



NARRATIVE

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The Dishwashing Women

A STORY

BY TRYPHENA L. YEBOAH

AT FIRST THERE WAS one of them, and then two, and like a child that isn't planned but also isn't an accident, there was a third. They lived in a small kitchen inside a big kitchen. They imagined their place as some kind of pantry—only rather than a cupboard with shelves, it was an entire room, with a door and a window (that quickly steamed up when there was a lot of cooking in the big kitchen, which was often the case) and even a tall wooden cupboard in the corner where they kept canned foods, chipped plates, colorful scarves, woven straw hats, and a million other unnamed things. Adoma, the newest addition to the kitchen staff, did not want to believe it was the room assigned as the maids' quarters. It was a tiny room compared to all the other rooms in the house. But the maids made a home of it, and when she would look around, Adoma was indeed surprised by their possessions—a stained velvet curtain that hung on the wall, a side table with a lampshade that had no bulb in it, old newspapers to wrap smoked fish in or fold in two as a hand fan when the heat was unbearable, a basket filled to the brim with aprons. So much of it secondhand treasures, and so many times their hands did the digging and salvaging from what would soon be discarded as worthless.

Adoma was the youngest of them all, and at twenty-nine she did not want to accept that well-meaning people designed their homes to include small rooms of this kind for other humans. It seemed strange, the disparity; reckless, the thought of it.

The mansion belonged to a diplomat, his wife, and their two children—Samantha and Ben. At two years old Ben was a precious



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and often abandoned boy walking and throwing two-word sentences all over the place. When the women first moved in, he would poke his head into the kitchen, cackle, and turn around and head back to the other side of the house. It was almost as if he knew where the territory ended for him, to which side of the building he belonged. After a few weeks, though, and this might be because of all the aromas of food, or their singing and chatter, Ben crossed the gray marble tiles that separated the hall from the kitchen. His mother didn't mind and was perhaps pleased to have him off her hands, and so he kept coming—only on condition that he stayed in the main kitchen. The women had come to wash dishes (that was the initial arrangement), but with all the gatherings and parties the family had been having, extra hands were needed to assist with the cooking. Soon enough, with their secret recipes and many whispered recommendations to the cook about what local spices to use and the right amount of time to keep pastries in the oven, they had more to add to their workload, while their payment stayed the same. And with Ben wanting no other place to play with his toys than on the kitchen's wooden floor—surrounded by women who saw him, tickled him, stuffed a tiny cornbread muffin into his small mouth every now and then, and threw him up in the air and caught him in their firm hands—they quickly became nannies too.

As for Samantha, or Sam, as her parents called her, she watched them from a distance. Sometimes she was envious of the affection her brother received, but most of the time, her eyes were cast down, the anger visible in her slumped shoulders. She did not want to be there, away from her friends and her private school and paved roads back home. She sat in the next room journaling, sometimes writing letters to friends, complaining about the scorching sun. When her father would walk by and say, “You have to make a conscious effort to make yourself feel at home, we will be here for at least two years,” she would sulk and shake her head, her red pigtails swinging on both sides of her face. “This is not home, and it will never be.”

To the women, home was never explicitly defined, but they knew they were seen by each other, that they could stretch their hand in the dark and another would reach out to hold it, that the

unspoken rule was to keep watch and take care of your own, wherever they may be. Every job they did, they did well, talking among themselves, latching on to a tune when one started a hymn, working and praying and stretching their strength into the night. They were aware of each other's sighs and lifted spirits, nursed one another when there was a new burn on the hand from a boiling pot or a deep cut on the finger from the endless chopping of carrots or peeling the skin off plantains, and ended each day looking forward to the next—not so much the labor of the new dawn, but that they could partake in the living again, could strum the chord of being alive, regardless of what it looked like, and what it stripped away from them.

