

Amma DARKO
FACELESS

Chapter One

She chose to spend the night on the old cardboard laid out in front of the provision store at the Agbogbloshie market place because it was a Sunday. It had nothing to do with Sunday being a church going day. The reason was simply that if she hadn't, she would have stood the risk of losing her newly acquired job of washing carrots at the vegetable wholesale market. Fofu would have spent the night from Sunday to Monday dawn with her friends across the road at the squatters' enclave known as 'Sodom and Gomorrah,' watching adult films her fourteen years required her to stay away from, and drinking directly from bottles of *akpeteshie* or, at best, some slightly milder locally produced gin. Ultimately she would have found herself waking up Monday morning beside one of the friends her age, both of them naked, hazy and disconcerted, oblivious to what time during the night they stripped off their clothes and to what exactly it was they did with their nakedness. Sucked into life on the streets and reaching out to each new day with an ever-growing hopelessness, this was one of the routes they took to escape their pain.

A boy and a girl of about Fofu's age, making home on the streets of Accra just like her were once asked about what their ultimate dream was by a reporter doing a survey for one of the private FM stations. Dreams as in Martin Luther King's famous phrase "I have a dream." The reporter thought the kids would be craving material things like shoes and clothes, or more practically, blankets for warmth at night. She was thrown. For they craved warmth all right, but of a kind that many with secured roofs over their heads and the assured love of a parent at least, took for granted.

"My dream," offered the boy, "is to be able to go home one day to visit my mother and see a look of joy on her face at the sight of me. I want to be able to sleep beside her. I want her to tell me she was happy I came to visit.

Whenever I do that, she hardly lets me stay before she politely asks me to leave. She never has a smile for me. She is always in a hurry to see my back. Sometimes I cannot help thinking that maybe she never has a smile for me because the man she made me with and who is my father probably never had a smile for her either. One day she said to me, 'Go. You don't belong here.' If I don't belong to where she is, where do I belong? But I know that it isn't that she just doesn't want to see me. She worries about food. There is never enough. So she worries that it may not be enough for her two new children if I came along. The ones she has with the man who is their father and who is her new husband. He hates to see my face. I often wonder what it is I remind him of so much."

The girl said: "one day a kind woman I met at a center made me very happy. As I was going there I knew that she would give me food all right. But she gave me more. She hugged me. I was dirty. I smelled bad. But she hugged me. That night I slept well. I had a good dream. Sometimes I want to be hugged even if I smell of the streets."

It was around 2a.m and Fofo, though not being hugged, was smiling in her sleep. Not that she was aware of it herself. But God above and the angel watching over her saw the smile and knew it was the smile of a contented fourteen year old girl who but for the life that fate had plunged her into, should have been smiling that way each night in her sleep. Fofo was smiling because she was having a dream that was far removed from the realities of the life she lived. It was a dream as in the group of thoughts and images experienced during sleep. And in her dreams, she was living in a home with a roof. She was there when it suddenly began to rain and she was going to rush to somewhere in search of a safe and dry place to huddle close to other kids for warmth when it dawned on her that she had a roof over the head. And in the home with a roof, there was a toilet. A toilet with a roof. She smiled so wide when she felt the urge to attend to nature's call that the angel watching over her smiled too. In the dream, she simply entered the toilet with a roof and did her thing. No war like it many times was when she had to do it in real life. The bullies, mostly the older and more seasoned

street boys, and their thick-set leader, Macho, also regularly unloaded the solid waste contents of their bowels onto the rubbish dumps and in the gutters and open drainages. Then after freeing themselves, would begin to yell out how very determined they were to keep the environment clean and go after the likes of her to line their pockets with whatever money she had begged for or stolen or earned the previous day under the guise of 'spot fine'.

