Night Dancer

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On the third day, she went back to see Madam Gold.

The problem is that those with buttocks do not know how to sit!' Madam Gold declared firmly. 'That was your mother's problem.' She shifted in her half of the settee as if the reference to buttocks had made her suddenly self-conscious of her own.

'Ah, may this heat not kill us, oo,' she said, pulling off her bobbed wig to reveal sparse greying hair held untidily by a rubber band at the top of her head.'I don't know how you can bear to have such heavy braids in this heat, Mma.'

Mma smiled back in response.

Madam Gold reached one massive, wobbly hand into her bra, pulled out a flower-patterned handkerchief and wiped the sweat off her face. She tucked the handkerchief back in, turned to Mma, and in one swift movement, flung her arms around her. She whispered fiercely, 'I know what life is like for a young girl like you.'

Both the remark and the hug took Mma by surprise. Madam Gold, her mother's best friend, was not given to displays of affection. She released Mma as suddenly as she had grabbed her, as if she herself was surprised by the hug, and said almost tenderly, 'Your mother was stubborn. Very stubborn.' She moved her hands over Mma's face. 'Every man deserves a son.' She paused. She looked like she was weighing her words, trying them out in her head before releasing them.

'Every man . . . a man like . . . Your father was . . . a man . . . Especially a man who had been as patient as your father was. Your father was very patient. Yes. Not even a man carved out of stone would turn away a son when his wife had only been able to give him a daughter.' Her voice rose: 'I'm not saying that what he did was right. ***Mba nu!*** I'm only saying that he did what any man in his position would have done. Any man, ***nwoke obuna***, would have done the same. Would have looked elsewhere. It's only natural. They would have planted their seeds in many places, hoping that at least one would sprout. Anybody who tells you otherwise is lying. Are you listening to me? ***I na-egekwa m nti?***'

'Yes, Aunty.' She was grateful when Madam Gold released her face. She had held her breath through the speech, for the older woman stank as if she had just eaten beans. Or boiled eggs. She'd had to resist the urge to pull her head back from the assault.

Madam Gold picked up the glass of water from the side table beside her and began to drink. For a long time the gurgling noise was the only sound in the room. ***Glup***. ***Glup***. ***Glup***. 'This heat keeps my throat dry all day,' she said. She craned her neck behind her and shouted into the kitchen for more water. Her maid, a little girl of about eight, came scrambling out with a plastic jar and

placed it on the table. But she did not go away. She stood there, a sheet of paper in her hand, half held out to Madam Gold.

'***Ogini***? What is that, ***Ebele***?' Madam Gold asked impatiently.

'It's a list, Ma. For supper. I need to go to the market before it closes.'

Madam Gold took the list from her and scanned it. 'Didn't you buy Maggi cubes yesterday?'

'Yes, Ma, but we used them all up in stew last night.' Madam Gold hissed. She dragged a brown handbag from under the settee and counted out some notes. She gave the money to the girl and dismissed her with a 'Don't waste time there, oo. Just buy what you need to buy and come home straight!' She replaced her bag, looked at Mma and said, 'You know, when we were younger, our parents could buy food in bulk to keep at home, not like these days when you have to rush out each time you need to cook to buy onion and Maggi cubes! Who can afford to buy anything in bulk these days, eh?'

Mma sat on the edge of the settee, her hands clenched in her laps, saying nothing. She was not really listening to Madam Gold any more. She wondered what it was she felt. Her throat was parched but she had not asked for a drink when she came in and now she could not. She would just have to bear it.

So, she had a brother somewhere. She could have had a 'happy-happy' family, the sort of normal family her mother had mocked in her usual way: 'All those happy- happy families you see everywhere, scratch them, lift the lid and all you'll see are many sad-sad things, dirty-dirty things.'

Every child deserved a father. Indeed. Especially a child with a mother like hers to balance out her life.

