. But I let him know again and again that it was all over between us. I did not even bother to tell Fr. Bloomsbury. I simply loved him with renewed intensity. He had a way of making me feel special each time I was with him so that even when we had to see once a month, he still made me feel loved, cared for and he seemed determined to make up for his absences. There were also periods we saw each other almost every other day. I cherished every moment with him. We would cling to each other as though in each other we have made the best discovery that we couldn't afford to let go of.

Unknown to Fr. Bloomsbury, I was preparing fervently for the first anniversary of our love. I could never forget the first day I was alone with him in his living room. It was the first day he held me to himself as though I was all that mattered in his life. It was my first time of feeling loved and truly important. Out of the money my stepfather gave me I bought fruitcake and vanilla ice cream and some candles which I would take to Fr. Bloomsbury. I had planned to drop the cake and my gifts in the cabinet by his door and stick a note to his door so he would see it and take the gifts in. I had written in the note that even though I would love to see him, I did not want to ruin the surprise by asking for an appointment. I was prepared to leave it to chance. If he was home and it was okay to see him, I would be delighted if he could put a call to the chancery by 5pm where I would be seated by the phone waiting for his call. I had said that if I didn't get his call by 6pm, I would go home pretty sad. I had ended the note by indicating that I would not like to be sad on the first anniversary of our love.

I dressed in his favourite pastel shades, the outfit he liked to see me in, the very one he bought for me on my birthday. It was a burgundy lacy top and flayed black skirt. I remembered that the first day I wore it to see him, he had spread his arms in excitement to receive me as I flew into his arms jumping high so that he caught me in mid air. He held me as he looked up at me, his eyes beaming with inexplicable joy. It was that day I bemoaned the fact that he was a reverend father. It was that day I asked him innocently if he could not indeed marry me. He had been surprised at first. Then he laughed over it and said that the only way that could happen is if he left the priesthood. And he said it in a manner that indicated he had never thought of it.

"Or the Church," I had said.

He shook his head and muttered something about how improbable that was. In my eagerness or perhaps childishness, I had suggested that he wrote the Pope for permission to marry me to which he smiled and shook his head vehemently at my obvious naivety, "Marriage is not for the likes of me," he said.

I was sure I looked hurt but he soothed me as he said, "You are a very delightful girl. Any man would be grateful for the opportunity to be your husband. It's just that I am not cut out for marriage. Personally, I can't deal with the intricacies of married life."

"What if the Church approves that her priests marry, won't you marry me and learn that vocation?"

"Do you want to know the truth," he had asked, his eyes glittering under the glare of the chandelier in his living room.

"Yes."

"No, because I will not encourage any woman to go through the torture of marrying a restless soul, flighty spirit and blighted body like me. Besides, I sincerely believe that priesthood

has enough pains and pleasures and should not be saddled with those of other vocations especially a complex vocation like marriage. You know, as tough as celibacy is, it is good for priesthood even in all its trials and torments. The character, discipline and nobility it bestows on priesthood should not be dispensed with. Really I do not think a priest should be fettered by family responsibility," he had finished as though he talked to himself, as though I was not there with him. I had left it at that even though I never stopped dreaming of being his wife someday, perhaps when I grew up, when I was at least sixteen. He seemed to be the sort of person that would always be there, watching and helping me grow.

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