

Eight

Mma looked down again at the paper in her hand. It was filled with writing in a barely legible hand: tight, terse, scribbles like a child writing in a hurry: the letters rising and falling as if following the patterns of a song. Red ink on white paper. How very typical of her mother, she thought, to write in red. Blue or black ink would have been too regular, too normal for a woman who once told her daughter she took great pride in living life on her own terms. Once when Mma, at fourteen, went crying to her because a classmate had laughed at her for wearing sandals that were no longer in fashion, she had told her daughter, 'Be a leader, not a follower! No child of mine is going to be a cow. Be the herdsman! Who decides what's fashionable? Who has the right to tell you what's in trend? Your classmates? The media? You are not stylish if you follow the herd. You should stand out. Create your own style, then you'll be truly stylish.' That day, Madam Gold was visiting, and had interceded for Mma. 'Make the girl's life easy, biko. Were you not a child yourself once? Biko, stop filling her head with leaders and followers, cows and herdsmen, she's not a Fulani nomad,' she scolded Ezi. Turning to Mma, she said, 'Don't mind your mother. If she hasn't bought you a new pair by the time I visit you again, I'll take you myself to Bata and you can choose two pairs of shoes: one for school and one for outings. I na-egekwa m nti? Now stop crying. Stop crying! You'll get new shoes before Monday. I promise you that. Now, go and play. Good girl!'

Her mother had seemed slightly piqued but the very next day she had taken Mma to Bata to have her sandals replaced. They even skipped breakfast to beat the traffic. When Madam Gold visited two days later, Mma had shown her the sandals. 'I'm glad your mother saw sense!' Madam Gold said. Ezi had eyed her dramatically. Then they both burst into laughter and started talking about things of which Mma had no understanding. She had often wished at that age, that Madam Gold was her mother.

You stood out alright, Mommy, Mma thought, starting to read.

My mother never knew me as a mother. Not really. I have sometimes wondered what she would have made of me had she met you. She never gave me a chance to show her, did she? Not really. I know we have had our problems – , you and me, but that is because we are really alike. I can imagine you shaking your head now. But it is true. We are more alike than

you care to admit. Ose na mmanu. We go together. Think about it baby-baby and dare to tell yourself the truth. The truth will set you free!

I wonder who came up with that: The truth will set you free. Nonsense! The truth is many things. It can do many things. But the truth does not always liberate, though, does it? It is self serving and sometimes causes harm. During the war, some people told the truth of their neighbours hiding grown-up sons, and got those sons forced into the military handed guns and ordered to shoot. The truth has no hiding place, they say. I say it can stay hidden and not cause harm. I never wanted the truth! I could have done without knowing it. Ignorance is bliss, is it not? There is more truth in that than in anything we have ever been told about the truth.

There were times I wanted to show you off. To tell the world, See what I've done with her! Did you know that? I bet you didn't. I know what you thought of me. I know. But beware, my daughter. I am not the enemy. The man who refuses to open his eyes to the excreta his friend has successfully side-stepped will have no one but himself to blame when he steps into it. The lizard says that it nods its head when it falls to encourage itself because no one else will encourage it. When I think back on how I hard I had to struggle, on what I had to work with, I too nod my head. I have done a good job with you, even if you do not realize it.

It was not always easy. You have always been such a difficult one baby-baby but no one can blame me for not doing my best. Think. Think of all the good times we had. Remember...

Mma hissed and dug into her own memories of growing up with Ezi. How could she have thought she did a good job? Her mother had no idea what parenting was! Taking her to the park and baking her cupcakes, did that qualify her for mother of the year? She shut her eyes and inhaled deeply to stop from crying but memories came rushing in.

M. Memories. Beneath all the other memories, the clearest childhood memory Mma had of her mother was of a not –so- tall- not-so-short woman in a multicoloured boubou, clapping and dancing to music Mma could no longer recall. On her feet she had shoes of such glossy red that it seemed as if they sent out of sparks every time she tapped them. The boubou billowed around her waist like a parachute and Mma remembered imagining the boubou opening up and sending her mother spiraling upwards into heaven, sparks of fire trailing from her feet. Her mother's face was dominated by a wide, wide smile as if that was all her face was: a smile which swallowed everything else. It was the smile Mma saw whenever the memory popped into her head. She was there now:

‘Ngwa, dance,dance,’ her mother said to her.. And Mma, already embarrassed by her mother’s flamboyance (even though it would take her some years to understand why,) and irritated by the baby-talk, shook her head. She was quite upset with her mother.

