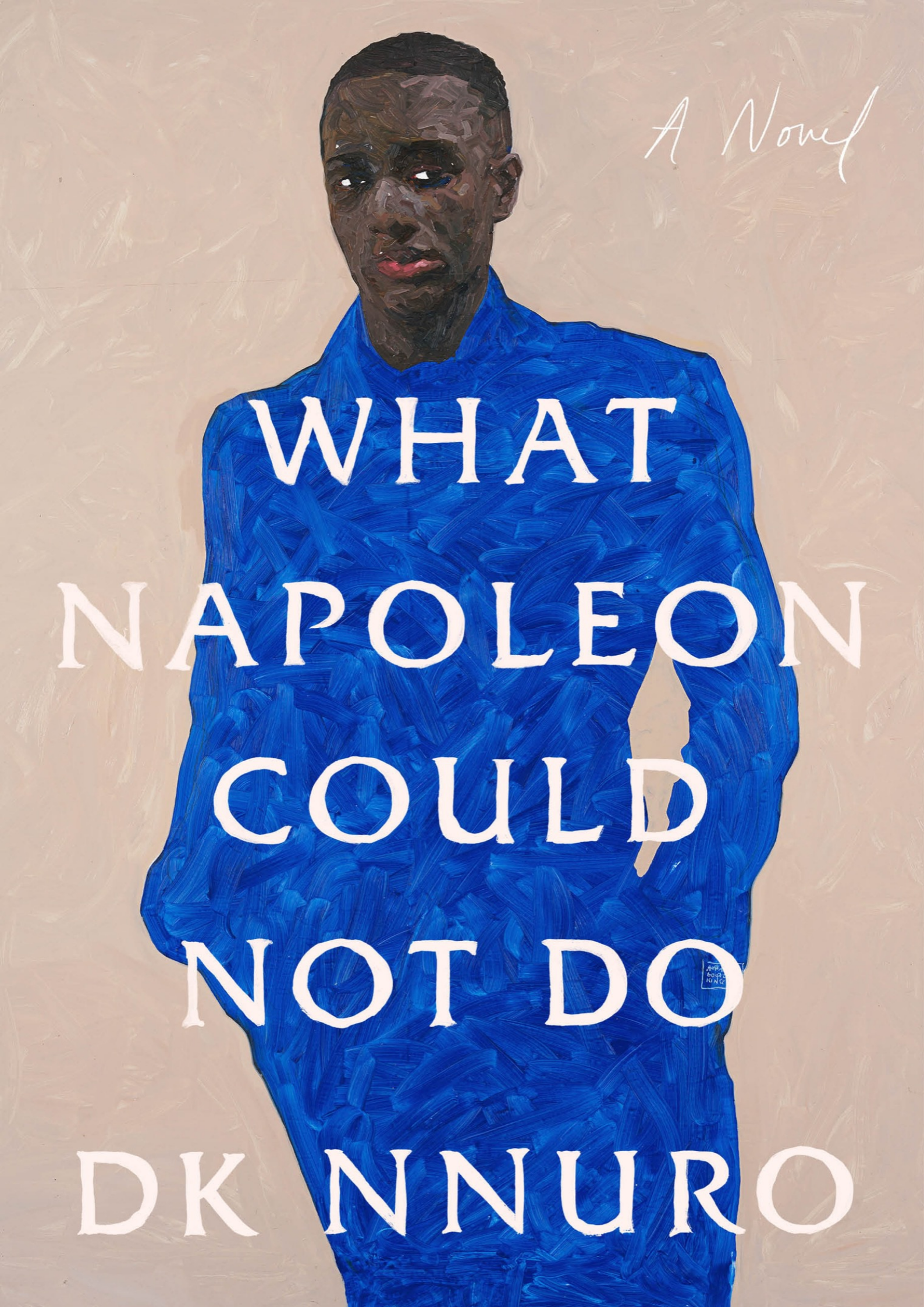


*A Novel*

A painting of a Black man from the chest up, wearing a vibrant blue, textured shirt. The background is a light, textured beige. The man's face is rendered with dark, expressive brushstrokes, looking slightly to the left with a neutral expression. The title text is overlaid on his torso in large, white, serif capital letters.

