

Mamle KABU

A story

Stolen Lives

“This is my mother. *Mi Mami nie.*”

“*Ei!! Ni ho ye fe oo.* She’s beautiful. I didn’t know she was *broni* like that, so fair. You don’t look anything like her.”

“That’s because I take more after my dad.” Darling flipped backwards one, two, three, searching. “There, you see, that’s him, *mi Papa nie.* In America. New York.”

Ama stared. “New York!” she echoed, leaning over the photo. Then her tone changed, “Black, *tumtum* just like you.”

“Yes but he’s still an American,” Darling said petulantly.

But Ama had lost interest. She yanked the album impatiently from Darling and flipped forwards again, reclaiming the sweetness for herself. “Let’s see her again. Look at her hair, her dress. *Shiee!*” She reached out a finger and Darling knew from her gentle clucks that it was silky locks, silky fabric she felt, not cellophane and cardboard.

“Were you at a wedding?”

“No, just church, that’s how we dress every Sunday, it’s nothing special.”

“Hmm, *Abrofo*, white people. But why aren’t you in the photos?”

“I was away. At school. In America.”

“America? *Wu?* You?”

“Aden? Why, you don’t believe me or what?”

“So can you speak English like white people? *Wu ka... Slangs?* Can you speak... American?”

Darling made a pitying noise. “My dear, if not for you I wouldn’t be twisting my tongue to speak this *Twi*, but if it’s some small *slangs* your ears are aching for, come on, let’s speak it right now.” And she added in her best American accent, “No *pra-ablem*, no *prablem* at all.”

Ama’s eyes widened. “*Gyae!* Stop, it’s OK.”

“*Wo’aa hwe.*” You want me to stop already! You see, I was only trying to consider you.

“O-o-o *me m’pe saa*, leave me alone. Anyway, I never said I didn’t believe you.” Ama looked away to hide her embarrassment. “Hey look, isn’t that your house girl coming through the gate?”

Darling's head jerked round with an exclamation Ama did not understand. It didn't sound like American to her but then, she wouldn't know. In one movement, Darling jumped down from the desk, grasped the face of the gold watch dangling loosely from her right wrist and twisted it round.

"Ewuradi, my God, is that the time? Mommy must have sent her to call me." The Americanized word stood out from the Twi ones like a lone white person at the centre of a black crowd. "Mommy gets worried sick when I'm late home."

"Your album."

"Oh, don't worry, we have so many, you can keep it! I'll bring more tomorrow."

And she was gone.

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"That's her."

"Your mum?"

"Yes."

"Finally. I can't believe I never saw her picture all this time."

"Well, you never asked I guess."

"True, but..." I trail off because I'm not sure what my own point is. Later on, I figure out I've seen Roselyn's father without ever having had to ask because his photo is on display in at least one place in the house.

"You don't look much like her."

"No? I guess I took my dad's features. Heaven knows where they came from, he used to say there might even be some Red Indian blood in there somewhere." But I'm absorbed in the photo.

"She's gorgeous. Gosh, and so much darker, I mean, of course she would be, but I'd kind of forgotten with you being so fair."

"Yeah, I think their European blood really came together in me. To her delight and his... horror. That's her too, in uniform."

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten she was a nurse. Yes, of course, she was the one who gave you the heartache pills wasn't she?"

"No, that was Dad. When she died. *One a day to take the pain away.*"

"Such a cool idea. Did they work?" As she hesitates I kick myself for asking. "Sorry, I shouldn't have..."

"No, don't worry, I was just trying to remember. Yes, I guess they kind of did."

"Not really then?"

"No they did, just not right away. The beginning was like madness you see. I couldn't really take in anything, remember to make myself do anything till I stopped wanting to... smash my head open."

“Sorry.”

“I’m told I ran outside when they were pounding *fufu* and tried to lay my head in the mortar.”

“What?”

“Not that I remember, you know, one ... blocks it out, but I can just imagine I must have wanted them to pound my brains out.”

I grope for words in the frozen silence and jump as she shatters it with a peal of her inimitable laughter. The suddenness is not to be believed, but my God, there she is doubled up, shrieking between spasms, “Can you imagine the mess of my hair tangled in the sticky *fufu* and me screaming ‘Pound it! *Pound me I say!*’ at the poor house boy?”

The last few words are inaudible, buffeted by renewed gales. Tears run down her cheeks and I find myself jerking and gasping alongside. To resist Roselyn’s laugh in its utter abandon is to stay dry with a wave breaking over your head. When the laughter subsides the climate has changed between us. Inhibitions, hesitations have been swept away in its torrential release and drowned in its sheer irreverence. I scent freedom and closeness blowing in gently, imperceptibly as new seasons often do.

