

On Black Sisters' Street

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An extract pp (1-4; 5-15)

Original title Fata Morgana
Publisher Meulenhoff|Manteau, 2007

Translation Dutch into English
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12 May 2006

The world was exactly as it should be. No more and, definitely, no less. She had the love of a good man. A house. And her own money – still new and fresh and the healthiest shade of green – the thought of it buoyed her and gave her a rush that made her hum.

Humming under her breath, relishing the thought of new beginnings, she thought of how much her life was changing: Luc. Money. A house. She was already becoming someone else. Metamorphosing. A word recalled from a long-ago biology lecture. Sloughing off a life that no longer suited her.

What she did not know, what she would find out only hours from now, was just how absolute the transition would be.

Sisi navigated the Keyserlei and imagined everything she could buy with her brand-new wealth. How it would buy her forgetfulness, even from those memories that did not permit silence, making her yell in her sleep so that she woke up restless, wanting to cry. Now the shops sparkled and called to her and she answered, touching things that took her fancy, marvelling at the snatches of freedom, heady with a joy that emitted light around her and made her surer than ever that the Prophecy was undoubtedly true. This was the true epiphany. Not the one she had on a certain Wednesday night on the Vingerlingstraat. That was a pseudo-epiphany. She knew that now. For sure.

She was hungry and stood undecided between the Panos and the Ekxi on the Keyserlei. Her new life smiled at her. It nudged her towards the Ekxi, with its prices a notch higher than Panos's. She went in and bought a sandwich with lettuce spilling out of the sides, ruffled and moist. To go with it, a bottle of thick fruit smoothie. She sat at a table outside, her shopping bags at her feet; carrier bags shimmying in the light spring breeze, evidence of her break from a parsimonious past. What should she get? Maybe a gift for Luc. A curtain for his doorless room. *Imagine a room without a door!* The architect who designed the house had a thing for 'space and light' and since Luc was coming out of a depression when he bought the house, he had been certain that 'space and light' were the very things he needed. The lack of a door had not disturbed him in the least. 'Rooms must have doors,' Sisi told him when he showed her round the house. 'Or curtains at the very least!' Luc said

nothing in response. And silence was acquiescence. Certainly. Curtains with a frenetic design of triangles and squares, bold purple and white splashes against a cocoa brown, found in the HEMA. She imagined what the other women would say of Luc's doorless bedroom. She imagined their incredulous laughter. And that was enough to feed the guilt that she was trying hard to suppress. She hadn't abandoned them. Had she? She had just . . . moved on. Surely, surely, she had that right. Still, she wondered: What were they doing now? When would they notice she was gone?

* * *

In a house on the Zwartzusterstraat, the women Sisi was thinking of – Ama, Joyce and Efe – were at that very moment preparing for work, rushing in and out of the bathroom, swelling its walls with their expectations: that tonight they would do well; that the men would come in droves; that they would not be too demanding. And more than that, that they would be generous.

'Where's my fucking mascara?' Ama shouted, emptying a make-up bag onto the tiled floor. Joyce was at the same time stuffing a denim duffel bag with deodorant, a beach towel and her Smiley, so nicknamed by Sisi. Smiley was a lubricant gel, innocuously packaged in a plastic seethrough teddy bear with an orange conical hat and a wide smile; it might have been a child's bottle of glue. She blocked out images of her mother's face looking aghast at Smiley, her lips rounding to form the words of a name that was not 'Joyce'.

'Where's Sisi?' she asked.

'I haven't seen her. Maybe she don' leave already,' Efe said, putting an electric toothbrush into a toilet bag. In an inner pocket of the bag was a picture of a boy wearing a baseball cap. On the back of the photograph were the initials, L.I. The picture was creased and the finish had worn off, but when it was first sent to her, it would have been easy to see (in the shine of the gloss that highlighted a broad forehead) that the boy bore a close semblance to her. The way a son might his mother. Efe carried this picture everywhere.

