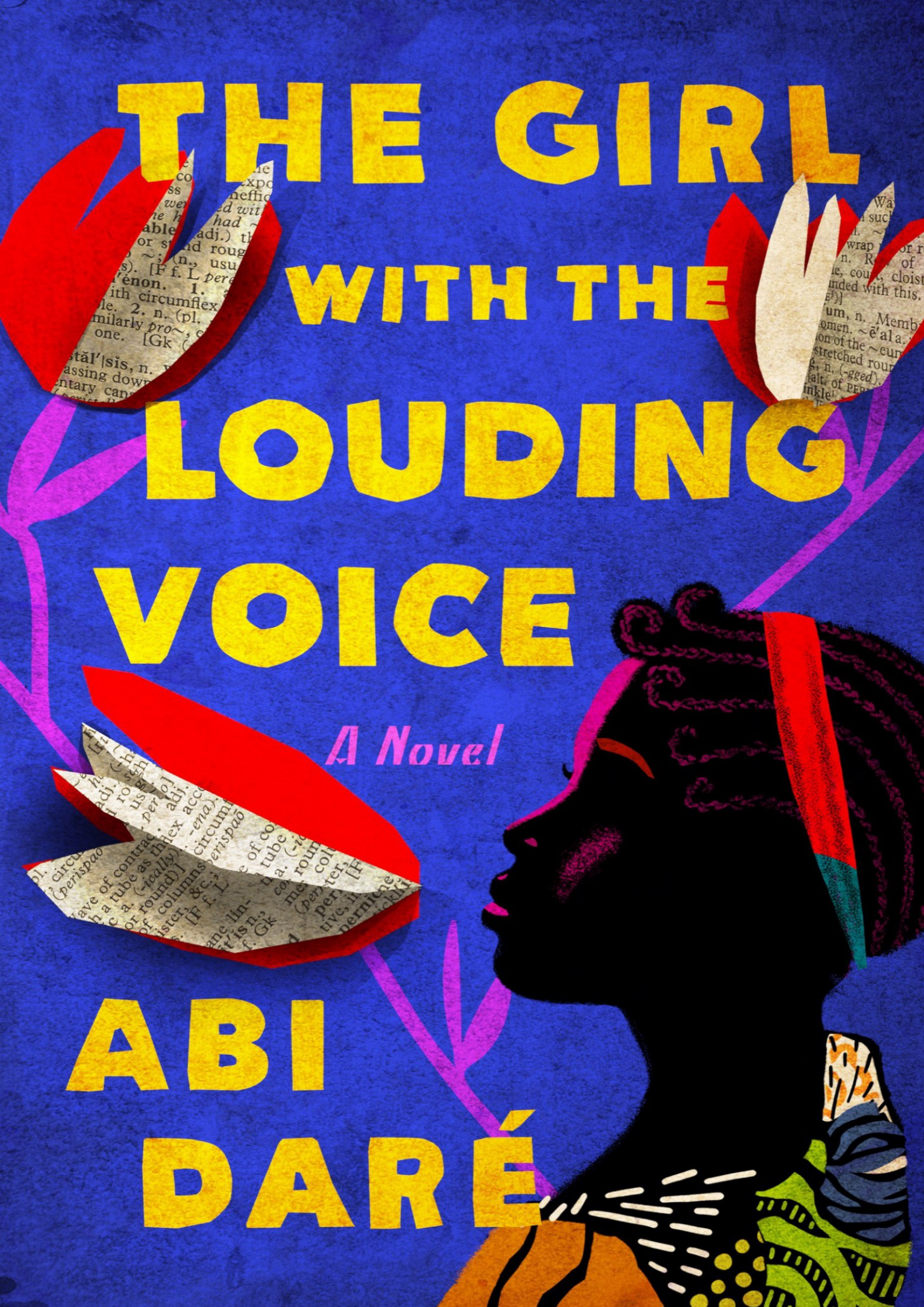


# THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE

*A Novel*

# ABI DARÉ







**THE GIRL  
WITH THE  
LOUDING VOICE**

• A Novel •

**ABI DARÉ**



DUTTON



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*To my mother, Professor Teju Somorin, not just because you are smart and beautiful and became the first female professor of taxation in Nigeria in 2019, but also because you made me see the importance of education and sacrificed so much for me to get the best of it.*

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## **PROLOGUE**

Nigeria is a country located in West Africa. With a population of just under 180 million people, it is the seventh most populous country in the world, which means that one in seven Africans is a Nigerian. As the sixth largest crude oil exporter in the world, and with a GDP of \$568.5 billion, Nigeria is the richest country in Africa. Sadly, over 100 million Nigerians live in poverty, surviving on less than \$1 a day.