WHAT  
NAPOLEON  
COULD  
NOT DO  
DK NNURO

What  
Napoleon  
Could  
Not Do



*DK Nnuro*



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*For my mother,  
Cecilia O. Gyamoh, who saw me through,  
and for my maternal grandparents,  
E.A. Ofori and Agnes Gyamo,  
who never wavered in their belief in me.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# *Book 1*

Worth





From where he was standing on the veranda, Mr. Nti watched as Patricia's people exited the pickup truck that held up two sedans behind it. On Saturday mornings stillness descended on Otumfuo, Deduako's busy main road, a stillness Mr. Nti surmised also infected the drivers. How else could he explain the Job-like patience of the people at the wheels of the stopped cars? Hardly a honk from either when they were both forced to idle, all while Patricia's people took a lifetime to cross Otumfuo for the clearing.

Otherwise bare, the clearing rose in several small sand mounds, making it feel like unsteady foam underfoot. Still this inconvenience did not disqualify the clearing as a favored football pitch. The usual footballers who assembled every Saturday at dawn had now dispersed; the dust they excited had dissipated. Mr. Nti had caught the conclusion of this morning's match, after which each side had brought down their collapsible goalposts. Today it had been skins versus shirts, with the skins coming out sand coated, some appearing as if a curious child had misconstrued sand for body paint; some as if a man had crept out of soot rubble. It was a shame that the dust they'd flared had cleared, Mr. Nti thought. A cloud of it would have precisely underscored the coming of Patricia's indecent lot.

Triggering the cloud would have been easy enough, except that Patricia's people were not heading for the house as he'd expected. Their pace matched the slowness with which they'd crossed the road, and in its current iteration it could even be mistaken for tenderness. He, of course, would not be mistaken; Patricia's people were the sort he knew to never accept at face value. When he couldn't see them under the shroud of bushes that was part of their trek to the house, he was able to focus on hardening his resolve. He took in the rainbow-like rooftops that his high-sitting house looked onto; he heard the hollow chirps of morning birds. In this respite of peacefulness, he lost track of Patricia's people, so that he almost missed it when Patricia's mother came to an instigating stop about thirty yards away from the house's front gate.

She held herself in place: one leg on the timber bridge that led to the house, the other on the ground behind her. It could have been a warm-up stretch in an aerobics class. But Patricia's mother, carelessly stout and in her sixties, had no use for aerobics. Maybe she stood wide legged to let whatever breeze was rising from the stream run up her thighs. Maybe she was savoring a secondary tickle: the dry weeds at the bridge's entry against her legs. Just as Mr. Nti was contemplating this, they locked eyes, the thirty yards between them contracting to a hair.

She smirked at him. She wobbled her raised leg. A taunt. That was it. She'd stopped only for that childish purpose.

It was just like her. Two days before, during a phone conversation to finalize today's plans, she'd predicted a quick divorce proceeding. "After all, it's not as if Jacob has anything of worth for us to fight over," she'd said.

Now, with her assessing leg, she was repeating herself. Such worthlessness in Mr. Nti's household. So much worthlessness that even the sturdiness of the bridge was now in doubt.

It was a mercy, Mr. Nti thought, that Patricia's mother would be out of their lives after today. All would be said and done. Why he hadn't followed his first instinct five years ago to thwart the marriage, only God knew. He'd done some investigating on Patricia's mother then. Someone had called her "a woman in charge." Another had said, "What father?" when he'd asked for the whereabouts of Patricia's father. That same person had mentioned that Patricia had a half sister whose father was also out of the picture. Worried about what might become of his son Jacob, Mr. Nti had sat him down to ask, "Are you prepared to marry into a home where men don't matter?"

Jacob had laughed off the concern, his eyelids flitting in that way of his. Patricia wasn't like her mother, he'd said. "Men matter to her."