There was time before they had to leave, but they liked to get ready early. Some things could not be rushed. Looking good was one of them. They did not want to turn up at work looking half asleep and with half of their gear forgotten at the house.

'How come Sisi left so early?' Joyce asked.

'Who cares?' Ama ran her hand quickly across her neck as if to assure herself that the gold chain which she always wore was still there. 'All this "Sisi", "Sisi", "Sisi" – are you people lovers? Maybe she's gone on one of her walks.'

She laughed, slitting her eyes to brush on mascara.

Sisi went out alone at least twice a week, refusing company when it was offered. Nobody knew where she went, except that she sometimes came back with boxes of chocolate and carrier bags of Japanese fans and baby booties embroidered in lace, fridge magnets and T-shirts with Belgian beer logos printed on them. 'Gifts,' she mumbled angrily when Joyce asked her once who they were for.

Joyce was already out of the bathroom. She had been hoping Sisi would help her cornrow her hair. In between perm and braids, her hair was a wilderness that would not be subdued. Neither Ama nor Efe could braid. Nothing for it now, she would have to hold it in a bun and hope that Madam would

not notice that the bun was an island in the middle of the head, surrounded by insubordinate hair that scattered every which way. For Sisi's sake, Joyce hoped she would be back on time. How could anyone forget what Madam did to Efe the night she turned up late for work? Nothing could excuse her behaviour, Madam said. Not even the fact of her grandmother's death.

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Zwartzusterstraat

It was not every death that earned a party. But if the deceased was old and beloved, then a party was very much in order. Efe's grandmother was both. And being too far away to attend the burial herself, the next best thing, the expected thing, was a big party.

Efe did not invite Madam to the party. It was not as if, were she invited, she would attend anyway. The girls had started the day in the kitchen doing dishes from the previous day.

Sisi's laughter was the loudest, rising and drowning the voices of the other women. She slapped her thighs with a damp kitchen towel. 'Tell me, Efe, your auntie really believed her husband?'

'Yes. She did. He told her she could not go abroad with him because the British Embassy required her GCSE results before they would give her a visa. Dat na de only way he could tink of to stop her *wahalaing* him about travelling with him. Four wives and she wanted him to pick her above the rest? And she no be even the chief wife. Imagine! De woman just dey craze!'

'Your uncle handled it well. Sometimes, it's just easier to lie to people. Saves you a lot of trouble and time,' Joyce said, placing a glass she had just dried in the cupboard above her head. Her soft, childish voice made it difficult to believe she was thirty, as she claimed.

'Men are bastards,' Ama said.

'Ama, lighten up. Since when did this story become about men being bastards, eh? Everything has to be so serious with you, you know how to spoil a good day. You just have to get worked up over nothing!' Sisi wiped a plate dry, examined it for smudges and, finding none, placed it on top of another on the work surface beside the sink.

Ama turned towards Sisi and hissed. 'Move the plates, *abeg*. If you leave them there, they'll only get wet again. Why don't you just put them away as soon as you've dried?' She sucked her teeth and went to work on scrubbing a pot in the kitchen sink. 'How could you burn rice, Sisi? I can't get the fucking pot clean!'

'I don't know what's eating you, Ama, but I don't want any part of it. Whoever sent you, tell them you didn't see me, I beg of you.' She flung the dish towel she had been using over her shoulder and raised her hands in surrender. 'I don't want to fight *abeg*.'

'Fuck off. Why don't you fuck off on one of your long walks?' Ama's voice was a storm building up.

Sisi took a step closer to Ama and started to say something but Efe broke in, 'Girls, girls, it's a beautiful day. Make una no ruin am!' She hoped it would not rain today. It was a pleasant day for November: leaves turned aubergine purple and yellow and white by a mild autumn and a clear sky. A minor miracle for the time of year. 'See as de day just dey like fine picture, and una wan spoil am?'

'Nobody's ruining anything. Anyway, I'm done here.' Ama banged the now gleaming pot on the draining board, and walked out of the kitchen into the sitting room where she turned up the volume on the CD player flooding the room with the *twang boom bam* of a highlife tune. She lit a cigarette and began to dance.