“D’you have any pictures of their wedding?” I ask. The complexities of Roselyn’s background have always fascinated me.

“Yes, I even have their old wedding album tucked away in here somewhere, hang on a minute.”

“Excellent.” I love old wedding photos. The new, middle-class brides with their shiny wigs, gloves and colonial couture, pioneering the white wedding, officializing monogamy with happy ever after shining out of their eyes. What I love most of all is the whiter than white, the frosting of the veil against their dark skin. Only the black and white photos can really capture the startling beauty of that contrast and the flavour of the time, that magical... *crispness* of bygone eras.

“Uh-oh, I could have sworn it was here, together with the other old ones.” She kneels on the floor and her head disappears into the darkness of the cabinet.

Please find them, I pray silently. It’s not only the colonial bride I want to see, it’s the new arrival, the ‘Afro-American’ as he would have been called at the time, on that day of days when he married into the motherland and started his real journey ‘home.’ I long vicariously for the purity of unspoilt dreams, their sacredness captured for all time, immunized against hindsight by the untouchability of the past. Ah, the wonder of photography, marvellous so far beyond its technology.

“Sorry, but they’re ...gone,” she says, emerging from the cabinet. It’s hard to tell who is the more dismayed.

“It’s so odd, I could have sworn...,” she trails off and then startles me with a sudden shout “Wasila!”

Her housekeeper rushes over from the kitchen. “Yes Madam?” She smells of palm oil and onions. I realize I am hungry.

“Have you seen the old albums which were in here?”

“De halbon? Why? They no dey for dat place?” I see genuine surprise on Wasila’s face. “Oh Madam, I no see dem. But I go look. And I go ask Fatima too. And Madam, please, the food make ready.”

“OK, we’re coming.”

As Wasila's footsteps recede to the kitchen I hazard to ask, "D'you think maybe she...?"

But Roselyn doesn't let me finish. "Oh no, not her, she's never stolen a thing. And albums of all things. I mean, why would anyone steal pictures of other people?"

"True," I agree hastily, ashamed of raising a clearly unwelcome suspicion. But household staff are always the first suspects when things go missing, I reflect in my own defence. My mind flits between the accounts I've heard of employers handing them over to the police and even to *juju* men. Determining their guilt or innocence can entail anything from being beaten to a pulp to having the spirits as their jury.

She calls out once again. This time - "Stacy!" But the response is slower this time. Her daughter is showing my two the latest Disney film. She comes reluctantly at the second call. "Darling, have you seen the albums, those old ones we keep in here?"

As the girl hesitates in the doorway I cannot stop myself staring at her once again. Roselyn's home has a way of feeling like a film set accidentally wandered onto. At least with her, age and the vexations of daily life etch some reality into her face. But the picture perfection of this child blurs that reality and is all the more unsteady for being the same image - albeit in a darker shade.

"I wanted to show Auntie how like you my childhood photos are."

"Sorry Mummy, I haven't seen them," and she turns and runs back to the TV room. Is it because I was studying her face that I am less satisfied with her response, I wonder.

Roselyn turns back to the cabinet. "But I was so sure they were here," she repeats in puzzlement.

"Don't worry, it's easy to forget such things."

"Yes, but lately it seems to be getting worse. I keep losing things, it's getting ridiculous. Must be motherhood."

"Yes it must be pretty stressful having three, how are the nights now?"

"Oh she still wakes up a couple of times. But that's good, it used to be three or four. I can't remember the last time I got a full night's sleep. Seems like decades ago."

As we start eating I look at the silver strands that have emerged around her temples within the few years I've known her. She's vulnerable, I feel suddenly, a mother who needs mothering. I have a sudden urge to shield her from squalid, every day life, pamper her as her parents must once have done. It's somehow out of order for them to have died. A person like her seems to have a birthright always to be the apple of someone's eye. There's her husband I know, but I get the feeling she's more of a jewel in his crown than his ... *apple*.

"You know what you need? A good massage."

"Oh, what heaven! I can't even remember my last."

"I have a fantastic masseuse. We could make an evening of it, candles, mood music, aromatherapy, pamper ourselves till we beg for mercy."

She closes her eyes and sighs, "That just sounds too good to be true."

"Well, if you can get away, I'll set it up. My treat. You know what? You could even sleep at my place so you don't have to drive back. Could Joe take care of the kids?"

“Well, the question is more what he’d think of me going off like that for the night! But as for the kids, no problem. Wasila is there. More of a mother to them than me, to be honest.”

“But Joe... you said..., I mean, I wouldn’t want to upset...”

“Oh, stuff him,” she snaps unexpectedly. I’m not sure what to reply. A welcome interlude is provided by a dull-looking girl bringing in a dish of sliced watermelon.