She was smiling still in her dream and doing it comfortably in the toilet with a roof when she felt the light pressure on her breasts under the weight of a pair of hands that were definitely not the Lord's. The hands began to play around her bosom. Slowly she began her descent from dream to reality. She felt a squeeze, which jolted her very rudely into full awakenment. She opened her eyes slightly. Someone was kneeling over her. She

opened the eyes a little. It was a man. She stiffened, closed the eyes again and remained still. Instincts guided. The hand traveled gradually and purposefully down to her stomach. Her heart pounded violently, threatening to explode inside her chest. The hand moved further down. Instinct continued to guide. She opened her eyes again. Wider. Two viscous eyes glared back at her under the illumination of the storefront bulb. She stared into the face above her. Was her mind playing games with her? She looked again. It was the no-nonsense streetlord Poison of the streets all right. A man who used to be the leader of the bullies like Macho now was. Who used to be content with just 'spot fines', but whose eyes, like they say, opened, somewhere along the line and caused him to fight his way to his present position of 'street lord'. Fofa let out a cry and began to kick her hands and legs wildly in the air. One huge muscular hand came down hard upon her mouth and suppressed the sounds from her throat. The other restrained her flailing hands and legs. The angel still looking on shed a tear. Poison successfully captured her legs between his kneeling thighs.

"You want to live?" He hissed.

Fofa moaned and nodded under the gravity of his hands.

"Then no noise!" He warned.

Fofa thought fast and wild. Her guts led her on. Then fate preached her the gospel according to street wisdom. She ceased her weak grappling, sighed heavily and went limp. Poison grinned like the devil self. The confidence of a fool. The folly of evil. Fofa lay there like a defeated soul. Poison pushed up her dress and scowled at the sight of her underpants. He muttered an obscenity and yanked it off. Fofa surrendered to her instincts. Poison unbuckled his belt. Then the angel descended. And it was so swift and so sudden that even Fofa herself didn't see it coming. It was an instant reaction of reflexes that in the split of that second responded to a stimulus without

soliciting the involvement of the brain. Her right leg struck at flesh. Her left leg kicked into muscle. Her fists bashed and banged into facial organs, hitting into both softness and bones. By the time sanity returned, the big muscular frame of Poison was swaying above her, one hand clutching the groin, the other shielding an obviously wounded eye. His face was contorted and oozing pure pain. Fofu shot up and grabbed the black plastic bag beside her. She cast one

last look at the groaning mass on the ground; gave up on her underpants and bolted like the devil was at her heels.

Odarley, Fofó's friend, was fast asleep when she felt the tap on her arm; gently at first, then harshly. She groaned and half opened her eyes with reluctance. Her head was pounding from the previous day's drinking spree. She ran a hand over her belly and below. She still had her pants on. It was fairly illuminated inside the wooden shack because the door was never shut. It had no windows and they would all sweat and suffocate to death if the door was ever shut. Paying two hundred cedis a day each to the owner, it was what they could afford. There were the regulars like herself and until a week ago, Fofó. The owner was never short of his daily tenants. Boys and girls slept together, stripped together and did things with each other, many times under the influence of alcohol, wholly unconscious of what they were doing or with whom. Such was the evil of life on the streets. She looked to her left. The shoe shine boy who came on so strong on to her the previous night at the video center was still fast asleep and stark naked. The iced water seller to his left was also completely naked. Odarley put two and two together and it made sense then why she still had her pants on. In their drunken stupor, the shoeshine boy mistook the iced water girl for her. She turned attention back to the apparition that patted her on the arm and opened her eyes full. They widened at the sight of her friend.

"Fofó, is that you? What are you...?"

"Shshshshshsh" " Fofó placed a finger to her own lips.

Odarley shot up from the cardboard and rubbed her eyes. A car horn sounded afar like a clarion call to duty. She rose.

Fob treaded her way carefully out of the shack. Odarley followed, pausing briefly by the door to fish out her *Charlie wotee* from a bunch. She slipped

in her feet and stepped out with Fofo. On second thought, she got back inside the shack. A big plastic water bottle stood by the pile of slippers. She picked an old plastic cup beside it and filled it with some of the water. She walked out to the crudely dug gutter in front of the shack, washed her face and rinsed her mouth.

“Have you?” she asked Fofo.

Fofo shook her head.

Odarley handed her the half-cup of water and went back into the shack. By the time Fofo returned the cup, Odarley had fished out some chewing sticks. She placed one between her teeth; gave the other to Fofo; chewed briefly on hers; removed it, spat into the gutter and whispered, “Trouble?”