—*The Book of Nigerian Facts: From Past to Present*, 5th edition, 2014

## CHAPTER 1

This morning, Papa call me inside the parlor.

He was sitting inside the sofa with no cushion and looking me. Papa have this way of looking me one kind. As if he wants to be flogging me for no reason, as if I am carrying shit inside my cheeks and when I open mouth to talk, the whole place be smelling of it.

“Sah?” I say, kneeling down and putting my hand in my back. “You call me?”

“Come close,” Papa say.

I know he want to tell me something bad. I can see it inside his eyes; his eyeballs have the dull of a brown stone that been sitting inside hot sun for too long. He have the same eyes when he was telling me, three years ago, that I must stop my educations. That time, I was the most old of all in my class and all the childrens was always calling me “Aunty.” I tell you true, the day I stop school and the day my mama was dead is the worst day of my life.

When Papa ask me to move closer, I am not answering him because our parlor is the small of a Mazda car. Did he want me to move closer and be kneeling inside his mouth? So, I kneel in the same place and wait for him to be talking his mind.

Papa make a noise with his throat and lean on the wood back of the sofa with no cushion. The cushion have spoil because our last born, Kayus, he have done too many piss inside it. Since the boy was a baby, he been pissing as if it is a curse. The piss mess the cushion, so Mama make Kayus to be sleeping on it for pillow.

We have a tee-vee in our parlor; it didn’t work. Born-boy, our first born, he find the tee-vee inside dustbin two years back when he was working a job as dustbin collector officer in the next village. We are only putting it there for fashion. It is looking good, sitting like a handsome prince inside our parlor, in the corner beside the front door. We are even putting small flower vase on top it; be like a crown on the prince head. When we have a visitor, Papa will be doing as if it is working and be saying, “Adunni, come and put evening news for Mr. Bada to watch.” And me, I will be responding, “Papa, the remote-controlling is missing.” Then Papa will shake his head and say to Mr. Bada, “Those useless childrens, they have lost the remote-controlling again. Come, let us sit outside, drink, and forget the sorrows of our country, Nigeria.”

Mr. Bada must be a big fool if he didn’t know that it is a lie.



We have one standing fan too, two of the fan blade is missing so it is always blowing air, which is making the whole parlor too hot. Papa like to be sitting in front of the fan in the evening, crossing his feet at his ankles and drinking from the bottle that have become his wife since Mama have dead.

“Adunni, your mama have dead,” Papa say after a moment. I can smell the drink on his body as he is talking. Even when Papa didn’t drink, his skin and sweat still smell.

“Yes, Papa. I know,” I say. Why is he telling me something I have already know? Something that have cause a hole inside my heart and fill it with block of pain that I am dragging with me to everywhere? How can I ever be forgetting how my mama was coughing blood, red and thick with spit bubbles, inside my hand every day for three months? When I am closing my eyes to sleep at night, I still see the blood, sometimes I taste the salt of it.

“I know, Papa,” I say again. “Have another something bad happen?”

Papa sigh. “They have told us to be going.”

“To be going to where?” Sometimes I have worry for Papa. Since Mama have dead, he keep saying things that didn’t make sense, and sometimes he talk to hisself, cry to hisself too when he think nobody is hearing.

“You want me to fetch water for your morning baffle?” I ask. “There is morning food too, fresh bread with sweet groundnut.”

“Community rent is thirty thousand naira,” Papa say. “If we cannot pay the moneys, we must find another place to live.” Thirty thousand naira is very plenty moneys. I know Papa cannot find that moneys even if he is searching the whole of the Nigeria because even my school fees moneys of seven thousand, Papa didn’t have. It was Mama who was paying for school fees and rent moneys and feeding money and everything money before she was dead.

“Where we will find that kind money?” I ask.