“Thank you Fatima,” Roselyn says with a kind smile and then turns it on me so I feel I must have imagined her snapping. “Well? Are you changing your mind?”

“No, of course not. I’ll set it up then. If you’re sure it’s OK.”

“I said it’s fine. No problem, no problem at all.”

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It’s a week later and everything is set. The masseuse is due any moment but Roselyn is late. I dial her cell phone.

“Hi dear, it’s all set up, hope you’re on the way.” No response.

“Hi, Roselyn?”

There is a nervous stammer at the other end. “Madam, please ee be me, Wasila.”

“Oh!” Why would she be bringing Wasila along?

“Where are you now?”

“Please Madam, we dey for house.”

Still at home? “Can I speak to Roselyn please?”

“Please Madam, she seek.”

“Sick? Oh, I’m sorry. But can I *speak* to her please?”

There is hesitation at the other end of the line and I feel angry and helpless.

“Please Madam, she dey slip.”

“She’s asleep? But ...,” There’s no point getting angry with Wasila. I can’t believe Roselyn has let me down like this.

“What sickness?”

Another pause. Then “Please, mararia.”

I’m relieved. Malaria’s no big deal, we get it all the time here. No, something isn’t right somehow. The sound of the doorbell startles me. It’s the masseuse.

“I have to go. Please tell your Madam I hope she gets better soon and to call me.”

That final sentence becomes a refrain over the next week and each time Wasila murmurs an apologetic 'Yes Madam, Sorry Madam.'

I'm not going to call anymore. A week is plenty of time to recover from malaria. Maybe she wants to push me away, backtrack. The next day I get a call. Roselyn is so warm, apologizing profusely. I stop her, disarmed against my will. She begs for another chance. It'll be her treat now, to say sorry, she's keener than ever, when can we do it?

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That weekend happens as if the week in between never was. As if the world itself has had one of those bouts of amnesia and skipped a week. After the masseuse leaves we lie there jelly-like, sinking into the scented torpor. Even speech seems too much to muster. It is Roselyn who first manages it.

"You know what I'd...", she stops. The phrase hovers, ready to unspeak itself, melt back into the torpor if it has gone unnoticed.

"Yes?" I prompt.

"No, nothing."

"Oh, come on." I feel oddly hurt, like she's dismantling a segment of an invisible bridge forming silently between us.

"I have this fantasy of something I'd love to do while having a massage."

I arch an eyebrow.

"I'd like to...", she falters again and drops her gaze, troubled, "No, you'll just think I'm mad."

I stay silent. Confidences are like snails. They come out by themselves or not at all. Roselyn looks up and scrutinizes my face. To trust, or not to trust. The old gamble of friendship with its great gains and devastating losses.

"I'd like to cry."

"While being massaged?"

"Yes, cry and cry and cry. And be allowed to. Left in peace to."

"Hmm," and the shadow of a smile are my response. She turns away.

"You see, you do think I'm crazy."

"Well, then we're both crazy."

"What? You mean you want it too?"

"I mean I've done it."

A visible shock passes through her, freeing her from the torpor in an instant. She sits up on the bed.

"You did? Really? How did the masseuse react?"

“She was concerned of course, but I begged her just to go on.”

“And she did?”

“Yes. You know, I don’t think it was her first time somehow. I suspect I might not have been her first... Crier.”

If I were with any other friend my lips might not twitch at the word. And peals of wild laughter would almost certainly not greet it. Whose ring out first I can’t tell, nor can I ever explain how we can laugh hysterically over such pain. But when I try to imagine what other friends’ more ‘decent’ reactions to such a confidence might be, my mind goes blank and I realize it’s because I’ve never told, never even considered sharing such things with anyone else.

Roselyn is flat on her back again, felled by the force of her laughter. I’m getting a stitch in my side. Perhaps this is the way, the only way to do it. Chasing pain away with laughter, like night with day. At its peak, when we are helpless in its spasms and the tears stream down, I reflect that if you sequestered that moment, it would be indistinguishable from weeping. And its healing power is the same.

“I told her I was fine, great actually.”

Roselyn catches her breath and wipes her eyes. In what I’ve come to think of as her transitional tone, she says, “Was it after... the split?” I always marvel at that tone. It’s still shaky with mirth and accompanied by a smile but its genuineness cannot be doubted. It conducts us back to seriousness only slightly less suddenly than we departed from it, and with complete grace. Only Roselyn could pull it off.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I could have done with some of your heartache pills then, I tell you!”

“Wish I’d thought to give you some. Actually I never realized at the time what you were going through. You’re good at hiding it.”

“Well, aren’t we all.”