There were empty rooms on the other floors. Adoma knew because she counted them each week when she went up to change the sheets, even when no one slept on them. Six empty rooms. Surely one could be given up for them? She fantasized about sleeping in one of the beds. To just walk up those stairs one night and throw herself onto the soft mattress and feel her body sink into its padded layers of cotton and wool. What's the worst that could happen if they found her in the morning—she'd be sent back to the small kitchen shelter? Well, that wouldn't do much. She imagined the shocked faces of the master and his wife, how they wouldn't know what to say because they hadn't anticipated a day like this would come when somebody they did not—and would not—consider one of them crossed that threshold and made herself feel at home. And perhaps along with the shock would be fear—how did they let this happen? When did they stop being in charge? They would be quick to question: How is it possible that this shy twenty-nine-year-old kinky-haired, soft-eyed, kitchen-bound lady could do this brave, unacceptable thing? It made Adoma laugh whenever she thought about such things, and she thought about them a lot.

Esiha, the oldest and first to arrive at the house, couldn't stand the young lady's absentmindedness and giggles. The whole act was strange, and to Esiha, even impolite. They would be washing and slicing vegetables for an evening gathering, and there Adoma would go, half a tomato in hand, laughing and covering her mouth; or they would be sweeping and mopping the floors and she

would stop and nod and chuckle, as if someone had just appeared to her and whispered a joke in her ear. In so many ways she reminded her of Helen, her daughter, who was away from home, from her care, and in the faraway wildness and strangeness of a foreign land. It had been two years since she left to study psychology, and now during every phone call, the girl had questions, she wanted to know everything. How was her mother coping, was there anything from her past holding her back, if she could go back in time, what would she change about her life?

Sometimes Esiha shook her head and smiled, amazed by how smart her girl sounded, how she was confident enough to ask her these big questions. When Esiha was Helen's age, her own voice was unfamiliar to her, and when she did speak, she was meek sounding, uttering the words with fear and uncertainty, unsure of herself. Often swallowing them down before she could even string the words together to articulate them. Her daughter's questions wore her out. She had no complaints, she would say.

"Life is good, there is nothing to change. I wake up, take what I can get, and hope to God I live to see another day."

"And what happens then?" Helen always knew what to say, how to steer the conversation back to what she really wanted to know. "What happens when you see another day? How are you walking into tomorrow, Ma?"

Esiha did not know what to do with her and all this newfound and disconcerting curiosity.

"Ach! Why are you bothering me with all these questions? When tomorrow finds me, I know what I want to do with it. Tell me about you. Have you found a church? And how are you doing in the weather? Don't let the cold get into your bones. It'll stiffen up your veins and cripple you!"

Helen told her not to worry about the cold; there were clothes to keep her warm. She was concerned about her mother, how her work in the house was going, if they were treating her well. They went back and forth like that, each not saying much of what the other needed to hear but still asking enough questions to keep the other talking until one of them had to go. It was often Helen running off the line, her voice suddenly taking on a sense of urgency, as if she were going to miss her train if she didn't get off

the phone that instant, but it was always to the library or a café or some department meeting, and none of those things could wait.

After every phone call, Esiha shared her diagnosis with Nkwa-daa, her quiet and observant friend. The one who wouldn't let her do this job all by herself, the one who, despite all of life's misfortune, got back up on her feet every time, humming as she cooked and cleaned and moved about. No one ever embodied the meaning of their name like she did, *life always*. Esiha and Nkwa-daa had been friends for more than twenty years, and when Helen was born, Nkwa-daa was right there to pick up Helen's small wailing body and shush her in the middle of the night, urging Esiha to go back to sleep after the baby had had some milk. But Esiha mostly stayed by her friend's side, dozing off a few times, while the image of her dearest friend cradling her baby stayed with her, made her heart heavy with gratitude and at the same time light with relief, for how could she survive these nights all by herself?

"She is well, by grace. But her voice . . . maybe she has a cold," Esiha said, looking at the phone as if expecting Helen's call to come through again.

