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Poor Men Have Too Much Ego

We all know how Queen Vashti ended; Esther was brought to prominence

That was last week's sermon,
Last Sunday,
The Sunday on which I saw the WhatsApp messages
Unanswered,
With each outgoing message more desperate than the previous
Even if they pretended not to be.
Then there were the WhatsApp calls.
Outgoing too.
Of zero minute each.

I saw the last message on Sunday morning. Before church. Before that sermon.

Je vais passer t'apporter des viennoiseries.

Je vais passer.
I will come over.
I.
Will.
Come.
Over.

If ever there was a certain future. Certainty in future. Only God knows that a future is certain.
Otherwise, the rest of us...

Je vais passer.

On a Sunday morning.
On the day of the Lord.
A day for our family.

Je vais passer.

I saw no other message as I decided to go and get Cécile ready. I also chose not to look again. Not to torture myself like that.

Je vais passer.

What would he have done had she said yes?
Yes, come over.

What does she like? In terms of *viennoiseries*? Chocolate croissants? Almond croissant? Financiers? Was she one of those girls? She must be, if after all those messages, he was now resorting to popping over to hers with, *des viennoiseries*! One of those girls who fancies the high life. Who only likes eating in a man's pocket. Whose expensive tastes only appear when a man is paying.

The pastor sermonated, and punctuated each sentence with Amen,
Every pause with Amen,
Every thought trailing away with Amen
Why so many Amens?

And the congregation too. We responded to his Amens with louder Amens of our own. *They* responded. I didn't. Amen to what? I needed answers to questions. Questions like, what kind of showing off did Vashti refuse that she had to be banished? Hein? What was it? For a man who had a harem! And why did nobody ask anything of Xerxes? Why did nobody say, "Ah Xerxes, you know, women" and shrug?

I remember carefully watching the pastor's wife, looking all First Lady, her right hand raised up, her palm open, her face impassive but in a state of rapture. Composed rapture. If any whys were going on in her mind, they did not transpire on her carefully made-up face. She was drinking in the Word. No Sir! Whys were not her portions. Vashti who?

Presumably Vashti was used to being shown-off. So if she refused on that day, why did nobody ask, Why? Perhaps Xerxes had said to one of the many women of his harem, "*Je vais passer t'apporter des viennoiseries*"?

Maybe that was why on that day,
on that particular day,
she said,
Fuck the dignitaries!
Fuck his kingship.
I'll not be my husband's crown.

The head that wants to wear a crown must sit straight. You move your head here and there and you want the crown to stay on?

That thing is heavy.

And it falls,

If the head doesn't stay put. And sit straight. And doesn't want to see every delight passing by.

Nothing new under the sun.

You are not Solomon

Although Solomon can be excused

Brother had dough

Why do men who budget want to be understood?

Hein?

Some will say that it is up to the crown to position herself. In such a way that however much the king moves his head, his crown covers him. In the same way that Proverbs 31 woman, through her rising before the dawn, never eating the bread of idleness but working vigorously, brought respect to her husband at the city gate and made him take his seat among the elders. But, did nameless Proverbs 31 woman's nameless husband tell anyone,

Je vais passer t'apporter des viennoiseries ?

Or was she the kind of woman who didn't place any stock on men's ego anyway?

"My child! Men are what they are. What do you want to do?" Tantie Georgette asked this of me the first time I saw a message.

My body shook. It trembled. I screamed. And I cried. Because I never imagined that Didier, my Didier, could/would do something like that.

How was he to cover me, if he was behaving like those other men who didn't know better and let themselves be seduced by the honeyed voices of the sirens outside? Did he not know that he was giving his strength to another household?

The pastor spoke with him. Once with me present and the other times, alone. I spoke with the pastor's wife. We spoke of submission,

Of not paying heed to all the gossips out there
To the Jezebels trying to create discord!

If you don't open the door, the devil can't enter.

You are a young, beautiful, engaged couple. Filled with the Holy Spirit. Of course that doesn't please the devil.

I acquiesced. But something gnawed at me.

Over the course of the days and weeks that followed,
As I ordered him to delete the number of that whore,
And never contact her again.

Saving ourselves was hard; virgin I wasn't. But we were doing it for the Lord. For the devil not to
have any hold over us,
Not build a stronghold in our lives.

Besides, I knew. Doing the things that should only be reserved for marital life outside of the
boundaries of that marital life, was more pain than it was worth.
I knew.