“Morufu,” Papa say. “You know him? He come here yesterday. To see me.”

“Morufu the taxi driver?” Morufu is a old man taxi driver in our village with the face of a he-goat. Apart from his two wives, Morufu is having four childrens that didn’t go to school. They just be running around the village stream in their dirty pant, pulling sugar cartons with string, playing *suwe* and clapping their hand until the skin about to peel off. Why was Morufu visiting our house? What was he finding?

“Yes,” Papa say with a tight smile. “He is a good man, that Morufu.

He surprise me yesterday when he say he will pay community rent for us. All the thirty thousan'."

"That is good?" I ask the question because it didn't make sense. Because I know that no man will be paying for another somebody's rent unless he is wanting something. Why will Morufu pay our community rent? What was he wanting? Or is he owing Papa moneys from before in the past? I look my papa, my eyes filling with hope that it is not the thing I am thinking. "Papa?"

"Yes." Papa wait, swallow spit, and wipe his front head sweat. "The rent moneys is . . . is among your *owo-ori*."

"My *owo-ori*? You mean my bride-price?" My heart is starting to break because I am only fourteen years going fifteen and I am not marrying any foolish stupid old man because I am wanting to go back to school and learn teacher work and become a adult woman and have moneys to be driving car and living in fine house with cushion sofa and be helping my papa and my two brothers. I don't want to marry any mens or any boys or any another person forever, so I ask Papa again, talking real slow so he will be catching every word I am saying and not mistaking me in his answer: "Papa, is this bride-price for me or for another person?"

And my papa, he nod his head slowly slow, not minding the tears standing in my eyes or the opening wide of my mouth, as he is saying: "The bride-price is for you, Adunni. You will be marrying Morufu next week."

## CHAPTER 2

When the sun climb down from the sky and hide himself deep in the crack of the night, I sit up on my raffia mat, kick Kayus leg away from my feet, and rest my back on the wall of our room.

My head been stoning my mind with many questions since this morning, questions that are not having answers. What is it meaning, to be the wife of a man with two wives and four childrens? What is making Morufu to want another wife on top the already two? And Papa, why is he wanting to sell me to a old man with no any thinking of how I am feeling? Why didn't he keep the promise he make to Mama before she dead?

I rub my chest, where the too many questions is causing a sore, climb to my feet with a sigh, and walk to the window. Outside, the moon is red, hanging too low the sky, be as if God pluck out His angry eye and throw it inside our compound.

There are fireflies in the air this night, their body is flashing a light of many colors: green and blue and yellow, every one of them dancing and blinking in the dark. Long ago, Mama tell me that fireflies are always bringing good messages to peoples at night. "A firefly is the eyeballs of a angel," she say. "See that one there, the one perching on the leaf of that tree, Adunni. That one be bringing a message of moneys for us." I didn't sure what message that firefly was wanting to bring that long time ago, but I know it didn't bring no money.

When Mama was dead, a light off itself inside of me. I keep myself in that dark for many months until one day Kayus find me in the room where I was sorrowing and weeping, and with his eyes round, full of fear, he beg me to stop my crying because my crying is causing him a heart pain.

That day, I pick up my sorrow and lock it in my heart so that I can be strong and care for Kayus and Papa. But sometimes, like today, the sorrow climb out of my heart and stick his tongue in my face.

When I close my eyes on some days, I see my mama as a rose flower: a yellow and red and purple rose with shining leafs. And if I sniff a deep sniff, I can catch her smell too. That sweet smell of a rosebush sitting around a mint tree, of the coconut soap in her hair just after a washing at Agan waterfalls.

My mama was having long hair which she will plait with black threads and roll around her head like a thick rope, looking like two or three small tires around her head. Sometimes she will remove the threads, let the hair climb down to her back so that I can brush it with her wooden brush.

Sometimes, she will take the brush from my hand, make me to sit on a bench in the outside by the well, and twist up my own hair with so much coconut oil that I go about the whole village smelling like a frying food.

She didn't old, my mama, only forty-something years of age before she die, and every day I feel a paining in my spirit for her quiet laugh and voice, for the soft of her arms, for her eyes that say more things than her mouth ever speak.