“No, maybe some of us are pretty crap at it actually. That’s why we need... pills, I guess.” I catch a new note of bitterness.

“Tell me more about that.”

“What? Oh, you mean the heartache pills.” I wonder what else she could have thought.

“Well,” she says, “As I told you before, I didn’t have much luck trying to get the house boy to pound my brains out.” She allows a decent interval for her smile to fade away and shifts into a new level of seriousness. I suspect it’s more for my sake. Perhaps when you’ve had her kind of life such topics don’t intimidate you anymore and you can stop toggling your words up in that ill-fitting suit of formality, dispense forever with the dress code.

“So I... took matters into my own hands.” She sees my eyes widen. “I’ll spare you the details for now, but anyway, the heartache pills appeared the day Daddy brought me home from the hospital. He brought out a little bottle I hadn’t seen before and said –

“Rosie my darling, this is for the pain the doctors can't take away. You're going to swallow one a day to take the pain away. You'll see. After a while you'll start to feel their effect. Then you can take only one a week. Then one a month. And one day you won't need them anymore.”

Tears gather in Roselyn's eyes as she speaks her father's voice. And like her laughter, they infect me.

“Maybe it was because he was a doctor I believed him.”

“Smart guy.”

“Yes, he always had great faith in the healing power of time. So much that he found a way of making it into an... active ingredient. Bubbles of time coated in sugar. But there was one thing he was wrong about.”

“What was that?”

“That one day I wouldn't need them anymore. It got better yes, but it never quite goes away, it just - blends in with everything else and sometimes you don't even know anymore why you're hurting or where you're hurting. All you know is...” She trails off and looks into my eyes. I don't flinch.

“I'm still taking them but it's not my dad prescribing them anymore.” She reaches over to her handbag and fishes out a pack of something which she hands me. “For the pain time can't take away.”

I look at the box. Anti-depressants. A wave of understanding washes over me. “So then, last week...?” She nods.

“Oh God, it all makes sense now, and poor Wasila, I feel guilty for getting impatient with her. Does she...?” I'm not quite sure how to finish that question.

“Oh yes, she knows everything. Good old Wasila. She begged me to speak to you every time you called.”

“What?”

“Said I should let you come, that you would make me feel better.”

I have many shocks to recover from at once. The first is the stepping into relief of a figure who has always blended into the background. It's like she's just walked out of an old painting into full, three-dimensional life... our lives. A housekeeper knowing her Madam's deepest vulnerabilities, being a support, giving advice, recommending... me.

“She likes you,” says Roselyn, groping for me in the sudden vacuum of silence, “Says you always make me laugh.”

Another shock. I've always thought of it the other way round. Roselyn makes me laugh like no-one else on earth. That wild peal when you least expect it, that iconoclastic humour. But what if... what if she's not the same with other people? I suddenly see things from Wasila's perspective, and I see her too, re-born to me. No longer a shadowy figure camouflaged in domestic servitude but a sentient individual in her own right. Uneducated but astute, unobtrusive but protective, caring, no, loving. And maybe that explains the final shocker. I'm flattered. I care. I'm glowing with the praise of ... Roselyn's housekeeper. This is new and feels a little odd.

“So she - Wasila, she looked after you while you were, um, down?”

“Oh God, not just me, the kids, the whole household. You know, there were days I never got out of bed.”

“Wow.”

“I can’t imagine what I’d do without Wasila.”

When people stay up all night whether in suffering or pleasure, they call it a long night. But when the first streaks of dawn light up the window I have to look again. It can’t be. Once again I have that strange sensation of chunks of time skipped over. Rosie and I are still talking. We have been through so much in those few hours. Her whole history with Wasila to begin with. How in the six years Wasila has been more like a mother than an employee but never lets that erode her deference. How she has tried to reward her. Bringing her daughter to live with them is the latest.

“Her daughter?”

“Yes, Fatima.”

Ah, so that’s who that girl is. I hadn’t even known Wasila had a daughter. Oh yes, Roselyn tells me, but they’ve mostly lived apart. She spent most of her life with an aunt to whom she was given in infancy in the traditional way. But a year ago the aunt had sent her back to her father. “Take back your useless daughter. She has become so lazy she’s no use to me anymore.” The father decided that the wisest, most profitable way to relieve himself of the indolent burden was to marry her off. She had breasts, she was ready. But Fatima joined a band of young girls who had made a secret plan to run away to Accra to become ‘*kayayee*’ - head porters in the market. Luck was on her side and more by accident than design, she was able to trace her mother after two months in the capital.