"Did you tell her to drink some herbal tea?"

"Well, no. But when does she ever listen to us?" Esiha started for the main kitchen.

They were cooking yam and kontomire stew for dinner and some chicken soup too. There were guests coming, foreign people who had slowly trained their palate to enjoy unfamiliar foods. There were, of course, the days of mashing potatoes upon request, when they'd rather fry them, or throwing mixed fruits into a blender when they'd rather pop the solids in their mouth, feel the textures of pineapples and mangoes on their tongues. But rarely did they do anything in the house for their own pleasure. They followed orders for no reason other than it was what they were for.

"She listens to me," Nkwa-daa said, playfully poking her friend in the ribs with her finger. "Next time let me talk to her."

Helen was Nkwa-daa's daughter too, and some days, when the girl was not in a haste and remembered her manners, she asked of her aunt and even spoke to her on the phone sometimes, but of course the woman sounded no different from her own mother.

They had the same thoughts, worried about Helen's life abroad, if she was eating well and filling up her Rawlings chain—the visible and protruding collarbones of starving Ghanaians under Rawlings's rule—and if she was staying warm and remembering their God. They whispered the same prayers over her life, lived as if tied to each other by a string. You tug on one end, only to find the same at the other.

Helen's first year on campus, she had secretly yearned for a friendship of this kind, and that had meant saying yes to parties or going on a group hike or enrolling in the same classes as her colleagues. She didn't expect it to be hard—to find someone who brings your presence an ease, an ease that comes from years of knowing and understanding, of paying attention to another. She was wrong and it had been lonely, even lonelier after these gatherings where one is somehow reminded of her own isolated existence while surrounded by happy, dancing, drunk people. Helen wouldn't admit this to herself: if she stayed on this quest of finding a sister-friend, wishing so desperately for what her mother and Aunt Nkwa-daa had, she might indeed miss out on other kinds of friendships, even ordinary delights in being with someone. It need not be what they had, nothing of this strange devotion, this rare unrelenting bond.

It did not surprise her that Aunt Nkwa-daa always asked about her safety and whether she walked home alone at night. Helen said yes, she was being careful and no, she never walked home at night by herself.

Since her daughter's disappearance five years earlier, Aunt Nkwa-daa had a way about her. She was fearful and untrusting, always looking over her shoulder, double-checking locked doors, sitting up in the middle of the night to see whether the sound she heard was the wind blowing things around or somebody in the dark, closing in on her. Helen had to leave behind the pepper spray her aunt gifted her at the airport, although she had tried convincing Nkwa-daa that she wouldn't be allowed to take it on the plane with her. But the woman had pleaded, pressed it firmly in her palms, and wrapped her fingers around it, saying, "Take it, please take it. My heart hurts, take it with you everywhere." And yet, Helen remembered, she is also the woman with so much love

in her eyes, so much patience to give, a vessel of flesh that takes on whatever burden is laid on her without so much as a murmur. And of course there was her mother, ready to strike anything that threatened them, and Adoma, the new girl her mom talked about. Helen knew exactly why she was there and what she'd have to give up to get what she wanted. What they all wanted, she believed, was an escape. When she was home, Helen had only wished to be away, and she couldn't exactly say why other than everything about her life in that place was small and stifled and ordinary. She wanted out and wanted more, and she now convinced herself that she had it. The new girl, who her mother said ought to be in school but wasn't, wanted to live the promise of this new life too, at whatever cost. Helen did not blame her; it is the kind of scholarship and good fortune that could change one's life after all. It's changed hers.

THREE TIMES Adoma had tried to speak with the diplomat, and three times Esiha had stopped her, pinched her waist on their way out from the dining room.