She didn't sick for too long, thank God. Just six and half months of coughing and coughing until the cough eat up her whole flesh and make her shoulders be like the handle of our parlor door.

Before that devil sickness, Mama was always keeping busy. Always doing the-this and the-that for the everybody in the village. She will fry one hundred puff-puffs every day to sell in Ikati market, sometimes picking fifty of it, the best of the gold-brown ones from the hot oil, and tell me to take it to Iya, one old woman living in Agan village.

I didn't too sure of how Iya and Mama are knowing each other, or what is her real name because "Iya" is a Yoruba word for old woman. All I know is my mama was always sending me to give food to Iya and all the older womens who are sick in the village around Ikati: hot amala and okra soup with crayfish or beans and *dodo*, the plantain soft, oily.

One time, I bring puff-puff to Iya, after Mama was too sick to travel far, and when I reach home that night and ask Mama why she keep sending food to peoples when she is feeling too sick to travel far, Mama say, "Adunni, you must do good for other peoples, even if you are not well, even if the whole world around you is not well."

It was Mama who show me how to pray to God, to put thread in my hair, to wash my cloth with no soap, and to change my under-cloth when my monthly visitor was first coming.

My throat tight itself as I hear her voice in my head now, the faint and weak of it, as she was begging Papa to don't give me to any man for marriage if she die of this sickness. I hear Papa's voice too, shaking with fear but fighting to be strong as he was answering her: "Stop this nonsense dying talk. Nobody is dying anything. Adunni will not marry any man, you hear me? She will go to school and do what you want, I swear to you! Just do quick and better yourself!"

But Mama didn't do quick and better herself. She was dead two days after Papa make that promise, and now I am marrying a old man because Papa is forgetting all the things he make promise to Mama. I am marrying Morufu because Papa is needing moneys for food and community rent and nonsense.

I taste the salt of my tears at the memory of it all, and when I go back to my mat and close my eyes, I see Mama as a rose flower. But this rose is no more having yellow and red and purple colors with shining leaves. This flower be the brown of a wet leaf that suffer a stamping from the dirty feet of a man that forget the promise he make to his dead wife.



## CHAPTER 3

I didn't able to sleep all night with all the sorrowing and memorying.

At first cock crow, I don't climb to my feets to begin my everyday sweeping or washing cloth or grinding beans for Papa's morning food. I lie there on the mat and keep my eyes close and listen to all the noise around me. I listen to the crying of a cock in the afar, a deep mourning cry; to the blackbirds in our mango tree singing their happy, every-morning song. I listen as far away, somebody, a farmer maybe, is hitting a ax at the buttocks of a tree; hitting, hitting, hitting. I listen as brooms are making a swish on the floor in one compound, as one mama in another compound is calling her childrens to wake up and go baffle, to use the water in the clay pot and not the one in the iron bucket.

The sounds are the same every morning, but today, every sound is a blow to the heart, a wicked reminding that my wedding is drawing close.

I sit up. Kayus is still sleeping on his mat. His eyes are close but he look like he is having two minds about waking up. He been doing this shaking of his eyeslids in a struggle since the day we bury Mama, throwing his head left and right and shaking his eyeslids. I move near to him, press my palm on his eyeslids, and sing a soft song in his ear until he keep himself still.

Kayus is only eleven years of age. He use to bad behaving many times, but he has my heart. It is me Kayus come to and cry when the boys in the village square was laughing him and calling him cat-fighter because Kayus, he was all the time sick as a child, so Papa take him to one place and they use razor blade to slash on his cheeks three times this way and that, a mark to chase away the spirit of sickness. When you are seeing Kayus, it is as if he was in a fight with a big cat, and the cat use his nails to scratch Kayus on his cheeks.

It is me that was teaching Kayus all the schoolwork I know, the Plus and Minus and Science and, most of all, the English, because Papa is not having school fees moneys for even Kayus too. It was me that tell him his futures is bright if only he can push himself to learn.

Who will be caring of Kayus when I marry Morufu? Born-boy?

I sigh, look my older brother, Born-boy, as he is sleeping on the bed, a vexing look on his face. His real name is Alao, but nobody is ever calling him that. Born-boy is the first born, so Papa say it is respecting for him to be sleeping on the only one bed in the room three of us are sharing. I don't mind it. The bed have a thin mattress foam on top it, full of holes that

bedbugs are using as kitchen and toilet. Sometimes, that mattress be smelling like the armpit of the bricklayers at the market square, and when they are raising their hand up to greet you, the smell can kill you dead.