Whatever hurt this father might have caused could not be that bad, if Madam Gold, sensible Madam Gold, had said that any man would have done what he did. He had not sent her mother packing; she had walked out. Whatever had happened she, not he, must be blamed for the consequences. Her mother had no right to keep her away from him, or him away from her. It was not right. If only she had been allowed contact, her life would have turned out differently. She would have talked about him at school. She could have stood in front of the class, all proud, and said, 'My father is an architect.' Or, 'My father is a painter.' What did he do? She had no idea. She could ask Madam Gold. He was a real person.

'What does . . . what did he do, Aunty? My father?' It was difficult knowing whether to speak about him in the present or the past.What if he was dead? She chided herself for even thinking it. She would not permit such thoughts. Not now.

'Business. He was a businessman. I suppose he's still a businessman.'

'What sort?'

'He had a supermarket. One of the best in Kaduna then. Sold everything. Anything you couldn't find, you couldn't find anywhere else. Such was its reputation. Your mother used to complain that he kept her awake at night talking about his plans for his business, simulating change on a sheet of paper, drawing and erasing where items ought to be placed for maximum sales. Every few months he moved stock around, said it kept customers interested.'

Her father was a successful businessman. Someone she could have been proud of. The sort of man any young man would have been happy to introduce as his father- in-law. If he had been in her life she would not have had boyfriends date her and then dump her for a more suitable candidate. Or have Obi drag his feet about her now. She would make any man a good wife, one ex-boyfriend had told her, 'it is just your mother. And we're not ***oyibo***, oo, we are not white people, for whom love is enough.' (He had married someone more suitable soon afterwards.) He was right. Everyone knew that marriage here was not an intimate affair between two people like it was with the ***oyibos***.

Madam Gold poured some more water into her glass from the white plastic jar, and said loudly, as if she was angry, 'Your mother could have stayed. She should have stayed. What else

could your father have done? What could he have done? Your mother was stubborn. I talked and talked to her, but my words went into one ear and straight out through the other. Her mind was made up. When you give medicine to a very sick man and his penis rises up, it is best to leave him alone as he has already found a woman on the other side. Nothing could change your mother's mind.'

She paused as if exhausted. 'Your father loved your mother, which is more than many wives have. He loved her. She knew that and I think she wanted to punish him by taking away what would hurt him the most. The problem was that she loved him too. She forgot that it never makes sense to cut off your own nose to spite your face. Everything, everything she had worked for, she gave up the moment she walked out. And for what? For that slip of a girl. A mere girl! She was not even beautiful, that Rapu.' She shook her head slowly from side to side, like a masquerade performer worn out from a day of running and dancing in the heat. 'I know my place. And I know what the options are outside these four walls. What do you think I'd do if my husband took another wife tomorrow? We women are little people. Your mother forgot that. I'm not condoning what Rapu did. I am not condoning what your father did, God forbid. I was upset when I heard. I mean, I could hardly believe that Mike would do such a thing. We always thought he was different. But I told Ezi, "What's done is done."'

She let out a hollow, unexpected laugh. 'Your mother was brave to take the steps she did, to walk out without looking back. Not even once. She shut that door and she never went back. That has to take quite some guts. E was fearless. Me, I am not brave enough. But I also know that there is wisdom sometimes in not being brave. You can only fight while you are alive. What is it they say in English? "You ***leev*** to fight another day." I told her that. She was my best friend and it was my duty to tell her the truth. But she would not listen to anyone. Once your mother's mind was made up, there was no changing it. You know that; you grew up with her, you know how she could be.'

She exhaled loudly, as if she had been holding her breath.'Women cannot afford that kind of stubbornness. Are you listening to me? ***I na-egekwa m nti***, Adamma?'

'Yes.' There were not many people who called her by her full name. Her mother had screamed it at her when she was really angry. 'Adamma, come and pick up the schoolbag you've left lying around here!'

'There is no place for that kind of stubbornness in a woman's life. Are you listening to me?'

'Yes, Aunty.'