Roselyn had insisted the girl come and live with them. She had already been through far more than anyone of her age should, living the life of a ‘*kayayoo*’ in Makola market. And it would emerge soon after the girl moved in that this was just the tip of the iceberg, that she had suffered years of abuse and rape in her aunt’s household. Roselyn was incensed but Wasila seemed resigned. Even if they knew who did it, it wouldn’t make any difference, she said. She accepted it like a familiar and unassailable adversary.

The girl had now been with them for two months. Roselyn was paying for her to attend a local state school. Fatima was placed several grades below her age in order to catch up with the basics. Within a month of moving in she started to look healthier. However, her spirit responded slower than her body. At school her progress was slow and at home she moved around with a sluggish obtuseness as she ‘helped’ her mother with her duties. But Roselyn felt for the trauma she had been through, recognized her lethargy and disengagement as symptoms of it and urged patience in Wasila.

The only person she really seemed to connect with was Stacy, who decided in the way of children to take her under her wing, perhaps even, to like her. It may just have been the fascination of someone so different or the pleasing power of becoming a benefactress, but before Roselyn had time even to think where dividing lines should be drawn, Stacy was inviting Fatima to watch DVDs and share treats with them. Asked to keep an eye on the children, Fatima would start playing with them and the rest, the crossing of the divide, happened naturally with nobody realizing till it was done. After all, Stacy was the age of Fatima’s classmates and Fatima herself was, at puberty, getting her first crack at childhood.

Roselyn was not quite sure how she felt about it all and neither was Wasila. Despite the liberties she enjoyed with her unorthodox Madam, Wasila knew from her own experience that one always paid a high price for disrupting the natural order of things. Roselyn had heard what she had been through in her marriage and how she had finally fled down south in desperation. If he hadn’t killed her, they would have, she said of her violent husband and scheming co-wives. She firmly believed the latter to have bewitched her, stopped her from having any more children, to the disgust of her husband. They were witches, she tried to convince Roselyn, and they had eaten the unborn babies right out of her womb.

Ugh, the gruesomeness, the fascination of traditional beliefs. Another riveting topic was the only thing that could take over and it was the story I'd been waiting for, the story of Roselyn's parents.

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Once upon a time, a handsome young Afro-American came back home to West Africa to live the dream and give back to the motherland. He offered his qualified medical services to the first African country to gain independence from colonial rule, Ghana. And fell in love with a beautiful home sister. It wasn't just a homecoming story, it was a doctor and nurse romance as well. It had all the makings of what should - must - end happily ever after. Even a baby girl who, in line with the flow, in keeping with the logic and simple genetics of the thing, could only be absolutely gorgeous. As she was.

But it was also she who clipped the wings of the story and brought it flapping down from romance to reality. The pregnancy was not a disaster in itself but the cleaving together of male and female had happened in nature's preferred headlong fashion, jumping a queue of circumspections which would prove divisive when finally allowed their day. Like when they started discussing the marriage. He wanted everything African. He had heard about customary marriage ceremonies and was excited, there was so much tradition behind them.

What? Didn't he know those were no longer considered marriages by educated, Christian Ghanaians? Engagements, that was what they were called now. And yes, of course they would do one of those to appease the old people but a real wedding must follow.

Oh. Why bother with two marriages though, why not just have the traditional one registered at the town hall and blessed in church?

She? Cecilia Sorensen, daughter of Justice Sorenson, get married by nothing but custom like some village girl? The mere suggestion was mortifying. Didn't he understand that the traditional thing was just a prelude to the real thing, the white wedding?

In the photos everyone got their families mixed up because his dressed in traditional African clothes while hers wore hats and suits.

He wanted an African name. Could he not take one from her family? How come she had a European name anyway?

"Cecilia?"

"No, Sorensen."

Ah, well that was because of the type of family she was from. He would later learn much more about the elite coastal families descended from wealthy European merchants and their local wives - daughters of chiefs who gave them in marriage to cement commercial and political alliances. He would even hear it said one day that such families went as far as to pair selectively to keep the light skin in the family.

"That is our family name," she told him stiffly. "But as for Ghanaian names, they're all around you, if you want one, just pick one."

No, that was not at all what he had had in mind. And with that flippant suggestion he sensed her contempt for his ingenuousness towards the ethnic complexity that surrounded and confounded him. "After all, everything is 'African' to you," he heard her think.

The tension grew. By the time Roselyn was born, Cecilia was clued in enough not to show her joy at the baby's fair skin and shock of straight hair. His disappointment over that particular detail was generously tempered by his adoration of his fragrant little flower from the first moment. Who cared what colour she was

when the fullness of her cheeks was like water doming on the brim of a cup and her lashes the swirl of a hula skirt. When she slept he held her in his arms and watched her. He called her Rosebud because of the shape of her lips.