How can Born-boy be caring for Kayus? He don't know how to cook or clean or do any work except of his mechanic work. He don't like to laugh or smile too, and at nineteen and half years of age, he look just like a boxer, both his hands and legs be like the branch of a thick tree. He sometimes is working all night at Kassim Motors, and when he come home too late in the night, he just throw hisself inside the bed and sleep. He is snoring now, tired, every of his breath is a shot of hot wind in my face.

I keep my eye on Born-boy a moment, watching the lifting up and down of his chest in a beat with no song, before I turn to Kayus and give him two soft slaps on his shoulder. "Kayus. Wake up."

Kayus pinch open one eye first, before the second one. He do this all the time when he want to wake up: open one eye first, then the second one a moment after, as if he is fearing that if he open the two eyes at the same time, he will suffer a problem.

"Adunni, you sleep well?" he ask.

"I sleep well," I lie. "And you?"

"Not well," he say, sitting up beside me on the mat. "Born-boy say you are marrying Morufu next week. Was he joking me?"

I take his hand, cold and small in my own. "No joke," I say. "Next week."

Kayus nod his head up and down, pull his lips with his teeth and bite on it. He don't say one word after that. He just bite his lips and grip my hand tight and squeeze.

"Will you ever be coming back after the marriage?" he ask. "To be teaching me? And cooking my palm oil rice for me?"

I shrug my shoulder. "Palm oil rice is not hard to cook. You just wash the rice in water three times and keep it in a bowl to be soaking. Then you take a fresh pepper and—" I stop talking because the tears is filling my mouth and cutting my words and making me to cry. "I don't want to marry Morufu," I say. "Please beg Papa for me."

"Don't cry," Kayus say. "If you cry, then I will cry too."

Me and Kayus, we hold each our hands tight and cry with no noise.

"Run, Adunni," Kayus say, wiping his tears, his eyes wide and full of a fearing hope. "Run far and hide yourself."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "What if the village chief is catching me as I am running? Are you forgetting Asabi?"

Asabi is one girl in Ikati that didn't want to marry a old man because she was having real love with Tafa, one boy that was working in the same Kassim Motors with Born-boy. The day after her wedding, Asabi was running away with Tafa but they didn't able to run far. They catch Asabi in front of the border and beat her sore. And Tafa? They hang the poor boy like a fowl in the village square and throw his body to Ikati forest. The village chief say Tafa was stealing another man's wife. That he must die because in Ikati, all thieves must suffer and die. The village chief say they must lock Asabi in a room for one hundred and three days until she is learning to sit in her husband's house and not running away.

But Asabi didn't learn anything. After the one hundred and three days of locking inside a room, Asabi say she is no more coming outside. So she stay in that room till this day, looking the walls, plucking hair from her head and eating it, pinching her eyelashes and hiding it inside her brassiere, talking to herself and the spirit of Tafa.

"Maybe you can be coming to play with me in Morufu's house," I say. "I can be seeing you in the stream too, even at the market, anywhere."

"You think?" Kayus ask. "What if Morufu is not letting me to come and play with you?"

Before I can think to answer, Born-boy turn hissself in his sleep, wide his two legs apart, and push out a loud mess that fill the air with the odor of a dead rat.

Kayus sniff a laugh and cup his hand on his nose. "Maybe marrying Morufu is better than staying in this house with Born-boy and his smelling mess."

I squeeze his hand and drag a smile to my lips.

---



I wait till Kayus is sleeping again before I leave the room.

I find Papa in the outside, sitting on the kitchen bench near the well. The morning is beginning to light up now, and the sun is just waking up from sleep; be like half a orange circle peeping from behind a dark cloth in the sky. Papa is not having any shirt on, just his trousers and no shoes on his feet. He is eating a short stick in the corner of his mouth, his black radio in one hand, and with the other hand, he is banging a stone on his radio to wake it up. He do this every morning to wake the radio up since

before Kayus was born, and so I low myself to the sand and keep my hand in my back and wait for the radio to wake up.