How terribly Jacob had miscalculated, leading them to this point, with Patricia's mother enjoying her little taunt before marshaling onto the bridge the three men she'd brought with her to certify that if Jacob had ever mattered to her daughter, he no longer did.

On the bridge, they pushed on in single file. In front was Tot, Patricia's maternal uncle, in whose hand was a black polyethylene bag Mr. Nti

presumed contained the bottle of aromatic schnapps they would present him to end the marriage. As for the two men behind Tot, also uncles, Mr. Nti knew them only by face, not name. Tot had stood in for the hypothetical father during the marriage ceremony five years ago, clutching absent Patricia's framed photograph to his chest—a forlorn beauty on some American pier seemingly awaiting her groom. Patricia's stare in the photograph had been fawning. It had added to the photo's backdrop of ceaselessness—the many birds dotting the sky, the rolling ocean waves—to speak of a forever for her and Jacob. At the marriage ceremony, Tot, wearing an amber organza number unseemly for a man, and speaking alongside the overhead whir of a snaking balloon arch, had sung Patricia's praises: a thick-and-thin warrior born to be devoted; a treasure. Obviously Patricia's readiness today to give up on the marriage spoke differently. She was not a thick-and-thin warrior. Devoted? Nonsense. A treasure? Even more nonsense.

Mr. Nti could not help returning to the one question that he had been asking himself for years: Had Patricia been at her own wedding, would he have been able to detect—from, say, the bunching of her face or the incessant pinching of her fingers—the untruths that came from her uncle's mouth?

An odd name, Tot. It was from his days as a drunkard—this according to one truth-teller from Mr. Nti's premarriage sleuthing. Even though Tot no longer frequented his neighborhood's teeming bars saying that a tot of liquor, any liquor, was all the pick-me-up he needed, the name had stuck. In her own efforts at a pick-me-up, Patricia had confirmed this piece of family lore to pry laughter out of Jacob. This was after Jacob's second visa rejection two years ago, when he'd told Patricia over the phone that he seriously doubted that the American embassy would ever favor him. He'd called her from his cellular while on the bus from Accra to Kumasi. After finishing talking with her, he'd called the house to announce the disappointment and to say that he would not make it home in time for dinner. A truck carrying timber had toppled over in the road and he couldn't tell how long the typically four-hour journey would be prolonged. Mr. Nti listened on, hearing in the background the other passengers' intensifying murmurs of frustration. He believed their frustrations

warranted. More than that, he believed that Jacob, a man who'd just been rejected by America for the second time—and who, to top it off, was facing an aggravating disruption on his journey back home—ought to have been leading them. Instead Jacob was unsettlingly composed.

“You sound well,” Mr. Nti wondered aloud. “You don’t have to.”

“The hurt isn’t so bad this time around, Pa. Patricia lifted my spirits.”

Then on and on Jacob went, extolling *lively* Patricia, saying that she'd known just what to say to put him in a better mood after this second visa denial. “Tot was quite the drunk, you know?” Jacob offered.

“So I’ve heard.”

Jacob laughed, adding, “The kind that ends up plastered on the floor.”

Another chuckle followed—a vicious one. In an instant Mr. Nti gathered that Patricia had infected Jacob with her rancor. He saw his chance to help Jacob see who Patricia truly was. He decided to frame his point as a curiosity. “Is it a lively person or a cruel person who makes you laugh at someone’s expense? Not to mention her own uncle?”

This rattled Jacob. He took a moment before replying. “It was the way she described Tot, Pa. That sometimes they would find him on the floor like a flopped rag doll.”

Stepping down from the bridge now, Tot did not flop onto the ground. Nor did the other two men or Patricia’s mother. They proceeded along the inclined grassy path to the gate. Scaling the low hill slowed them down again; this time, they had the manner of harried pilgrims.