Could they have learned to live with their differences in the happy little bubble of a new family? That was sport for the imagination for there are no bubbles in the crowded reality of extended African families. The crunch came at the christening party. "You're lucky she came out like that," said one aunt, "Make sure you keep her out of the sun so she doesn't go dark." When he began to bridle, an old uncle pointed at him and said, "But what are you so annoyed about, are you not a white yourself?"

It was one of those pointedly careless quips between an accusation and a joke, that counted truth among its contents but was not, in sum, meant to be taken literally. It carried but a gentle sting of ridicule intended to be laughed off or even swatted back. At any rate, they knew how they meant it but what they did not know and what they learned that day was what it meant to him.

Roselyn's christening party would always be remembered for that lesson. An earthquake opening up a chasm, movie-style, might have been more fondly remembered than the showdown between her father and his in-laws that day. Less Hollywood but possibly more chilling was the dividing line that drew itself between them as suddenly and palpably as the hand that wrote upon the wall of King Belshazzar's palace. It seared itself between humour and blasphemy, pride and contempt, black and white. It would remain forever between them with him on one side and they on the other. Cecilia would slip and trip for the rest of her life in her attempts to balance on it. "Look at him," they said to her, "Always making noise about being an African and yet he doesn't know you don't insult your in-laws. He doesn't respect. When it suits him, he behaves like the white man that he is."

They had found each others' weak points.

"They want to be white?" He asked her and she tried to explain, "It's more complicated than that." But he could not understand. For him it was as simple as, well, black and white. "I came all this way just to find what I was running away from!" He wept, "They don't care what we went through, what we're still going through, what they stole from us. They're proud of the slavers' blood flowing through their veins. I'd drain every drop of mine if I could. Yes, and of hers too..." And there he stopped, appalled at directing a violent thought at his little flower, overcome by the contradictions of it all, the treachery of his own blood, and the absurd undoing of all he believed in, through the very act he had thought would be the crowning of it. The bubble had burst and left as a scar that terrible dividing line. And the one person who could not only balance on it, but frolic between the two sides, had only just been born.

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Is it really possible to belong to conflicting cultures I ask myself, listening to Roselyn's story. And, what choice does a person have who is born right on that line that divides - on one side, a heritage preserving the wealth, prestige and even the blood of the white enslavers - and on the other, the pain, anger, the backlash of the enslaved, fighting for every shred of Africa that can be prised back, rejecting their white blood in the struggle for black rights, black pride. Perhaps being the embodiment of these fearsome contradictions, growing up with them as naturally as with day and night, male and female, is what has made Roselyn what she is. She even laughs at them - "Poor old Dad, so black and proud and his African queen turned out a Viking princess in disguise!" she giggles irreverently, "And gave him a white baby to boot!"

Yes, this very capacity to poke fun at tragedy, dance between humour and pathos, it must come from that unique balancing act of a childhood she had. I realize now it accounts for many wonderful things about her, like her ability to disown received wisdom, overlook set boundaries, make a friend - no, find a mother in a housemaid. I wonder if it's because the very elements of which she is made negate each other that she is forced to recognize the humanity that both underlies and transcends them. That draws friends, lovers,

parents and children together across all the boundaries. Like her parents. I picture them in the fever of first attraction. Man and woman, heeding nothing but the need to be together.

“You know, they really did love each other despite everything,” she is saying, “But it was that ‘Can’t live together, Can’t live apart’ kind of love. I’ve often thought they’d still have fought like cat and dog even without the whole race thing. Let’s face it, just the man-woman thing is enough on its own!”

“Yeah, tell me about it!”

“He slapped her in front of me once, you know. ”

“What?”

“And I used to hear stuff going on behind the bedroom door, I think she was doing the hitting sometimes too.”

“No!”

“And sometimes they’d act like new lovers again. He’d try to make it up to her with expensive gifts and stuff. But they’d soon get back to screaming at each other. When she went abroad she was just trying to get away. I knew it even though I was just a kid.”

“Went abroad?”

“Yes, for years, first to study and then to work.”

“Did she take you?”

“No Daddy wouldn’t let her, said he didn’t want my schooling disrupted but I knew he just couldn’t bear me leaving him too.”

“And she?”

“I don’t think it was easy for her, but she had her reasons for leaving I guess.”

I ask how she coped. “I put on a brave face, but no-one knew how much I missed her.” I feel, more than hear the sorrow in the simple words.

“It was good practice though for... when she died. I was so angry, so cheated. I blamed myself. Now I know it wasn’t me she was running away from – it was him, and things, and just ... the bitch that life is. No-one knows for sure how it happened, whether it was accidental or deliberate but it was... an overdose, she had become addicted to tranquilisers. It’s easy to get hold of them when you’re in the profession.”