'Good. But your mother was meant to be a man. Ah, my dear friend . . .' She smiled and shook her head gently. 'Your mother would have made a good man. She came in the wrong body. That's all.' She sighed again.

Afraid of being surprised by another hug, Mma bent down and started to scratch an imaginary itch on her leg. Her skin turned chalky white and she remembered that she had come out without rubbing on any lotion. She had skin which needed constant moisturising in the harmattan, even if the harmattan was as freakishly hot as this year's. She tried to rub the whiteness off with her thumb without much success. She also noticed that in her haste she had put on the rubber slippers she normally only ever wore at home. She hadn't worn rubber slippers outside since she was fifteen. And their purple colour did not go at all with her light green dress.

A reflective silence surrounded them for a short while. Madam Gold looked at her. 'Rapu was nowhere near your mother. That girl was nowhere near E at all! No comparison. She was flat both front and back. Teeth like a rabbit. No buttocks, no breasts. As skinny as a chewing stick.' She exhaled again. 'Yet . . . men will sleep with anything.'

Mma tried to imagine Rapu, skinny as a chewing stick with teeth like a rabbit's. Her mother, although not as big as Madam Gold, had body. She was full without being fat. Maybe Rapu had had the waif-like look of a supermodel. She wanted to tell Madam Gold, 'Aunty, my mother did not come in the wrong body, and she was not brave. She was selfish.' But once she thought of that, she remembered all the other things she had discov- ered about her mother: things that were making

her look at her in another light, in another way, as if she were discovering a total stranger. The remembrance brought a smell to her nose: the smell of something she would rather forget. The smell of something white. The smell of her upside-down thoughts. She could no longer stay.

G is for guilt. And for go. 'One of the most useful lessons life has taught me,' her mother had written, 'is knowing when to get up and go. There is nothing as resented as the guest who has outstayed his welcome.' The guilt was new for Mma, precipitated by the discov- eries she was making about her mother, through the letters she had left behind.

Mma got up. 'I should be leaving, Aunty. Thank you.' A bottle of Fanta had been brought out. She had not even noticed.

'Wait,' Madam Gold said. 'I have something to give you.'

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On the second day after she began to read the letters, Mma could think of nowehere to go but to Madam Gold's. Her mother had left her a trove of stories. Memoirs, Mma corrected herself, sticking to her mother's description. Half-told stories. Unformed stories she had to birth, midwifed by Madam Gold. Her mother called Madam Gold G. Madam Gold, on her part, called Mma's mother E. Just the initials, in the intimate short-hand of best friends and confidantes. Mma knew that if anyone could fill in the gaps in her mother's story, it would be

Madam Gold.

She told Madam Gold about how, intending to go to bed, she had found herself instead walking to her mother's room, lantern in hand, as there had been a power cut.

'I didn't even think I was going to go there!'

Madam Gold said, 'Man proposes, God disposes. It isn't inexplicable. Your mother's spirit dragged you in. She wanted you to read her story.'

'She's dead, Aunty!'

'And the dead live among us. The line between us and them is just a breath away.'

'Maybe,' Mma said, shrugging her shoulders. She did not want to think of her mother guiding her movements from beyond the grave. The thought was depressing. She did not tell Madam Gold that the moment she turned the handle of her mother's door, the power was restored, as if both actions were linked. She had almost dropped the lantern from the shock of it. She did not want Madam Gold telling her that her mother had something to do with that as well. She had always thought she was too modern, too intelligent, to believe in the dead having powers or feelings, but now she was not so sure. No. In fact, now she rather hoped that they did. After all, what was the point of her seeking revenge if her mother was oblivious to it? If she could not ensure that her mother's spirit never rested?

'How could you have had the letters for this long but never bothered to read them?' Madam Gold asked.

Mma shrugged.

'You're just your mother's daughter.'