We were going to have children.
We have a child.

As for that deletion, Didier had already done it. And was busy winning me over.

Candlelight dinners
Flowers
Day trips
Viennoiseries.

Maman indulgently looked on. As if to say, a bad wind blew by. When happiness is on its way, the
devil is busy working hard. In fact, like the pastor's wife said, she also said that the devil doesn't like
it when people progress.

"You people do know that you insult this devil, if he exists even, when you say things like that, *non?*
You think that he cares for your frolicking?"

“He didn’t sleep with her. What would you do, tantie, if it were you?”

“Do you see a man here?”

“But if tonton Richard cheated on you? Or at least, had an écart.”

“Is that what they call it these days? Darling girl, I’ve always been interested in being rich. When you are rich, there are some things that don’t even enter your mind.”

“But you are a woman,” I said and burst into tears.

As if it wasn’t bad enough that all that conversation had happened within earshot of her housemaids.

I didn’t see the tears coming. I didn’t even know they would come. I thought that I had got over it but obviously not. It – Didier’s écart – was still gnawing at me, despite knowing that papa had had words with him. Obviously I wasn’t there, nor would I have wanted to be there, watching my future husband getting a telling-off.

It gnawed at me as I brought the date of our wedding forward. Because if I was feeling horny, what could be going on with him? But it gnawed at me. Because biology is biology. I also wanted it but I wasn’t moving sideways! Why could he not pray too?

It gnawed. That’s why I went to visit tantie Goergette, arguing with myself that even if my family – the immediate family – kept their distances with her a bit, well, she was there the day Didier came to formally ask for my hand in marriage. And I decided to take it as answer to prayer when I called and she was not only in Abidjan, but at home and not in some villages buying aubergines, okra, shea butter, plantains or whatever else she bought to sell in Abidjan. And since two years ago, even in Europe!

She was in her kitchen with her two housemaids, grinding spices, making up sauces. There were quite a few pots on the go on the huge 6-fire cooker in her kitchen.

“Bring water for my daughter, kèh! Look at these girls!” She humorously shook her head at the housemaids whilst hugging me, and asking me to wait for her in the living room.

“No, I’ll sit here with you.” I smiled and plonked myself at the kitchen table and drank the water one of the girls poured for me.

“Well then, taste this!” She picked a piece of chicken that she gave me. “I’m opening a shop in Beverly-Hills here soon!”

I might have marked a pause when she gave me the piece of chicken, a pause during which I told myself that it was just a piece of chicken. A piece among many pieces. That tantie wouldn’t have had the time to do a sacrifice in the hour that it took for me to leave Koumassi to her place. That the housemaids were in the kitchen. Weren’t sacrifices made with nobody around? Still, I ate the chicken, because the blood of Jesus was stronger. But really, because a huge part of me likes tantie Georgette. It would just be easier if she was a Christian. Even a Muslim, it would have worked for me. But tantie Georgette was an out-and-out animist, and she was in a polygamous marriage. Or rather, a union. The law doesn’t know her. Only her children although the children, women! Actually – whole seven and three years older than me – were not tonton Richard’s.

“She came to Abidjan and instead of looking at her work, she got knocked up.”

I have heard Maman say this many times and I have often wondered, even if I have asked forgiveness and prayed not to admire the things of this world; but I have wondered if Maman wasn’t maybe a little jealous of tantie Georgette. But I have also wondered, even more so now, especially since seeing those unanswered WhatsApp messages and that *viennoiseries* message if I wasn’t the jealous one. After all, how many friends of Maman were busy working hard, being single but often with child or children, living it up in Abidjan and making waves? Well, not many of my friends either but some. Charlotte is living in a cool apartment in Bonoumin. Fatou is in her very own villa in 2-Plateaux. Not married and even if they wanted it at times, the way they spoke about it made it sound more like a fantasy life they were seeking.

“He needs to have his own house too. Because at this my age, he is bound to have children and I don’t fancy playing at being Mama to someone else’s child!”

“But he will come as a package, Fatou!” I would answer, because can you imagine, if someone made such a judgment on Cécile? Not that when we were engaged in those conversations, I even imagined anything like my package being damaged in any way.

“Nobody is saying he wouldn’t come as a package. Even me, I come as a package, non? You think I will let someone play daddy of the year on my Khady? And while we are choosing qualities, brother needs to be rich o! Poor men have too much ego.”

“Fatou!”

“I lie? From whose mouth are you always hearing, I’m a man?”