Heartache pills, my mind involuntarily supplies. Everyone needs them sometime in one form or another. But as Roselyn’s father tried to tell her, everyone also needs to find the strength to come off them, to face up to life in all its perversity.

I turn to look at her. All this time we have been talking side by side into the dark, which provided both a shield for soul-baring and a screen on which our words came to life. Now it is full daylight and I see her clearly for the first time in hours. Someone’s rosebud. A new person to me, but also now, an old friend. I feel privileged for her trust and awed by what she is, by her victories and losses on the battlefield of her life. A battle that will never end, I know instinctively.

I next see Rosie five days later at the school. She catches me on the way to the classrooms. She is flustered and beautiful.

“Hey, you’re late,” I tease, “What’s up?”

“I got held up at the salon.” Yes, that’s why she looks so good, her hair is freshly set. “You’ll never believe what happened to me there.”

“Which one?” I ask, intrigued.

“That dingy little neighbourhood one I go to just for wash and set. This woman came in to have her hair done, and - she knew me. But I’d never seen her before. Said she recognized me from my photo.”

“Your photo?”

“My photo yes, or should I say, photos. She knows me, and more, she described Joe, Stacy, all of us! She has albums full of our photos... in her house!”

I am dumbstruck. The albums. At last.

“She says her niece brought them to her house. Said someone gave them to her.”

“Who?”

“I’m going to find out. She offered to take me to her house but I was already late coming for the kids. So we’re going to meet at the salon tomorrow afternoon and she’ll take me to her house.”

Have you asked Stacy about it? I call the question back just in time and say instead - “Well, call me the moment the mystery is solved OK?”

“Sure, you’ll be the first to know.” And she dashes back to her car. But I hear nothing the following day. I wait till evening and call. I can tell the moment she answers that my timing is bad.

“I’m at the hospital.”

“Oh God, what’s wrong?”

“Don’t worry, I’m fine, it’s... a friend, listen can I call you back?”

But I hear nothing till the following morning. She wakes me up with a call. “How soon can I come over?” She arrives an hour later with the children still in their pyjamas and, barely out of the car, hugs me tight. I sense need, relief. We settle the kids and hurry back to the living room, forgetting drinks and all other visiting protocol.

“I went on my own to meet the woman,” she begins. “She hadn’t said anything to her niece in case the albums disappeared. As soon as we entered the house, the girl - Ama, cried out, ‘Darling’s mother!’ Then she looked behind me and asked, ‘Has Darling come too?’

‘Darling’? I asked.

‘Your daughter! Aren’t you her mother, the beautiful lady from the photos?’

‘Well, yes and actually, I’ve come to take my photos back,’ I said.

She began to gabble, 'But she said I could keep them, that you had so many at home, and she knew I liked them because you are all so beautiful and your clothes are so pretty..., ' Her voice began to falter, she was realizing something was wrong.

'I'm not angry with you,' I reassured her. 'But just tell me, this friend of yours, my... daughter as you say, calls herself *Darling*?'

'Well yes, it's her house name isn't it? She told me that's what you always call her, that you're..., ' She suddenly went shy.

'What?'

'Such a sweet mother. And so beautiful and rich.'

There were so many questions whirling around inside my head. 'OK, so 'Darling' is her house name, but she must have a real name. What do other people call her? D'you know?'

'Yes, the name the teachers call her.'

'The teachers? Oh. So you know her from school.'

'Yes.'

I held my breath. The truth was a moment away.

"They call her Fatima."

Rosie stops there. Silence endures beyond the cue for an explosion. Words, sound, fail me. *Fatima?*

"D'you know what she'd told that girl? That I was her mother and Wasila was her housegirl! A whole pack of lies."

"And the girl believed it?"

"Every word. She cried with disappointment to discover her best friend wasn't the richest, coolest girl in the school."

"So how did Fatima get hold of the albums in the first place?"

"Apparently Stacy had taken them out to show her and they never got put back that day so she spirited them off quietly later."

So that explains why Stacy was uneasy. I have more questions. "How did Wasila take it?"

"It was awful. I've never seen her like that before. In fact, if I'd had any idea what it would do to her I wouldn't have left them alone together."

"What d'you mean?"

"After I'd talked to the two of them together, they went off to the quarters and soon after we heard screaming. I rushed there and the door was locked but there was pandemonium going on inside."

I feel sick with dread, wanting her to stop and go on at the same time. It's starting to make awful sense why she has no help with the children today.

"I had to get the gardener to break open the door and – Oh God it was terrible."

"What?"

"Fatima was cowering in a corner and Wasila was standing over her, screaming and hitting her with the heel of her shoe. The poor girl needed stitches. Her lip was split, face all puffy, bleeding..."