Mma shook her head by way of response.What could she tell Madam Gold? That she wanted so much to be rid of her mother that she had not wanted to read the letters? That she was afraid that the letters might reveal something that would call into question all her righteous indignation at the dead woman? She did not believe Madam Gold's thesis that her mother's spirit had somehow engineered it. But something had happened to cause her change of heart. She had not even been curious, certain that she knew as much about her mother as she cared to know. It was probably, she thought, a combination of things: a dream she had been trying to forget, the power cut,

boredom.There had been nothing to distract her. She knew better than to tell Madam Gold this. She would just try to convince Mma that responsibility for her change of mind lay with the dead woman.

'I wasn't ever going to read the letters, Aunty. That night, I was just going to go to my room and sleep. Even when I got to my mother's room, I was going to turn round and leave. But I did not leave. I went back to the shoebox.'

Madam Gold nodded. 'Once it had brought you that far, it wasn't going to let you go without a fight. Your mother was a very determined woman. Ah! My friend was a tenacious woman!' She looked around the room with a sweeping smile that lingered for a moment on Mma as if she was the one whose tenacity Madam Gold was admiring.

Mma did not say a word in response. Nor did she return the smile. Instead, she said,'All my life, I sacrificed for my mother. Why could she not meet me halfway?' Sacrifices. Sacrificial. Scarification. Mma enjoyed word- play. She had picked up the habit in primary school when the headmistress would begin every school day by throwing an alphabet to the pupils and asking them to make as many words as possible with it. She called it 'The Thinking Exercise'. Mma could make up many more S-words to describe her life.

'What do you know about sacrifice, eh, Mma?' Madam Gold asked. She was not wearing a wig. Her hair was corn-rowed but the braid was untidy, already loosening at the ends, and in front, tufts of hair sprang up. Mma's anger was still raw, hurting like fresh chilli rubbed into the eye.

'Aunty, you don't know what my childhood was like,' Mma said, even though Madam Gold had known her for as long as she could remember. She had been the only other constant in her life. She was trying not to cry. Not to remember. She did not want to remember children yelling '***ada ashawo***' – whore's daughter – to her as she walked to school, children not much older than her throwing the words like missiles, and laughing as they struck her. Their cruelty was not gratuitous. It was calculated and consistent. It hit its mark and sent her to the privacy of the school toilets and to her bedroom to cry. She could not remember her life without the tears. She tried not to think of the words flailing in the air and then falling on her back to burn her, her skin welting. She tried not to think of the boys she did not know stopping her on the way from school to ask her how much she charged for her services – they had some cash to spend – while their friends tittered behind them, high-fiving each other, impressed by their daring.

'She told me I had no father! I was the only child in school without a father, dead or alive. Have you any idea how that made me feel?' Mma's voice remained flat. She did not wish to alienate Madam Gold by shouting.

Once, in anger, she had shouted at her mother, 'I bet you don't even know who my father is!' Casting the worst kind of aspersion on her, hoping that the accus- ation would force her into talking, into giving her a chance to seek the man out. But her mother had simply laughed that long laugh of hers and said, 'True, I don't know who he is. Are you happy now? You do not have a father. ***Kpom kwem. Onwe ife ozo?***'

Madam Gold began to say something, stopped. 'Sorry?'

'I am sure it was not easy for you, but it was worse for your mother.Your mother . . . Did she tell you about Goody Goody and his wife? Eh? Did she?'

'No. Who are they?' She didn't mention them at all in her . . . her memoirs. M was for memoirs. Trust her mother to exaggerate. She could not just write letters, it had to be a 'memoir', telling half-stories, sending her out in search of more. Sacrifice. Sacrificial. Scarificate. Skipping. Stories. Skipping stories. Snake. She listened to Madam Gold defend Ezi and said to herself, ***My mother was a snake.*** How ironic, she thought, that her mother was afraid of snakes.

'Snakes are dangerous creatures, that's why you can't have one,' her mother had told her when she had gone through a period of wanting a pet. She could not have a dog. 'Dogs need a lot of work.