It had been two days since their insufferable phone call, and yet Mr. Nti could still feel his tense grip on the receiver after Patricia’s mother questioned Jacob’s worth. In reply, Mr. Nti had demanded that Patricia’s mother swiftly return the gold band Jacob had presented to the family at the marriage ceremony. How she was going to engineer the return, he harped, was her burden. The ring had reached Patricia’s finger through one of her Virginia friends. This friend, unlike Patricia, possessed the papers required to move freely between America and Ghana. In the six years of Patricia’s courtship and marriage, the friend had visited Ghana several times. Mr. Nti had taken to calling her Postwoman, for she’d delivered to Jacob clothing from Patricia, a cellular phone, a laptop, picture books of America that Patricia had wanted Jacob to study in preparation for his

interviews at the embassy, in case the immigration officer sprang on him a particularly idiosyncratic question about American monuments. Mount Rushmore had been the one Jacob asked to be tested on most often, saying that it was a four-in-one monument; if an immigration officer truly wanted to trip him up, Patricia had told him, he'd ask about Mount Rushmore.

"There are others," Jacob anxiously announced to his father the night before his first appearance at the embassy. Standing in front of his wardrobe mirror, Jacob inspected his fifth blazer-and-trousers combo: ash against khakis, along with a cream shirt. He would go without a tie as not to appear too eager or overdone, he decided. Satisfied, he nodded at the reflection of himself in the mirror, capping off with, "According to Patricia there are other monuments all over Virginia but nowhere to be found in any of the books she sent me. That's because Americans in their right minds are ashamed of those ones. So no immigration officer is going to bring them up."

Patricia had also sent packs of white underwear and white singlets for Mr. Nti, and for Mrs. Nti she'd sent jewelry that, truth be told, quickly faded. Patricia's coordinated largesse wasn't endless. Over time it would lessen to trinkets, most notably in the way the Werther's Original toffees she sent went from five hundred-packs at a time to two ten-packs. Call that the point of no return. The last time Jacob had gone to meet Postwoman, he'd returned empty-handed.

What did it mean to dissolve a marriage when there'd been no *real* marriage? No embrace, no consummation, no sharing of a marital home. In all but name, "in absentia" described Patricia's role from the start. She'd been courted in absentia. Gotten married in absentia. It was, Mr. Nti thought, the perfect cap that in an hour she would finalize her divorce in absentia. The necessary rites of Jacob and Patricia's ending were straightforward enough: Mr. Nti and his delegation and Patricia's mother and her delegation would gather in the living room, grievances would be aired and exchanged, scores would be settled, the divorce eventually declared. A final act would follow: they would each take their turn drinking from the same quarter-filled glass of aromatic schnapps.

Mr. Nti understood that these customs were worthless in addressing his true grievance: What about Jacob? These customs were as worthless as he

knew Postwoman's future delivery of the ring would be. True mollification had to come at the hands of something blisteringly unpleasant. Custom be damned! The ring be damned!

Last August, exactly a year and a month ago (how could he ever forget?), Jacob had learned that Patricia shared her two-bedroom flat in Virginia with a man. Over his cellular, Jacob had inquired about it and Patricia had responded in a roundabout way that the man was only her flatmate. For Jacob, that response had sufficed. But for Mr. Nti, it had demanded a deeper probing. He wondered aloud whether Virginia suffered from a scarcity of woman flatmates. Jacob had merely smiled. At any other time his flitting eyelids and his liquid smile would have effectively poured oil on the troubled waters. But Patricia had set in motion savage waves.

"Who told you about the man in the first place?" Mr. Nti asked him. "Why not ask that person who he *really* is to her?"

Jacob did not reveal his source, which Mr. Nti found a completely unnecessary commitment to discretion. Nobody but Postwoman could have told him; that much was clear. What was the danger in Jacob revealing to his own father that Postwoman had been kind enough to let him know the truth? Since childhood, Jacob had confounded him with his oddities—among them a seeming aversion to women, which had contributed to his younger sister, Belinda, essentially assigning him a wife he would never meet. Jacob had been fully grown by age fifteen—handsome, an enviable physique, a towering self that was rare among Ashanti men, who tended to be on the shorter side. Yet as much as these qualities promised a full life with women, his son spun through one lonely year after another. He was thirty-four when Belinda connected him with Patricia.