Those conversations don’t happen so often. Fear. Fear stops me from being too close to those girls. I imagine them to be like the purple cloth seller even after she heard Paul and was converted. And

then there is the fact that they are never around much. Fatou is busy making back and forth trips between Dubai and Abidjan for her cosmetics and clothes stores; Charlotte is as careerist as they come! We might have started together as accountants at SODECI but she soon launched her own event management company and left.

A big part of me wants to speak to the girls. To call them. Maybe Charlotte because she was my friend first. I met Fatou when she hired Charlotte to put on a housewarming party for her and they hit it off, and I hit it off with her too when I came to the party.

“Sister, if I tell you the struggles I have gone through, even you will understand why I am hiring a company to plan a housewarming party for me! We need to celebrate our success, djo!” She said, in between two sips of Champagne. The only drink after water that she seems to drink.

So maybe I will speak to the both of them, because I need the honesty of Fatou. Charlotte would tell me, like tantie Georgette told me then, What do you want to do? Maybe, when all has been said and done, it is in my hands. Whatever “IT” is.

I didn’t know then though what I wanted. Even today. I’m vacillating. But that was why I burst into tears in her kitchen that day, because as much as I was going ahead with the wedding, as much as all the insults and the sticks were being hurled at the devil, well, I had a heart. I still do! And telling me that’s how men are, was not cutting it, and it is to avoid the repeats of that same mantra, that I have not spoken to anyone about the *viennoserries* message yet. Not even Didier, even if he’s noticed that I seem to be down.

“It is just work.”

“It will be fine. Cécile doesn’t need to see her maman like that and I don’t need to see the love of my life down like that.”

He hugs me. I smile, and tell him to look after himself as he goes out. To some meetings. At church. At a *vié père*, usually established men in politics, business. That’s how he might win a contract, and bring money home.

Then I didn’t mind the “freelance” nature of his work; a work no-one knew, not even me. He is an influencer. That’s what Charlotte said to Fatou when she asked what my husband did. Because she had been talking about and pointing at some man that day at her party that said man seemed to be looking a lot in my direction.

“I’m married.”

“And she is a Christian,” Charlotte added for good measure. A good measure that I didn’t mind. It is good witness when people know that because of your belief, there are some conversations that will not be pursued. Had, but not pursued. I am no prude.

“Have you brought him to the party then?”

“We are not attached at the hip, you know.”

“Ooohhh! Anyone we know?”

“He is that influencer. Didier Ogou.”

Fatou nodded, and said, “I have heard that name.” The tone of her voice felt too cold for me but ... I didn’t know what to think then and I still don’t know today. Did she know him?

Today, I have bigger things to worry about. Not even about where he was going. If he is going to the woman, whose name I now know but have done nothing about it. Yet. Not even if he will get a contract? Or come home and tell me that he is traveling to some country because he’s got some opportunity. Today, I’m thinking about what tantie Georgette told me that day, before I was married, when I was still free.

“Let’s go in my bedroom.” She said after she hugged me and soothed me and when my sobs died down, she grabbed a bottle of wine out of the fridge and my bottle of water and led the way up the stairs to her room.

“So all these tears are over Didier.” She said as she popped herself down in her chaise longue and opened the bottle of wine. “Have a glass. Sangaré will drop you back home.” She poured the wine.

“Why would he do something like that?”

She took a sip of her wine and I followed suit. The room was beginning to cool nicely and apart from the hum of the air conditioner and the sounds of the birds outside in the garden, there was no other sound.

I leaned back in my seat and allowed myself to take in the room. Maybe when I’m grown, maybe I will have a bedroom of my own too, I remembered thinking. Tantie had decorated her bedroom simply but elegantly. White sheets on the bed, plumped-up pillows. A delicious smell of jasmine wafting through. The chaise longue and the two armchairs. White-coloured too. The wooden floor was painted a powder blue, and uncovered. Tonton Richard had his own bedroom but of course, that was out of bounds to me. Tonton Richard was one of those men whose name was whispered in Abidjan but whom not many people had access to. The real riche, as opposed to the nouveaux riches who needed everyone to acknowledge when they broke wind, passed gas or sneezed. Not even Fatou and Charlotte knew that he was my tonton. Partly because I certainly didn’t care and because I didn’t want to deal with any raised eyebrows. Or questions that would be trying to understand.

“But he is married. Han han, so..., you mean, that’s your auntie.”