“Big one.”

Odarley’s mind went ablaze with what Fofo’s big trouble most likely was. Maybe the vegetables woman who employed her found out Fofo sometimes picked pockets. Or did Fofo try a fast one on somebody and failed?

“What big trouble?” she asked, “And what trouble here at’ Sodom and Gomorrah’ isn’t big? I tell you, how we boozed yesterday? That one was big trouble. Nature is even calling.” She held her stomach. “Let’s go to the dump.” And took the lead.

A handful of children and some few adults were already there and doing their own thing under the scrutinizing eyes of some early rising pigs and vultures. They found a free spot. Odarley raised her dress and pulled down her pants and got straight to business. Fofo also lifted her dress and squatted. Odarley who was observing her, shot out, “You are wearing no underpant?”

“You let us finish fast and get out of here before Macho comes. You know

how he has been harassing people nowadays, don't you?" Fofo responded.

They were facing each other like two alternate angles. It enabled them to watch each other's back.

"Honestly," Odarley snorted, "Macho himself, where does he do it? He is a foolish man. Where does he want us to do it?"

"He wants us to go to the public toilet up there. Where else?"

"Nonsense. Then why doesn't he and his gang also go there? Who can walk that long distance to up there when the thing is coming with force?"

"Ask again. And look at the long line of people too always there. Ah! Even if you go there at twelve midnight, you would find a queue."

"That is why people sometimes do it on themselves while waiting for their turn. This is not like hunger where you can force small and say like: oh, let me hold on a little. This one, when it says it is a coming, zoom! It comes. Bum! Like that! What does it understand about holding on a little?"

"And see how sometimes too when you are in there doing it and haven't finished at all, those guard people too would come on you telling you to hurry up because you have kept too long and others are waiting. Is this something that you can start doing and stop midway just because you have kept long and others too are waiting?"

"lint."

Odarley seemed to be concentrating. She groaned a little.

Fofo was obviously having a problem. "Odarley, do you think God is watching us do it?" "Ah, don't they say He sees everything? But why this question? You squat there and ask foolish questions. Me, I am about to finish."

“What? Just now?”

“You call all the time we have been here, just now? Do you want Macho to come after you with those thick round arms of his like Mami Adzorkor’s kenkey balls?”

Fofo didn’t reply. “Fofo,” Odarley called. “}lrn.”

“I am about to finish oh.” Fofo didn’t respond. “Are you also about to finish?”

“No? Why?”

“Ah, me do I know why? It’s refusing to come.”

“Oho! What did you eat yesterday?” “Yesterday what time?” “Yesterday morning. What did you eat?” “Bread. Tea bread.”

“And in the afternoon?” “Bread. Sugar bread.”

“*Ebei!* And in the evening? Don’t even answer. I am sure it was some of Kwansima Fante’s butter bread. No?”

“Yes.”

“Hm. You ate bread bread bread like that? With what?”

“Water. Yesterday was a bad day.”

“Then give up and let’s go. Don’t you know that you end up cheating your own self when you try to cheat the spider? By now the plenty bread have turned to concrete inside your stomach. Let’s go!” And rustled her piece of

old newspaper.

Fofo panicked and groaned aloud.

“Eh, are you forcing?”

“But what should I do?”

“You will get piles oh!” she rose.

“Don’t go and leave me, please!”

“I am waiting; but you are keeping too long. Do you hear the lorry engines revving? Macho would be here any

“Everybody s-c-a-tt-e-r-r-r-r-. . . oh! He is coming oh! “Someone yelled. Everybody and everything within sight went hey-y; even the pigs and vultures. Odarley was yards away before Fofo could even make it to her feet. By which time Macho’s glistening baidhead was already within sight. Fofo bolted.

“You’ve left your plastic bag!” Odarley screamed, “Look! He has taken it!” Fofo turned. She had completely forgotten the bag.

Macho looked inside it and grinned.

“He’s got all of my money from last week.” Fofo whined. “All of it?”

“All of it.” And broke down in tears. “So what are you going to do now?” Fofo didn’t hesitate. “I am going to see my mother.” “For money?”

“Am I a dreamer? She and me who needs money more?”