They need looking after like children.You have to walk them and clean up after them. Wipe up the pee, pick up the pooh. Huge responsibility.'

'A chicken, then?' In one of the story books she had, three English children had a pet hen called Hannah. Hannah had fluffy white feathers and a sharp beak. Mma imagined feeding it rice and letting it peck off her palm. But no, not a chicken. 'Chickens you eat, you don't walk them. You fatten them and then you chop them up for soup. Have you ever seen anyone keep a chicken as a pet, eh?'

'A cat? Please.' She imagined a cuddly fluffy cat sleeping on her bed. A cat with black-and-white fur and a long tail. A cat she could stroke and carry around. 'Please, please, please, Mummy, a cat?'

'Only witches keep cats. Next thing you'll be wanting a long broom to fly on. What's all this nonsense about, eh, Adamma? If you keep following me around like this while I'm trying to work, I'll trip over you!'

'A snake, then?' Snakes did not have to be walked. She was not sure how much they needed looking after but surely it could not be too difficult. She had imagined a snake in a cage, looping itself and raising its head to look at her. Maybe she could train it – get it to answer to its name, stick out its long tongue every time it was called.

'***Tufia!*** What a crazy idea. Who keeps a snake as a pet? Have you gone completely mad? Snakes are evil. What will you be wanting next? The devil himself? ***Tufia!***'

So, no dogs. No chickens. No cats. No snakes. Just a box with layers of dust and layers of stories.

'Who is Goody Goody?' Mma asked, thinking, What a name. Who would walk around with a name like that? 'Goody Goody was the devil,' Madam Gold said, hacking her words so that they fell harshly into the room. 'He. Was. The. Devil. ***Heiii. Tufia.*** The man ***bu ekwensu ojo***. He was evil. He worked with his wife, who was worse than he was. She had the face of an angel, beautiful like a ***mammywata***, but in her heart was evil. You'd think we women would help each other but not her. That woman was nasty. I am only telling you of Goody Goody so that you do not judge your mother too harshly. Are you listening to me? ***I na-egekwa m nti, Adamma?***'

She waited for Mma to nod before she continued. 'She had to work for her money, unlike some people.'

Madam Gold glared at her, daring her to say something.

Mma kept quiet.There was a short silence before Madam Gold sighed and continued.

'They were moneylenders, Goody Goody and his wife. He is long dead now, the man. Your mother was desperate. She had her rent to pay, you to feed and a business idea she was eager to put in motion. Talk about sacrifice! Don't you come talking to me about sacrifices because you don't know the half of what your mother went through for you!' Her voice rose as she spoke.

'You want to talk about sacrifice? Think of your mother!' Her chest heaved as if she were trying not to cry.

'Why did she go to a moneylender? Why not to a bank? Surely she had other choices. Nobody forced her to go to Goody Goody.'

Madam Gold hissed long and rolled her eyes.'Choices, ***ke***? Bank, ***ke***? Why do you ask as if you did not grow up in this country? You think things have changed so much since the seventies? You think she did not try? You think you invented common sense and your mother had none? You children, you forget that no matter how high the okra tree grows, it's never mightier than the hand that planted it.You think you can ever be wiser than the womb that carried you?' Madam Gold shook her head and hissed again. 'Your mother, she carried you in her arms and went from one bank to the other, but not one would lend to a single woman with a baby and no collateral. Not one.

And yet she still hoped to get her business off the ground. She had it all planned out, the enterprising woman that she was.Your mother had a lot of brains. First-class brains that woman had. She was going to supply the university with good-quality meat pies and sausage rolls and cakes, so that students and staff did not need to leave the campus at lunch. She was sure it would be successful. That way, she could stay home with you and earn at the same time. Why do you think she wanted that, eh? A job that kept her at home? You, Mma, guided her decisions. You and no one else. So don't talk to me about sacrifice because you don't know the half of what your mother suffered.