Efe sighed and followed her into the sitting room. 'I can see you don dey get ready for the party ,Ama. Ooh, shake that booty, girl! Shake am like your mama teach you!'

'Oh, shut it! What has my mother got to do with my dancing?' Ama moved away from Efe, the crucifix around her neck glinting. Her anger seemed exaggerated. But Efe let it pass. She had other things on her mind.

The party for starters. The Moroccan man who had promised to get her cartons of beer at a discount had just called to say that his contact had not come through. Now the drinks would cost her a lot more than she had budgeted for. She was spending a lot of money on this party. The other women, unused to such extravagance from Efe, had teased her about it. 'So at last we get to enjoy your money, Efe?' Sisi joked. At her birthday party the year before, Efe had limited her guests to two bottles of beer each and had served only *jollof* rice and fried chicken gizzards, claiming that she had to send so much money back home that she hardly had enough for extras. 'Some of us get big problems to settle for house.' For this party the girls had promised to help her with the food, but with Ama in this mood, she might have one less pair of hands. Everything had to go to plan today. The wake for her grandmother had to be talked about for months to come. That was how much she loved the woman. She wanted a party that would last all night. And that would be what would put her in trouble with Madam. The party was a success, so much so that Efe could not leave until almost midnight. Madam's anger manifested itself in a laughter that was dry like a cough and a sneering, 'Ah, so you've earned enough money now to waltz into work whenever you want?' For a week she refused to let Efe use her booth. Instead, Efe had been forced to work in bars – when she could agree a fee with the owner or barman – having sex with men in dingy hotel rooms if she was lucky or servicing those on tight budgets in bar room toilets. She had made a lot less money than she would have otherwise. One week of working under such conditions was enough to put anyone off getting into Madam's bad books.

Still, Iya Ijebu got a party worthy of her memory. 'She's not even my real grandmother,' Efe told the women when she first learned of her death wiping tears from her eyes. 'I been dey call her Granny, but she be just dis woman wey live near our house wey I like well well. On Sundays, she made me moi-moi. When I was in primary school, if my mother wasn't home, she'd make lunch for my younger ones and me. Ah, the woman dey good to us. Which kin' granny pass dat one? Goodbye, Granny. Rest in peace.'

'What killed her?' Joyce asked.

But Efe did not know how the woman had died. The news of her passing had been a mere aside between 'Buy me a Motorola mobile phone' and 'Papa Eugene wants to know how easy it is to ship a car from there to here.' A distant 'Iya Ijebu died two weeks ago' carried along a faint and crackling

line from a telephone cabin in Lagos to a glass-doored booth in a Pakistani Internet/phone café in Antwerp.

‘She died? Iya Ijebu? *Osalobua!* What killed her?’ Efe had tried to drag her sister back to the news she had just delivered. ‘How? What happened?’

‘What? I can’t hear you. Did you hear what I said about the Motorola?’

And then the line had whined and cut off and Efe immersed herself in the frenzy of organising a party.

At the party she would distribute badly xeroxed pictures of the deceased: a woman in a huge headscarf, looking solemn and already dead, against a backdrop of palm trees painted wildly on a prop behind her. Below it would be the announcement that she died after a ‘sudden’ illness at the age of seventy-five (which was an estimation. Who cares really about exact ages?), and that Efe, her granddaughter, was ‘grateful to God for a life well spent’. Summer might have been a better time, its temperament better suited to feasting, but a party was what dreary November needed to cheer it up. She had a lot to worry about. What to cook. What to play. Who to invite. There would be lots of Ghanaians – those people were everywhere. Nigerians of course. A sprinkling of East Africans – Kenyans who ate samosas and had no traditional clothes and complained about the pepper in Nigerian food, not really African. The three Ugandan women from the ‘Black is Beautiful’ store close to the Berchem Station where Efe bought her wigs. Women who stumbled over their words, *brackening* black and *renthening* long. And the only Zimbabwean she knew, from the Schipperskwartier a woman who shuffled her feet when she danced. Those guests would spawn other guests, multiplying the guest list to infinity so that she was glad she had the foresight to hire a huge abandoned warehouse close to the Central Station, not the church hall she had rented last year to celebrate her birthday.