If Mr. Nti was being honest, Jacob's apparent glee over a life with Patricia was evidence that he did indeed like women, and that had encouraged him to support the union. In any case, such long-distance marriages were common and had been for some time, with so many young people in this country fixated on America. Yes, it was more often the case that the parties had been in each other's presence at least once, something that could not be said about Jacob and Patricia. That fret had received only brief attention from Mr. Nti, for Belinda, his only daughter, had repeatedly

vouched for Patricia's decency. And for God's sake there was the fact of Jacob's glee over a woman. That glee! How vivid it was when Jacob showed him and Mrs. Nti the ring he would give Patricia, some of the cost of which Mr. Nti had covered. Mrs. Nti had held it up triumphantly. It was beautiful, but the triumph in her eyes was for the fact that Jacob—however convolutedly, however remotely—had finally solved his woman problem.

"Girls of today prefer white gold," Mrs. Nti said about the ring, "which has never made sense to me. Yellow gold is classic. Never goes out of style. You couldn't have made a better choice."

These days, whenever that memory of Sarah struck Mr. Nti, her enduring cynicism about the union reverberated. Sarah was wise. It was from her that Belinda had acquired her wisdom and startling intelligence, but Belinda had taken hers further: the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, Williams College, George Washington Law, and magnificent wealth (even if that was the doing of Belinda's American husband, Wilder Thomas). A Sarah born in a different era—Belinda's era—would have charted a path of greatness like Belinda's, or even one outstripping hers. But in 1965, at fifteen, Sarah had been taken out of school and given to him for marriage. He was twenty-two.

Regarding Jacob and Patricia, Sarah had ultimately taken her cue from Belinda. During one of her calls home Belinda permanently subordinated Sarah's concerns when she said, "Ma, I want this marriage for you as much as I want it for Jacob. You will not live forever." A brash doctor had been direct with him and Sarah just weeks prior. He'd given Sarah three to four years, even with a pacemaker. Belinda was echoing the message more delicately.

"All right," Sarah said.

To Belinda's ears, Sarah had signed off on the marriage. But during moments when Sarah was certain of their privacy, she worried to her husband's hearing. Once, seated with him on this very veranda, she asked, "What if Jacob is doing this to hide?"

"Hide from what?"

"Himself."

Mr. Nti had needed a minute to settle on the right response. "Jacob is not duplicitous," he said.

Jacob. Good Jacob. A man of good conscience, Mr. Nti thought, courtesy of himself and Sarah. Jacob had remained faithful to his wife. The same could not be said, Mr. Nti was sure, about Patricia. The male flatmate was Patricia's true motivation for ending the marriage. Because Jacob's two visa denials did not seem like good reason. Nor were the two disappointing results from the American Green Card Lottery. Five months ago, Jacob had come home and reported that Patricia had asked him in their latest call, "How much longer can we hope that one day America will let you join me?"

The question had brought them to this moment when Mr. Nti, now in one of the veranda's cushioned cane chairs and feeling primed for battle, wished for lightning to strike Patricia's people dead. They banged on the high gate instead with a forcefulness he could have sworn shook the house.

From behind him he heard the kitchen door creak open. It let out to the left side of the house, where a strip of fertile land had been cultivated to grow red and green peppers, aubergines, and tomatoes. The rest of the walled compound was covered in cream ceramic tiling with a swirly rose-colored motif, against which he could hear his grandson's rubber sandals slapping. Alfred came into view in the front yard, dashing toward the gate.

Mr. Nti quickly got to his feet. "Alfred," he whispered.

Alfred stayed put at the large flowerpots that hemmed the veranda wall. He stood straight, as if, eight years ago, a midwife hadn't jerked him from his mother during delivery. The negligent woman had torn a crucial annular ligament in Alfred's right arm, leaving it to hang heavy at his side. It was rarely possible for Alfred to stand straight. Usually, he tipped to his right.