That unclickable name on his Wikipedia page wasn’t the name of my aunt. Tantie has her own Wikipedia page, created when she became Prix d’excellence last year. Fatou and Charlotte know tantie Georgette as my aunt; not that other woman and while in the family, everyone knows Richard as tantie’s husband, and his own children know her as the other wife of their father and his first wife knows it too; well, that knowledge is family knowledge. Not national knowledge.

“Baby girl, I’m going to talk to you as I would Amanda or Lara, because what can you do? You may not like it but I will still be your mother. This man you are going to marry, what does he do?”

"He works in Communications."

"Where?"

"Tantie..."

"Just answer the question." She interrupted me and took another sip of her wine.

"He is freelance. He works for himself."

"And how much money does he make in this working for himself that he does?"

"It varies..."

"But you earn more than him. A lot more!"

"Well, I have a good job."

"So why are you choosing to shack up with a man who is counting pennies? What's the rush?"

"I'm not expecting him to support me."

"Only the thing is, he is though. You are supporting him."

"We are both supporting each other. He is a good man."

"The thing that he is good and he is dipping his wick in other women before you have even tied the knot, I wouldn't want to see his bad."

Then, I had sat there while asking myself why I came to tantie. I was seeking advice from someone who did not share the same belief as me. How would she understand? But she did. She understood all about covering.

"You know, this church thing, I have done it. I have a Bible that I read. God is God and He is One. But even the man after God's own heart was rich. But this your one, how is he going to cover you when he can't even cover himself? Hein? Or is he going to lift you from your mother and father's house and make you make do in some rental again?"

I wish I had listened. Tantie had walked the walk after all. Tonton Richard might have bought her that place in Beverly Hills but she had a fat villa of her own in 2-Plateaux. With her own money, she sent my cousins to Canada and the States for their education. The fat villa is now providing her with rental income. But then, I was in my groove of light not yoking with darkness. That part about Jesus dying for my abundant life, I had put aside. And that was why I was in some rental in the back end of Koumassi when I could totally afford a lovely flat in Bonoumin. Well, not when I got married, but three years into the marriage when I got made expert-comptable. But men are men and their ego must be dealt with softly. And gently. And carefully. Although that was no guarantee. They could still go ahead and make offers like,

Je vais passer t'apporter des viennoiseries.

I met her one lunchtime at Fondation Donwahi. It wasn't a difficult thing at all. What is the use of Facebook if not for such things? To know what they look like. What they do. What their movements are. Why does dignity need to be translated into never meeting the husband's mistress? Confronting her?

She was at the terrace, having a glass of wine and smoking a cigarette. Her dark sunglasses firmly in place over her eyes. No doubt taking a well-deserved break. She was a photographer. One who was on Google. So what was she doing with my husband? I pulled a chair and sat at her table. She lowered the glasses and frowned. I smiled and introduced myself.

"I'm Abigael. Didier's wife."

She smiled brightly. "The wife he hides. Well, nice to meet you, sister."

"I'm not your sister. You are sleeping with my husband."

That's when she took off her sunglasses, took another drag on her cigarette.

"I call every woman a sister. Call it a tic."

She smiled again, a smile that appeared to me as condescending. But I didn't care for that. I was also asking myself why I checked her out, why I read her Facebook posts like I was reading a diary.

"As for your husband, I'm no longer sleeping with him. We did it maybe twice but you know, it was shit."

"Why did you even go there?"

"Ahi? Shouldn't you be asking him? He is the one who made promises to you, hein!" She clicked her finger and a waiter appeared. "L'addition."

"Don't you care that you are destroying a marriage? We have a child."

I was aware I sounded pathetic, and I was glad that she didn't answer that question. Instead, she paid the waiter, grabbed her bag and threw me a glance. That I do not know how to qualify today. I knew however that it wasn't pitying. She left. No other word was said.

I stopped stalking her on Facebook. I deleted her number that I pinched from Didier's phone and tried my best to forget it. I have begun to forget it.

Whether it is her or someone else, whether that someone challenges me as she did or grovels, my beef is with Didier. Not with any pastor, or a pastor's wife. I am the one whose heart is shriveling. Who is having to come across messages like that.

"I want a divorce."

No ifs, no buts. I dropped the bombshell as he was preparing to go out to "influence" at an event. But where was my problem in that?

He has been busy delegating people to talk to me. To convince me otherwise. I have been going to the tribunal.

How does one go about a divorce procedure in this country?