“Then what are you going to see her about?”

“The big trouble I told you about.” “The big trouble?”

“Yes. Poison.”

“Poison? The Poison? The Street lord?” Fofu nodded.

Odarley grew scared. “Why on earth should you become involved with him?” “I didn’t. The person I said tried to rape me, that was him.”

Odarley laughed. Her initial scare turned to bemusement. “Oh Fofu! Who would believe you? Poison doesn’t go raping girls like us. He doesn’t need to. When he wants it, he

beckons, and the hi-life girls flood to him in their numbers. Are you sure of what you are saying?”

“Yes. But I don’t know why. I don’t understand it either. That is why I want to see my mother. She has some connection with him. I don’t know exactly what. But I know she knows him.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“I mean. . . she knows him more.

“How? How do you know?”

“I heard her and my stepfather talk once. That was before I quit home. And they mentioned Poison more than once.”

“Were they fighting?”

“No. It was a conversation. A conversation and an argument in one.” “And

you never told me?”

“I never thought much of it. But now that Poison tried to
sure it was him?”

“Fofu, are you

“It was he.”

CHAPTER TWO

Fate's machinery got into motion elsewhere that same Monday dawn and placed on a

string, two destinies joined carefully at their seams by an unclear thread. Like a shadow crossing paths at the bidding of death's uncanny ways, Kabria, in the comfort of her

modest home in a middle class suburb of Accra, remembered that her regular garden eggs and tomatoes vendors at the Agbogbloshie market would be expecting her. The mother of three children between the ages of seven and fifteen, events both in and outside the home sometimes got her thinking that those ought to be the most impossible of all ages.

Married sixteen years to Adade, her architect husband, Kabria loved her job with MUTE, a Non Governmental Organisation that was basically into documentation and information build up, with passion. And with equal fervour, loathed the figure that appeared on her monthly salary slip. But topping it all was her shamelessness about her special attachment to her old-hand-me-down-thank-you-very-much-Adade-1975 V.W. Beetle nicknamed Creamy.

The mother, wife, worker and battered car owner that she was, no day passed that Kabria didn't wonder how came the good Lord created a day to be made up of only twenty four hours; because from dawn to dusk, domestic schedules gobbled her up; office duties ate her alive; her three children devoured her with their sometimes realistic and many times very unrealistic demands; while the icing on the cake, their father, needed do no more than simply be your regular husband, and she was in a perpetual

quandary. Obea, her first child, at fifteen, had reached so to say, that age. Three years after her grand entry into the teen world; three to qualifying to vote. And as much as Kabria could recall, Obea said goodnight to her one night, baby faced, flat chested and all, only to wake up the following morning sporting a blossoming bosom and a pair of fairly rounded hips. The result? Obea threw both Kabria and Adade into absolute turmoil. There she was, one minute their little girl, next moment protesting any reference to her as their little girl. And while Kabria suffered her period of discomfort in silence, praying to God for guidance on how to deal with her now physically maturing daughter, Adade for his part, retired to bed each night wondering if the time had not come for him to maybe invest in two bulldogs to discourage potential young male whistlers behind the wall. Her second child, Essie, was nine and the source of a different kind of worry to Kabria. Essie was born at midnight. Kabria ignored the age-old superstition that alleged midnight borns to grow up with their feet everywhere else but firmly on the ground. She should otherwise have performed a rite like touching Essie's tiny feet three times in hot sand,

three days following her birth to nullify the dreamer jinx. Nine years on, and she couldn't help but wonder at times if maybe; just maybe, she should not have underestimated that notion after all. Especially when it came to some of the methods and timings of Essie's financial and material demands. This normally followed a certain peculiar pattern. "Mum," she would begin, "You worry too much. Do you know that you worry too much? It's not good for you, don't you see?"

As though Kabria herself thought of worrying as an essential vitamin. As though she deemed it to be good for her soul. As though she worried just for the sake of worrying instead of like in a situation of finding herself counting and recounting the money in her purse with the deepest of frowns and canceling out items on the household shopping list; sort of doing the financial balancing act; none of which Essie would take note of. "Money is for spending, mum, you know," she would go on, like a crooked preacher

in a disoriented pulpit, “We came to meet it. We would leave it behind.”