Papa bang the stone on the side of the radio three times—*ko, ko, ko*—and the radio make a cracking noise. A moment pass, and a man's voice in the radio say, "Gooooo morning! This is OGF 89.9. The station for the nation!"

Papa spit his stick to the sand beside me and look me like he want to slap my head for bending low in his front. "Adunni, I am wanting to hear six o'clock morning news. What is it?"

"Good morning, Papa," I say. "There is no beans in the house. Can I go and borrow from Enitan's mama?"

I have beans swelling inside a tin of water in the kitchen, but I am needing to talk to somebody about this whole wedding coming because Enitan and me, we been best of friends since we been able to read ABC and count 1-2-3. Her mama is also having a small farm, and many times, she like to give us beans, yam, and *egusi*, and she will tell us to pay for it whenever we are having moneys for it.

Papa shock me when he laugh and say, "Wait."

He set the radio on the bench ever so gentle, but the radio make a cracking noise two times, and then it just die dead like that. Give up spirit. No more OGF 89.9 voice. No more station for the nation. Papa look the radio a moment, the silent black box of it, then he hiss, slap the radio from the bench, and smash it to the ground.

"Papa!" I say, putting my two hands on my head. "Why you spoil your radio, Papa? Why?" The tee-vee didn't ever work, and now, all that is remaining of the radio is a broken plastic with yellow, red, and brown wires peeping out of it.

Papa hiss again, shift his left buttock up, and dip his hand in his back trouser pocket. He bring out two fifty-naira notes of moneys and give me. I wide my eyes, look the money, dirty and soft and stinking of *sigá*. Where is Papa finding moneys to give me? From Morufu? My heart is twisting as I fold the naira inside the edge of my wrapper.

I don't say, *Thank you, sah*.

"Adunni, hear me well," Papa say. "You must pay for the beans with that money. Then you tell Enitan's mama that after your wedding, me your papa"—he slap his chest as if he want to kill himself—"will pay for all she been ever give us. I will pay it all everything. Even if it is costing thousan' of naira, I will pay it all. Every naira. You tell her that, you hear me?"

"Yes, sah."

He look the scatter of his radio on the floor and bend his mouth in a

stiff smile. “Then I will buy a new radio. A correct one. Maybe even a new tee-vee. A cushion sofa. A new— Adunni?” He slide his eye to me, strong his face. “What are you looking at? Off you go! Quick!”

I don't say one word as I leave his front.

---



The path to Enitan's house is a thin line of cold, wet sand behind the river, with a bush as tall as myself on the left and right side of it. The air on this side of the village is ever cold, even with the sun shining bright in the sky. I am singing as I am walking, keeping my head and voice down because behind the bush, childrens from the village are laughing as they are washing and splashing theirselves in the river. I don't want nobody to call my name, to ask me about any foolish planning for any nonsense wedding, so I quick my feets, cut to my right at the end of the path, where the ground is dry again, and where Enitan's compound is.

Enitan's house is not like our own. Her mama's farm is doing well, and so last year or so, they begins to cover the red mud of their house with cement and begins to fix it so now they have a sofa with cushion and a bed with a good mattress and a standing fan that don't make a loud noise when it is turning. Their tee-vee is working correct too. Sometimes, it even catch the Abroad movies.

I find Enitan at the back of her house, pulling a bucket out of the well with a strong rope. I wait till she set it down before I call her name.

“Ah! Look who is in my house this early morning!” she say, putting her hand up in the air like a salute. “Adunni, the new wife!”

When she make to bow her head, I slap her right up, right in the middle of her head. “Stop this!” I say. “I am not a wife. Not yet.”

“But you will soon become a wife,” she say, twisting her wrapper out from her chest to wipe her forehead with the edge of it. “I was greeting you, special one. You can like to be angry sometimes, Adunni. What is worrying you this morning?”

“Where is your mama?” I ask. If her mama is in the house, then I cannot be talking to Enitan about the wedding because her mama is worst of all for not understanding why I am not wanting to marry Morufu. One time she hear me talking my fears of marrying any man with Enitan, she pull my ears and tell me to eat my words of fear and be thanking God that



I am having a man to care for me.