Here, Efe had enough space not to worry about the number of people that would eventually turn up. And unlike the floor of the church hall which she had to ensure was spotless at the end of the party, there was no such obligation here. The tiles had come off in some places, exposing dark concrete, like half-peeled scabs over old wounds. Against the walls were high metal racks, most of which were already corroded. The racks would come in handy for stacking crates of beer and cool boxes of food so Efe did not need to borrow tables. In front of the racks were white plastic chairs. The space in the middle provided ample dancing room.

By the time Sisi, Joyce and Ama arrived, the party was in full swing. Music blared and a lady in bright orange stilettos pulled off her shoes, held them over her head, and yodelled at the very high ceiling. Joyce, radiant in a black minidress which showed off her legs, edged further into the room and began to dance with a man in an oversized shirt. Several times that evening she would be told that with her height and her good looks she could have been a model. It was not anything she had not heard before. So she would laugh it off and say, ‘Now, that’s my plan B.’ Ama spied two Ghanaian guests going back for a third helping of rice and smirked to Sisi that surely, surely, Nigerians cooked better, made tastier fried rice than Ghanaians. (People who threw whole tomatoes in sauces could not really cook, could they?) And both women agreed that Ghanaians were just wannabe Nigerians and Antwerp was, for all its faults, the best city in the world and Belgium had the best beers, the Leffes and the Westmalles and the Stella Artois. You could not find those anywhere else, could you? Efe toddled up to them, complaining that the soles of her feet hurt from too much dancing. She should not have worn such high-heels.

'But you always wear high heels! You'll complain today and tomorrow you'll be in them again,' Sisi teased.

'With my height, if I no wear heels, I go be like full stop on the ground.'

Efe was not really short. At least, not much shorter than Sisi who described her height as 'average'. 'Average' translated in her passport to five feet seven. But of all four women, Efe was the shortest and this gave her a complex.

'You're not short, Efe. You just like your heels high!'

High-heeled shoes and wigs were Efe's trademark. Ama called her the Imelda Marcos of wigs. Today she wore a bobbed black wig, so that it was as if she was wearing a beret. It was new, bought for the occasion. It was not as voluminous as the wigs she usually wore, and the hair moulded close to her skull exaggerated her features: her nose, her lips, her eyes looked blown up, as if they were under a magnifying glass.

Ama tapped her feet impatiently to the music.

'These your bow legs dey always itch to dance,' Efe teased her.

'Where's the fucking booze?' Feet still tapping to the music.

Before Efe could answer Ama was already off. She found her way to the drinks and grabbed a bottle of her favourite *blonde* beer. Swigging the beer, she danced alone in the middle of the dance floor, bumping into other dancers, shouting out at intervals that life was good. GOOD! A dark man with short, angry dreads swayed effeminately towards her and Ama moved back. He tried to grab her hand and she snatched it away and gave him an evil eye.

'What's wrong with ya, sister?' he said with what she could only guess was meant to be an American accent.

'I'm not your sister,' and she turned and moved away.

The man shrugged and went in search of a more willing dance partner, grumbling, *bloody Africans*, under his breath. He found his way to Efe who was sipping a glass of apple juice and dragged her to the dance floor. Efe was more obliging. She downed her juice and glided onto the dance floor that was fast filling up. '*Wema*, you're an awright sister! You Africans can really *pardy!*'

'Where're you from?' Efe asked, amused.

'*Seth Africa*. The real deal. You Ghanaian too?'

'Nigerian.'

'Oh, Nigerian? We got a lotta those *makwerekweres* in Joburg. Lots of Nigerians. They in the news all the time back home in *Seth Africa*.'