Then drop the surprise. Something like, “But if you like, I will hold on with my blouse till tomorrow.”

“Blouse? What blouse?” Kabria would yell between the desire to shove a piece of cloth inside Essie’s mouth and her maternal urge to exercise control and be patient even in the face of such an outrageous and inconsiderate provocation from no less a person than one of the three in her life to whom she rented out her womb free of charge for a whole nine months. Not one single month’s rent charged.

“It’s a tank top.” Essie would reply gingerly, as though just descended from another planet.

“Tank top? Didn’t you just see me count and recount the money in my purse?” And an unperturbed Essie would say calmly, “That is why I said I would hold on till tomorrow.”

“That was why you said? Who said I would have the money for it tomorrow? Where would it spring from?”

And in response, Essie would be at her dreamer best. “Mum, you see? That is why I said you worry too much. Tomorrow hasn’t even come yet, and already you are worrying about it. See?”

Her last child, Ottu, was their only son. And what an attitude Ottu carried upon his little shoulders for being an only boy. It was as though seven years ago, the good Lord above summoned Ottu’s then asexual soul; announced His intention to clothe him in flesh and dispatch him down to earth via Kabria’s womb and so gave him the option to choose the preferable sex Ottu would want to be on earth. Whereby Ottu chose to come as a male, only to realize upon his descent into Kabria’s life that indeed, a big favour it

was he had done her with his decision to the good Lord because she had two daughters already and was desperate for a son. Which he never ceased to hold Kabria to ransom with whenever a situation sort of demanded it. Like when he lost his school lunchbox for the second time in a term and Kabria decided to act tough and decreed that she was going to make him go to school for one whole week with his lunch packed in a black polythene bag. “Mum, do you know that I cut short your problems by coming a boy and eamed.you respect?” Ottu claimed unexpectedly.

Kabria was so taken aback by it that she found herself asking, “What problems?” “I have a friend at school,” Ottu launched into a self promotion campaign, “They are six...”

“Six children?”

“Yes.”

“In this day and age?”

“That is why my friend is special.”

And Kabria wondered where this was leading. “Ottu, please, every child is special. Every child ought to be to the parents be them even ten or twenty.”

“Mum, you don’t understand,” Ottu reproached, “He is also the only son. Just like me. And his grandmother said he is special. Veeeeery special.”

Kabria began to suspect where the conversation was leading to and asked carefully, “Did he say why his grandmother said that?”

“Yes. You see, by coming a boy, he earned his mother plenty of respect and also ended her pains.”

“Her pains?”

“Yes. When you are bringing forth a baby, they say it is painful. Veeeeery painful. No?” Kabria very stubbornly ignored that. Her beloved son went on unperturbed anyway.

“You see, my friend’s grandmother said that had my friend not come a boy, she being my friend’s father’s mother, would have insisted and ensured that my friend’s mother continued to bear more and more children till she bore a son.”

“Really?” “-.” “Yes. And because of that, his mum never punishes my friend. If you like when you take us to school tomorrow, I’ll call him for you to ask him yourself.”

Kabria turned down the offer with stiff politeness; told her son that like his two sisters, he too was special, but definitely not because he was a boy. And would have been equally special had he also come a girl.

Next was Adade who always rose from bed each working day at 6a.m. never one minute earlier. And which was a whole hour after Kabria. His expectation to find his breakfast table laid out ready and waiting after he had hijacked the bathroom for thirty minutes and used up another fifteen minutes to dress up, was always met religiously by Kabria. He never came to the breakfast table without a newspaper in the hand. To Adade, that would be akin to wearing shoes without socks. So that, sometimes, he would rather re-read a newspaper he had already read, than not read at table at all. His motto was that, old news was better than no news. And if his head was buried in a newspaper and Kabna asked a question, all she got was a nod or shake of the head for an answer. Sometimes stubbornness and frustration pushed her on to persist till she got him to open the mouth. But the often brief and snappy reply was always never worth the energy she invested in her persistence.

After work, Adade normally met with friends at a drinking spot to socialize over bottles of drinks. “To release tension,” he would say, “Every man needs that to hold onto his sanity.”