‘No-No? Come sweetie, come dance-dance with your mummy-mummy,’ her mother said, the smile never diminishing. She reached out to drag Mma up from the sofa but Mma sank deeper into it as if wanting to meld herself to the velvet cushions.

‘Get up-get-up and dance-dance with mummy-mummy.’

Mma said ‘No.’ She did not want to dance. She sat on the sofa with her doll in one hand like trying to behave herself at someone else’s house. She felt like a stranger. Her mother scolded her once, ‘You lurk-lurk in corners as if you were only visiting-visiting.’

She mother turned her back to her now, bunched up her boubou in one hand so that her thighs showed, wriggled her buttocks, threw a leg up and brought it down as if it were a tree she were planting, reconnecting it to the earth. Mma was convinced that her mother was so solid that nothing could remove her, not even death.

She remembered that day so well.

Ogochukwu-from-downstairs’ mamannukwu was visiting, and had come like Father Christmas, bearing sacks of gifts: Fruit. Gold-coloured cocoa and dark violet pears; green guavas the size of a human fist and sour-sop with green bumpy skin like a baby dinosaur.

Mma wanted her own grandmother to visit too. She wanted this , perhaps, more than she had ever wanted anything else at that age.

‘When is my own mamannukwu visiting?’

‘It’s just the two of us, baby-baby,’ her mother replied, interrupting her dance to give her daughter a quick hug. ‘Just baby-baby and her mummy-mummy. No mamannukwu’

Mma would not give up. ‘But where is my mamannukwu?’ Mma wriggled out of her mother’s hug. Surely, everyone had one tucked away in the countryside. Mma was not sure where exactly. She had lived in Enugu all her life, and did not, like the other children she knew, take regular trips ‘home’ with her mother. But that was a minor point. Like buttocks, every child had to have a pair of what Mma was becoming convinced was essential to their happiness: a village and a grandmother in that village. All the other children spoke of their grandmothers, whether they visited often or not, but Ogochukwu-from-downstairs had become unbearable since her grandmother came from Ezinifite. These days, she started every sentence with, ‘Mamannukwu m said and ‘Mamannukwu m did’ Her mamannukwu told her stories every night. Sometimes Ogochukwu was generous and shared them with friends, but always she would let them know that she was, like an impolite host saving the choicest bits of meat for himself, saving the best stories for herself. When they begged

her for more, she said, 'My mamannukwu says if she piled up all the stories she knows eh, they would fill this entire compound!' And then she would give a quick smile and ask, 'Did you like my story?'

'Yes!' They had laughed so hard when Tortoise lost all the feathers he had borrowed and was thrown down from the skies. They hoped their scream was enough to guarantee another tale.

'You think this story is great? Hmm, the one she told me two nights ago was better,' she said, laughing as they begged her to relent.

'Please tell us, biko nu.'

'No. That story is for me. Do you think stories grow on trees? You think you can just go and pluck them for nothing?'

Tired of begging, one of the children said, 'Wait till my own mamannukwu comes. She will tell me better stories than yours, Your grandmother is a rubbish storyteller who waddles like a duck with three feet and smells like a village latrine.'

'And your grandmother is a witch with hair on her chin and no teeth. She has a dirty mouth like you. I am never sharing my mamannukwu's cocoa and stories with you again!'

Mma did not care if the woman waddled like a duck or was toothless, (of course it would be better if she came perfect and did not smell, Ogochukwu-from-downstairs' mamannukwu did have a certain smell to her) as long as she was able to say Mamannukwu m said... and told stories and came with sacks of cocoa and huge delicious guavas, the size of which could never be found in Enugu.

Mma's mother kept dancing, the red shoes sinking their heels into the rug, sparkling as she danced, failing to grasp her daughter's need. It was this failure (how could she smile and dance away while her daughter suffered?) which got Mma upset. How old had she been then?

'Come dance-dance with mummy-mummy.'

And Mma had refused and sought solace in her doll, burying her head in its stringy hair. Breathing in its doll-scented smell. Ah, where was that doll now? She had no memory of losing it. It just seemed like it was there one day and unnoticed, had slipped away the next. Like so many things in her life.

But she did have a grandmother. She did have a mamannukwu who could have visited and who she could have shown off. And like everything else, her mother had kept her existence hidden until she died. And she dared to think that she had done a good job? 'No Mommy, you didn't' Mma screamed into the room. 'No amount of cupcakes, of picnics, of bottles of squash will ever make up for your meanness to me!'

What if she had refused to read those letters – she had never meant to read them after all – her mother would have kept her grandmother from her history as well. What sort of a woman does that to her own daughter? But what sort of a daughter, she caught herself thinking, was she? That was the same question Madam Gold had asked her on the day Ezi died.