Mr. Nti leaned over the waist-high veranda wall. "Stay right there," he ordered. "I'm going inside. You can open the gate after."

From inside the house, he would give Patricia's mother a taste of her own medicine. Alfred could get them at the gate. He could offer them chairs on the veranda. But inviting them inside was beyond the bounds of his eight years on earth. Until an adult appeared—and Mr. Nti was the only capable adult available, as Jacob had fled the house before dawn and Robert and Martha, Alfred's parents, were constrained by their inability to hear or speak—Patricia's people would be forced to wait outside.



Mr. Nti entered the house. He closed the door behind him and drew the drapes. Here was true taunting: invited guests made to feel uninvited upon arrival.

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PATRICIA'S MOTHER'S TRADE as a distributor of organza had afforded her a mint-green two-story house. She'd found her relative success through pluck rather than education. This pluck should have mattered more to Mr. Nti, as should have Patricia's mother's impressive home, where the marriage ceremony, following tradition, had taken place. Without the financial assistance of his children—mostly without Belinda's husband, Wilder—Mr. Nti would have been unable to build his own, single-story home. He hadn't made it back to Patricia's mother's house since the marriage ceremony, as, apparently dedicated to the union as she was, she had made all the subsequent house calls. She was partial to holiday visits, though she hadn't made her annual pilgrimage during the most recent Christmas season, for reasons that were soon obvious. The Christmas before she'd come with her maid in tow. Atop the girl's head was an aluminum pan filled with two live chickens—immobilized by the string that tied their feet together—a fifteen-kilogram bag of rice, and two crates of eggs. That crisp afternoon had piqued Mr. Nti's awareness and he'd noted that the woman had a singular redeeming physical quality: a perfectly round face. Otherwise Patricia's mother's stoutness was unfortunate. Her triceps flapped. Her midsection, visible through her tightly fastened kabas, looked pleated. She must have refused Alfred's offer of the veranda chairs, for Mr. Nti saw through the curtains that she stood by the flowerpots, taking them in as if she were seeing the red hibiscus and purple bougainvillea for the first time. Yet the flowers, like the bridge, were characteristic of Mr. Nti's home, and Patricia's mother couldn't claim to be unfamiliar with them. About the hibiscus she'd once asked, "What's your secret? Mine keep dying on me."

Was she wondering about his gardening competence now? Her eyes, as best as he could tell, observed the flowers like a flower show judge. It was unlikely that she was taking in the blooms in appreciation; most likely, she was finding fault, impossible as that was, with the hibiscus, or even the

bougainvillea, despite their sensuous lushness. But fault she was to find: Divorce had a way of reversing one's perspective. Everything that had once been beautiful was now flawed.

Inside the kitchen, Yaa, the maid, sat on a low stool skinning and cutting cassava onto newspaper. Across from her, Alfred arranged the pieces into lines. He looked up at his grandfather when he came in.

“Did they say anything?” Mr. Nti asked.

“They are waiting.”

“Where did you say I was?”

“In the toilet.”

Mr. Nti smiled. Alfred had probably provided the quickest excuse that came to him, not knowing that he'd done his grandfather a favor: nothing was more needling than having to wait for someone to void his bowels. How perfect! Thinking to show a bit of graciousness, Mr. Nti asked Yaa to take some water out to their guests.

He looked back at Alfred, whose eyes had not left him. “Did you tell your parents that they are here?”

“I told them. They are putting on nicer clothes.” He returned to his cassava and lined them up in columns with his useful arm without difficulty. That rare balance again.

“How about you?” Mr. Nti asked. Alfred was bare-chested. He wore a pair of mesh shorts, his orange rubber slippers paired at this side. “Won't you get ready?”

“Are we starting now?”

“Soon.”