“In the farm,” Enitan say. “Ah, I think I know why you are sad. Follow me. I have some beans in the—”

“I am not looking for food,” I say.

“Then what is all this worrying face for?”

I put my head down. “I been thinking about . . . begging my papa to don’t let me marry Morufu.” I am speaking so quiet, I am nearly not hearing myself. “Can you follow me to beg him? If you follow me, maybe he will change his heart about this whole thing.”

“Beg your papa?” I can hear something strong in her voice, something confuse, angry too. “Why? Because your life is changing for better?”

I dig my toesnails into the sand, feel a sharp stone pinch my toe. Why is nobody understanding why I am not wanting to marry? When I was still inside school and was the old of all in my class, Jimoh, one foolish boy in the class, was always laughing me. One day as I was walking to sit on my table, Jimoh say, “Aunty Adunni, why are you still in primary school when all your mates are in secondary school?” I know Jimoh was wanting me to cry and be feeling bad because I didn’t able to start my schooling on time like the other childrens, but I look the devil-child inside his eyes and he look me back. I look his upside-down triangle-shape head, and he look me back. Then I sticked out my tongue and pull my two ears and say, “Why are you not inside bicycle shop when your head is like bicycle seat?” The class, that day, it was shaking with all the laughters from the childrens, and I was feeling very clever with myself until Teacher slap her ruler on the table three times and say: “Quiet!”

In the years I was in school, I was always having a answer for the peoples laughing me. I always fight for myself, always keeping my head up because I know I am in school to be learning. Learning is not having age. Anybody can learn, and so I keep to my learning, keep getting good marks in my work, and it was when I was getting more better in my Plus, Minus, and English that Papa say I must stop because he didn’t have money for school fees. Since then, I keep trying to not forget my educations. I even been teaching the small boys and girls in the village ABC and 1-2-3 on market days. I am not collecting plenty money for the teaching, but sometimes, the mamas of the childrens will give me twenty naira, or a bag of corn or a bowl of rice or some tin sardines.

Anything they give me, I collect it, because I like to teach those childrens. I like the way their eyes be always so bright, their voices so sharp, when I say, “A is for what?” and they say, “A is for apple, AH-AH-

*APPLE*,” even though nobody is ever seeing any apple with our two naked eyes except of inside the tee-vee.

“Who will be teaching the small childrens in the village on the market days?”

“The childrens have their own mama and papa.” Enitan cross her hand in front of her chest, roll her eyes around. “And when you born your own childrens, then you can be teaching them!”

I bite my lips to lock the tears inside my eyes. Marriage is a good thing in our village. Many girls are wanting to marry, to be wife of somebody, or of anybody; but not me, not Adunni. I been cracking my mind since Papa tell me of this marriage, thinking that maybe there is a better options than to be a wife of old man, but my head, it have refuse to cooperating with ideas. I was even thinking to run away, to go far, but where will I go that my papa will not be finding me? How can I go and leave my brothers and my village just like that? And now, even Enitan is not understanding how I am feeling.

I raise my head, look her face. She herself was wanting to marry since she was thirteen years, but I think because her top lip is folding and bending to the left from a accident when she was small, nobody is talking marriage to her papa. Enitan don’t care about schooling or learning book. She is just happy to be plaiting hair, and now she is thinking to start a makeuppung business as she is waiting for when a husband will find her come.

“You cannot come and beg my papa for me?” I say.

“Beg him for what?” Enitan hiss a loud hiss and shake her head. “Adunni, you know how this is a good thing for your family. Think of how you been suffering since your mama . . .” She sigh. “I know it is not what you want. I know you like school, but think it well, Adunni. Think of how your family will be better because of it. Even if I beg your papa, you know that he will not answer me. I swear, if I can find a man like Morufu to marry me, I will be too happy!” She cover her mouth with one hand, laugh a shy laugh. “This is how I will dance on my own wedding.” She pinch her cloth by her knees and hold it up, begin to pick her feets, putting one in front of the other, left, right, right, left in a song only she can hear. “You like it?”

I think of Papa smashing his radio this morning, of how he is planning to buy new things with Morufu’s moneys.

“You like it?” Enitan ask again.

“You are dancing as if you have a sickness in your two legs,” I say to Enitan with a laugh that feel too heavy, too full for my mouth.