"What? Wasila did that?"

"Yes. It took Joe and the gardener to pull her off her. She was dripping with sweat, hair all wild, unrecognizable. I was scared of her."

Gentle Wasila, a second mother to the baby, the children, to Roselyn herself.

"That's why I couldn't call you. I never had a moment. I was finally dialling your number when I heard the commotion from the quarters. And then I had to send Fatima to the hospital."

I feel pity for Fatima but a part of me whispers it's not enough. I've never felt quite sympathetic enough towards her plight. The inconvenient truth is, she's just not an endearing character. Her lethargy and dullness are somehow incarnated by her flabbiness and against one's will, one is irritated, wants to be freed from the inert charmlessness of her presence.

"Poor girl," I say, not quite sure how to continue.

"I know," says Rosie, "She's had a brutal life but in a way, she seems to make it worse for herself." I realize Rosie is having the same problem as me. She sighs. "I tried so hard to like her but... she didn't make it easy."

"It's such a shame," I say uneasily, "Somehow I feel after what she's been through in life, we should be able to like her, feel sympathetic, you know. But when she goes and steals..."

"Yes, exactly. And between you and me," she says with something like guilt, "I kind of resented her against my will, maybe even envied her for having Wasila as a mother. And now, I feel angry with her, furious to be honest. What a waste to have such a mother, lose her once and get a second chance only to blow it like that. I know it sounds terrible but - it makes me want to give her a good slap myself."

"Yes, it does sound terrible but I know exactly what you mean."

"But with the life she's had, one shouldn't expect any different I guess," she sighs remorsefully. "What's so frustrating though, is..." and she gropes for a way to put it, "It's like there's some switch that just can't be flipped back anymore and now she destroys everything, even the few breaks she gets in life. I mean, how often do those come along for someone like her, for Christ's sake?"

Yes, she's right, I reflect. Ugliness doesn't beget beauty, crime doesn't beget innocence and some damage is just... permanent, no matter how inconvenient that is or how self-defeating it makes a person. When I think what she must have been through... "Who did that stuff to her anyway?"

"Oh some Mr. Nobody."

"He gets around, that Mr. Nobody. They left a few verses out of the old poem didn't they?"

"Yes, like all the illegitimate children he fathers and what he does to defenceless little girls."

“Just imagine...,” No actually, I don’t want to. Now I feel real sorrow for Fatima. She too has had things stolen from her.

I ask Rosie what will happen next and she says they’ll stay with relatives for the time being. Wasila cannot face her right now and everything is up in the air. So she has no house help and this is another reason why things have been chaotic. I offer to come and help her a bit tomorrow. She is even more pleased for the company. She is missing a lot more than a house help.

“And there’s another thing,” she says. “The one bit of good news in all this - you can finally see the albums!”

*

I arrive at her house the next morning. The place feels odd without Wasila. It’s not just the mess. It’s a pervasive sense of absence which I would never have expected to be so tangible for such a self-effacing person. “So will she come back?” I ask Rosie.

“Well, I can’t imagine life without her really. As for Fatima, I’m not sure what’s to be done with her but I don’t think I can have someone like that around the house.”

She shows me the pile of albums. So here they are at last. Stolen and tucked away in the only sanctuary where the fantasy they served could flourish, a child’s unquestioning mind. Elusive pity now floods me in the tragedy of Fatima’s act.

“You know,” I say quietly, “She was stealing a lot more than albums.”

“Yes, I even forgot to tell you about that part,” answers Rosie. “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That she stole so many other things from us. She confessed it all. Clothes, jewellery, money...”

“Oh did she?” I’m not surprised. She needed those things too, it was all part of her act.

“So you didn’t know. Then how d’you mean she was stealing a lot more?”

I pause. What’s it called? Zeugma. When the same verb is applied to completely different things in the same sentence. Somehow the dictionary example always sticks in my mind – “She got in a mood and a taxi.” I picture Fatima in her fantasy world, showing off, coming alive.

“She stole albums, clothes, money and... a life,” I imagine saying.

How absurd it’ll sound. This is real life, not the Oxford dictionary. And if Rosie can’t see it for herself, then yes, how absurd it’s going to sound. Might even spark off a wild peal of laughter. I can’t bear that just yet. It’s not my pain but I feel it somehow and I know Rosie will too when she understands it. I’m surprised she doesn’t yet but maybe it’s because she just can’t make out the battlefield of her life in Fatima’s paradise. But she will, when we talk some more. Yes, there’s a whole lot more to talk about, so much to what has happened. I need more time to think about it myself. But the way I see it right now, if stealing a life is a crime then the world is full of criminals. And victims. And you can’t always tell them apart. Fatima got caught. But most people get away with it.