Kabria often wondered which of them needed a more urgent release of tension. Whether it shouldn't be she, who after having been labeled the weaker sex, had to, in spite of a full time job, perform all of her traditional duties at home, without an iota of relief. Every day after work, while Adade set off on route to go and release his tension, she had to go and pick up the children from school; head straight for home; change clothes; and go to the kitchen to see to dinner. Only to have him declare first thing on arrival home after releasing his tension, “Oh Kabria, I am so tired!”

Finally, Creamy. The car had been in and out so many times of every kind of workshop from Abeka to Zongo and undergone all kinds of clinical and plastic surgeries that, it seemed to have grown immune to both. Creamy; a name Kabria held so dear to heart that she once shocked Adade with the extent of her passion when he dared and put it to test. It was after one of Creamy's many plastic surgeries, which left it, so tattooed that it required urgent re-spraying. Unable to squeeze anything out of her miserly salary, she sought help from Adade.

“Don't you receive salary?” Adade asked.

“Don't get sarcastic with me.” Kabria retorted, “If I had had the time to study further like you did, I would also have been reaping the benefits today in terms of a better salary. But I was busy making babies then. Remember?”

It was a line of argument Adade always tried to avoid. “Okay,” he said simply to shut her up. But come the subsequent first day and second day and third day; and neither word nor assistance came. Kabria cast her mind onto the daily bottles of beers gobbled up in the name of releasing tension and paid Adade a surprise visit at his fine office the fourth day. Tu-tu-tu-tu-

tu Creamy's furious engine and exhaust heralded its tattooed arrival. And Kabna who meant business, parked it right beside Adade's brand new Toyota Corona, provided him on loan by his employers. When Adade saw his wife and her car, he prayed desperately for the earth to open up and swallow him whole. Kabria compounded his embarrassment by deliberately soliciting for more attention with her loud and gay hellos to all of Adade's co workers; then in their full and attentive glare, hopped gingerly into the car and drove away in the same tu-tu-tu-tu fashion. Her little coup d'etat paid off. Adade came home that night with a set of car paint.

"Is it cream?" Kabria asked. Adade gave her a look to kill. "What colour is it?" she pressed.

"Blue!" he snapped. "Blue?" she roared. "Yes. Metallic sea blue!"

"What kind of a bit and pieces colour is that?" she wailed. Adade flared up; utterly flabbergasted. "Bits and pieces of a colour"

"Yes." Kabria howled, "How do I call my Creamy, Creamy, after it has been sprayed this metallic sea blue?"

Adade was so shocked into a stupor he didn't know what to say. And was so furious that when he attempted to speak, it came out a wheeze. He returned the paint the following day; declined the offer to exchange it at a little inconvenience cost for a cream colour; and told Kabria bluntly that for all he cared, she could call at his office ten thousand times a day with her tattooed tu-tu-tu-tu Creamy.

After three weeks he gave in to her stubbornness and determination to drive Creamy in its tattooed state than have it sprayed any other colour than cream.

So, that was Kabria the regular wife, mother, worker, and car owner;

minding her own regular business until she took the decision that Monday morning to visit the Agbogloboshie market for some garden eggs and tomatoes.

CHAPTER THREE

Maa Tsuru, Fofu's mother, was leaning by her charred doorsill. Her blank eyes, staring into nothingness, did not notice Odarley enter the compound house. Just a few years back, and Fofu could have been one of the numerous screaming children, scrambling with the sheep and goats and chickens for space to play and exist in the common compound. Fofu could have been the girl in the tattered brown underpants with the diseased red hair and a protruding stomach, carried on legs that were as thin as two dried sticks. Or the other in the flour sac underpant with a body ravaged by rashes and whose nose seemed to never stop running.

Maa Tsuru's extended family home was a house of many faces. And Odarley, there as, so to say, John the Baptist, took in the entire hawk like eyes that stole suspicious stares at her. She ventured past the first of the twelve rooms. The door and that of the second room were both shut. In front of the third, a girl of about eight was fanning a charcoal pot fire. Odarley greeted the girl's mother who was washing clothes in an aluminium basin.