Without saying a word, Alfred rushed from the kitchen with characteristically right-leaning strides, forgetting his slippers. What Alfred suffered in smooth movement he made up for with a mature mind. He'd absorbed the role of interpreter between his parents and the rest of the household three years ago when Sarah at last succumbed to heart disease—she'd been the primary interpreter before Alfred showed early signs of his own capabilities. She'd mastered Robert's language not long after he started signing in boyhood, beating Mr. Nti to it. Mr. Nti had tried to learn but had soon given up because Sarah was always ready to pass on to Robert whatever her husband's message was. It hadn't helped that they'd

sent Robert to a boarding school for the deaf when he'd turned six. Robert was gone nine months of the year, until he returned permanently at twenty-one. Belinda, being brilliant, had also picked up Robert's sign language, but by the time Robert came home for good, she was already abroad. Jacob was still around, but like his father he couldn't seem to master sign language. And so it was Sarah who burdened herself with the subtle bends in the fingers that differentiated "goat" from "sheep," "pear" from "aubergine," "red" from "violet." "Red, red," she'd once flicked her fingers in emphasis—they couldn't have Robert thinking that the blood drawn from her at the hospital was violet in color. This was during the latter part of her heart illness. By that time Robert was married to Martha and Alfred was five. Their little family made their home in the one-room guest quarters at the rear of the house. Sarah, relegated to the four-poster bed in the big bedroom in the main house, thanked the heavens for the gift of Alfred. "He will take my place when I'm gone. One-armed and all," she assured Mr. Nti after he tearfully confessed a diminished connection with Robert as one of his many grievances over losing her.

Alfred, despite his youth, would participate in today's divorce ceremony. Robert and Martha were the rightful participants, but they required a go-between to keep them abreast of what was happening.

By himself in the kitchen, Mr. Nti could feel its quiet thicken. Unnerved, he welcomed the faucet's aggravating drip. Before he could make his move to tighten it, he heard voices drifting into the house. His first thought boiled his blood: Patricia's people had let themselves in. He was in the throes of accepting that there might be no cordiality with which to begin when the rich alto of his younger brother's singsong speech patterns calmed him.

"Sorry we're late," Kwame Broni said.

Over the years, Kwame Broni's hair had stayed dark without ever being steeped in black coloring. This had always bothered Mr. Nti, whose own hair was spotted with gray.

"Not late enough," Mr. Nti said to his brother.

"I showed them to their seats."

"I heard." Sixty-eight years had made Mr. Nti lean. Kwame Broni, on the other hand, only three years his junior, was sturdy. One difference

disturbed Mr. Nti most: his brother in more than six decades hadn't contended with so much as a troublesome tooth, while all four of Mr. Nti's back molars had been extracted, which accentuated his jowls.

He could, however, take heart in his eyesight: he still saw significant distances without a blur while nearsighted Kwame Broni had to wear tortoiseshell spectacles.

Mr. Nti peered past Kwame Broni's shoulder. "My plan was to have them wait out there some more," he said. "Out of spite."

Kwame Broni giggled dismissively. "That's the best you could come up with?"

"I'm not like you. I don't have a ready bone for cruelty."

Without a word they entered the storeroom of the kitchen for some privacy. They stopped in the half dark amid a congregation of pots and pans. "I came up with something," Kwame Broni said, his voice low.

"As if that was ever in doubt."

"Do you want to hear it or not?" Kwame Broni asked. Mr. Nti nodded apologetically. "Patricia's uncle," Kwame Broni said. "Tot. When all is said and done, will he drink with us?"

"Not the schnapps." Mr. Nti had a sense of his brother's wicked intent but he would not name it explicitly. "We don't want his devil returning to him."

"We don't?"

"No. We don't."

"Not big on schadenfreude?"

"Not big on what?"

"Schadenfreude."

"Meaning?"

"Delighting in his misery," Kwame Broni said. "He's not innocent."

"Maybe. Or maybe not. Patricia's mother is his life support. You can't blame him for going with her will," Mr. Nti said. "Anyway, he's not our target."

Patricia's mother was. She was a proxy for Patricia, but also her aggressive instincts and attitudes deserved a proper reply. Mr. Nti and Kwame Broni had gotten together earlier in the week—after Jacob had confirmed Mr. Nti's suspicion that he would be a no-show at the divorce