'She took a loan from Goody Goody and his wife, signed a contract, and invested in an oven. The business failed. Not for anything she had done, but because many others turned up as soon as she started. It was like a wildfire. Once she set up, a million others set up too. Women with no brains waiting to prey on someone else's idea. Competition became fierce and the others undercut her prices. She made her cakes with real butter

– your mother was really into quality – and she was so optimistic. "People know quality," she'd tell me. "They appreciate quality and will pay for it." Well, it turned out people just wanted cheap snacks. They did not much care if the cake they were buying was made with real butter or dog piss as long as it had the right shape and a taste that was not too offensive. The competition used oil and could keep their prices low. Customers flocked to them. Your mother's real butter snacks sat untouched. And she still had a debt to settle. She went to Goody Goody's wife to beg her, woman to woman, to ask her husband for some more time. Goody Goody's wife promised her that if she did not pay up within two days, she should be prepared to face the conse- quences. Goody Goody was not a man to owe money to. I don't recall the exact details of the "consequences" but it involved you. You. Still want to talk about sacrifices?'

She hissed again; was Madam Gold blaming her for the choices her mother made? That's unfair, Mma thought, fuming silently.

'If she did not pay up within the agreed period, she had to pay with her daughter's life or something. There was a rumour that Goody Goody made his money by sacrificing children and no one doubted it. No one could touch him. He said that very often. Not even the policemen who hung around the secretariat near his moneylending office at lunchtime and turned a blind eye to the goings-on there could do anything to him. He had them in his pocket. There was no hiding from him. He used to say to defaulters, "No use trying to hide from me. I am a deity. I am everywhere." Your mother had to find a way to pay him back. What would you have done in her shoes? Tell me, Adamma, I'm listening. My ears are open, fill them up. What would you have done, eh?'

Shoes. Stranger. Strange. Her mother's shoes. A stranger's shoes. Her mother was a stranger. She was only finding that out now. It was easier to feel compassion for a stranger than for a strange mother. She was finding that out now, too. But compassion for a stranger who was also her mother was new. It was strange, and so she concentrated on something else, a feeling that was much more comfortable because it was normal. She asked, 'The men in shiny cars?'

'I'm telling you all this so that you do not judge her too harshly. There was nothing else she could do. She was running out of time. Yes, there were a few men, but she . . . she was always proper. She was young, she was beautiful, she had a child and she was broke. There were all these men wanting to date her, so she had to choose carefully. She wanted a good life for you.'

Mma swallowed the question in her throat and asked instead, 'And my father? Do you know who my father was?'

She did not look at Madam Gold as she asked the question but stared straight ahead, concentrating on the two brilliant slits of light under the heavy curtains, drawn to keep the sun out.

'If your mother has written to you about all of these other things, Mma, do you not think that she will mention your father?'

'Aunty, the pages are too long. I don't have the patience to read through it all.'

'Shut up, Adamma! Shut that mouth up or may light- ning solder it!' Madam Gold stood up and walked across the sitting room to where Mma was sitting. 'You come to me for neat answers, eh? You think your mother had anyone to give her that? You do not have the patience to read the writings of a dead woman, of your mother! Let me not hear such nonsense from you again. If I do, I swear, I'll walk you out of my house.You'll show respect for your mother here. Do you hear me? ***I na-egekwa m nti?***'

'Yes, Aunty.'

Madam Gold panted as if from the effort of scolding Mma. She motioned for her to make room on the sofa and sat down next to her. No one said anything for a long while.Then she turned to Mma and gave her a long questioning look.

'I am sorry, Aunty.'

Madam Gold still had the ability to scare her into behaving, just as she had when Mma was a little girl, scared of the only woman who could tell her mother to shut up and get away with it.

'I'll tell you what you need to know but you have to read your mother's letters. It's the least you can do. You didn't even bury her properly, but what's done is done and I shall not go into that. Anyway . . .' She let the sentence hang and then got up. She walked to the curtains and drew them open.