After all the guests had left, they pushed a cart around to collect the dirty plates. So much food left untouched, so much waste. As soon as they were out of sight, Nkwa-daa grabbed a plastic bag from their cupboard and scooped the leftovers in, stealing glances at the door to be sure the Madam was not walking in. Once when she discovered the women were packaging food and giving them away to people, she told her husband first, who told her to deal with the maids directly and not involve him. So she called some kind of meeting, warning them in a tone she might have used to address fifty people rather than the three tired faces that looked back at her. They nodded their heads yes, they understood her, and it wouldn't happen again.

Nkwa-daa had been restless that night. "How can we throw away all this food? She won't ask us to reduce the quantity, and she won't let us share what's left of it. And they won't eat anything that isn't fresh the next day. What is this life?"

But Esiha had told her they didn't have to stop, they just had to be sure not to get caught. They found a way to make it work and managed to stay out of trouble.

That night they were surprised that Adoma brought it up when they confronted her. It was very clear to both of them how much she sought the diplomat's attention, how she leaned closer than was usual to refill his glass and how even her fragrance was different when the man was around. Some kind of fine perfume mist with notes of vanilla bean and fresh orange blossom filled the air when she walked past them. She wanted so badly to be seen and did not care to hide it. The three of them had a pile of dishes to clean and a conference room to set up for the next day's event before it got too dark, but Esiha's temper was fiercely pressed against their waiting duties. She grabbed Adoma by the arm and pulled the girl face-to-face with her. She made sure her grip was firm, firm enough to send Adoma whimpering and trying to wrest her hand free from Esiha's grasp.

"What's the matter with you? What is it that you want from the man, eh? What do you want to tell him?"

"Ach! I've done nothing wrong. Let me go!"

"Nothing, eh?" Esiha chuckled and shook her head, still holding the girl's wrist. Foolish and ignorant, these young ones. "You're walking around stinking with all these wants. Craving so boldly, throwing yourself at him, having no shame, no dignity. You think no one sees you? You think no one sees those pitiful, pleading eyes?"

"I'm not the only one going against the rules here!" Adoma finally yanked her hand free and fumbled with her apron strings. She was shaking all over. It stung to hear the words because she did feel unseen, and she hated it.

"You and her," she pointed a trembling finger at Nkwa-daa, "have been giving away food. And sometimes, sometimes, I know Ben goes in there to play and he's not supposed to ever be inside that small kitchen." She said the word *small* with such disgust, such spite, that both women looked at each other, unable to hide their shock. Such disrespect.

"What do you want from the man?" Esiha was so close to the girl now and she saw it in her eyes—that fire, that misplaced rage, that stubborn will that would not be shaken.

She had seen it in Helen too, just a few days before she came running into her arms with good news. She had been considered

for the scholarship, and she, Helen, would be going abroad to study. The diplomat, together with the school, had picked her last but he had picked her. It was supposed to be good news, but Esiha could not shake off the feeling that something had happened to cause them to arrive at this point. Days before, Helen had sobbed quietly on the other side of the bed as her mother slept, her Bible held over her chest. They slept in an office by the church then, their own home having been submerged in a flood. Helen had complained to her mother about how she was so close, how her grades were good but not good enough, how an opportunity like this could save their family, and if only she could see the man, if only she could make an appointment at his residence and show herself and argue her case.

Esiha could barely follow what her daughter was going on about. Helen explained it over and over. The university had partnered with some ambassadors and diplomats to fund bright but financially challenged students. They announced the selected students in school and she did not make the list, but she was close. She was certain she was close because her grades were good and she could convince them, she could change their minds. “Don’t you see? I could be one of them!”

But Esiha did not really see. Yes, the girl was bright, but not so spectacular that anyone would be willing to pay for her to continue schooling. And besides, she hoped her daughter would join her at the market, help her rebuild their lives from all they’d lost in the flood. And so that talk about more school and much worse, Helen possibly going away from her, was unexpected and to her, implausible. Like all things she did not understand or care much about, she dismissed it—her daughter’s hopes to meet the man, to change his mind and change her life, a fading noise in the background.