Efe said she had to get back to her drink. What was it with the South Africans she met, claiming another continent for their country? And it was especially the black South Africans. She saw Joyce,

her hair extensions moving furiously as she danced with a light-skinned man in a *kente* shirt. Efe smiled and mouthed *jerk* to Joyce and pointed at the South African who was now talking to a woman with braids down to her shoulders. Sisi danced behind Joyce, a bottle of beer in one hand and the other waving wildly in the air, two gold rings catching and dispelling light like magic.

Sisi moved close to Joyce and whispered that Ama seemed to be in a much better mood. ‘That Ama. She can be tiresome sometimes. What does she want us to do? Walk on tiptoe in our own house?’ Sisi and Joyce had joined the women only two months before.

Joyce shrugged. She was out to have a good time, not to worry about Ama. Of all the women in the house, Sisi was the only one she was remotely close to. Sisi was the most beautiful of the other three, she thought. Her beauty was all the more striking for it being unexpected; she had slim legs, a low-slung waist and a short neck. When you saw her from behind – which was how Joyce saw her the first time – you did not expect to see a beautiful face, flawless skin. She also seemed genuinely nice. Ama was a basket case and, given to bellicosity, everything set her off. Efe, she was not sure about. Perhaps, given time, she would like her. She was definitely more likeable than Ama, although she had her own issues. Yesterday, Joyce had called her ‘Mother’, because she had tried to mediate between Sisi and Ama who were having a quarrel over what TV programme to watch. Everybody could tell it was a joke, even Ama (even Ama!) laughed, but Efe had not been amused. ‘I’m nobody’s mother,’ she had said, her voice wan as if in disappointment at a betrayal. Still, she was better than Ama.

‘I need to pee,’ Sisi said and she went off in search of a toilet. Ama saw her pushing her way through the people on the dance floor and caught up with her.

‘Not off, are you?’ she asked with a wink. Sisi’s lips pursed. ‘I’m just looking for the toilet. Not like it’s any of your business.’

‘What’s your fucking problem? Jeez!’ Ama hissed. She had a bottle of beer in one hand.

‘My problem is you,’ Sisi said.

‘Oh, get over it! Are you still upset about Segun?’ She quaffed some beer. ‘If it’s a lie, why are you so bloody worked up?’

‘Shut up, Ama!’ Sisi’s voice was raised. Ever since the incident with Segun, Ama had been frustratingly smug. Winking and making silly comments. Screeching songs around the house about Segun and Sisi. ‘You think you know it all.’

‘So why don’t you tell me then?’ Ama bridged the gap between them so that their shoulders touched. Sisi was the taller, bigger woman, but if it came to blows between them both she would bet on Ama. The regularity with which she picked fights suggested brawn of such superiority as to instil dread. Sisi took a step back. Ama took one step forward. Then Efe appeared at their side, ‘I hope you girls dey enjoy my party?’ Chance. Luck. Whatever it was that had brought Efe, Sisi grabbed it and walked away.

When she got back from the toilets, Joyce was still on the dance floor. Sisi went over and tapped her on the shoulder.

‘What time do we leave?’ Joyce asked, turning away from the man in the *kente*. They had to be in their booths by eight.

‘Around seven. I’d still like to clean up a bit before work tonight.’

‘I’ve eaten so much here that I worry I’ll just snooze at work,’ Joyce said and laughed, a bit of tongue showing through the gap in her front teeth; white teeth that contrasted so sharply with her dark lips.

‘Sleep, *ke*? Me, my eyes are on the money, baby! I’ve got no time to sleep and neither do you!’ Sisi mockscolded. ‘I want a gold ring on each finger.’

She danced away to the racks for a piece of chicken fried a golden brown, hoping she did not run into Ama again. She picked out a leg, bit into it and thought, I’m very lucky to be here, living my dream. If I’d stayed back in Lagos, God knows where I’d have ended up. She banished the notion. Lagos was not a memory she liked to dredge up. Not the house in Ogba and not Peter. She tried to think instead of hurtling towards a prophecy that would rinse her life in a technicolour glow of the most amazing beauty.

But memories can be obstinate.