But Helen did exactly as she’d said she would, and she came bearing the good news a few days later. At first she wasn’t in, but now she was. Just like that. She was going to America, and it was going to be the best thing that would ever happen to them. Esiha had looked up from the palm kernels she was pounding, settled her eyes on her daughter’s body, and looked away without saying a word. Her daughter went on, saying that the diplomat had even

offered her mother a job. She could wash dishes. But Esiha was no longer listening. She felt sick to her stomach. There was a burning sensation in her lower abdomen, making her nauseous, causing her to jump from her stool and hang her head over the toilet.

Something had happened to her daughter. Something had happened to her, and it had opened a door and it might just be the happiest she'd ever seen Helen, but something terrible had happened. Esiha thought this every day after the news. She couldn't shake off the feeling as Helen prepared for her visa interview, as she stood in front of the church to be prayed for, as people stopped by to drop off clothes and food items, half of which she would leave behind.

Esiha would take the job and later put in a good word for her best friend. She would hear the stories too—of what many of the girls at the school had to do for these scholarships, how much of themselves they had to give up in exchange for this dream. And she would think about her poor girl, walking down the halls of this mansion, her transcripts in hand, ready to fight and prove her worth. On the other side of the door was the greedy world Helen knew nothing about; the bloodthirsty hands, the wolflike creatures who, with a conscience long rotten, would snatch, deceive, throw a bone of promises to whomever was innocent and desperate, and like a dog, a girl chased after it, undressing herself in every leap. Afraid and cold and alone. Stubborn and prideful and determined.

When Adoma did not respond, suddenly subdued and visibly weakened by the interrogation, the question hung between them.

“What is it that you want from the man?”

A new life. Change. Opportunities. All that can be possible for a girl like me.

Esiha knew the desire as well as the cost, perhaps even more than the girl did. Her daughter's departure left her sick with numbness and a recurring malaria that dug at her bones. She stayed in bed, refusing to eat or bathe or clean the compound before church service. She would see only Nkwa-daa, and when her friend would come, she would sit quietly, watching her and saying nothing. If anyone understood grief and the illness that separation causes, it was Nkwa-daa. The first few days, Nkwa-daa gave her silence and the comfort of her presence, left a banana by

her bedside. Then she would bring fresh wheat bread from the bakery along with soup, sit next to her, and feed her. The silence at that point was so familiar, even necessary, that Nkwa-daa did not bother to break it. And one day, as Nkwa-daa was getting ready to leave, Esiha began to speak. And the words, they rushed out like some force was pushing them out of her. Nkwa-daa thought her friend was praying under her breath, but she got closer and realized she was talking to herself but also to her.

She had failed her daughter, she said. Something terrible had happened and she should have been there to stop it. “What kind of mother am I? And all this for what—a new country without me? How is this better? Tell me, Nkwa, how is this better?”

That night Nkwa-daa stayed by her friend’s side, dabbing a cold towel on her forehead, for her friend was running a temperature, shaking with fever. A love illness, the terrible condition of the heart where it convinces itself of its brokenness, its deep, incomprehensible calamities. The whole body buys into the illusion and suffers it faithfully. Nkwa-daa held her friend then, as her friend had done in the past when she thought she was losing her mind, when she was so sure that at any point in the day, her own daughter, missing for months, would walk through the door. How she waited, how she hoped—all the while, Esiha was by her side, waiting and hoping, knowing very well no girl was coming home. Saying, “Waiting is the easiest thing we can do, and we can do it for years. It demands nothing of us. Look at us. We sit and weep and fold our hands and look out to see who’s coming. But to move on? To gather our breaking selves and plunge back into life after this misfortune, that is the hardest thing we’ll ever have to do. And we’ll do it, together.”

In the kitchen Adoma had turned her back to Esiha’s intense black eyes and stood at the sink, furiously scrubbing the bottom of a casserole dish. Esiha exchanged a look with Nkwa-daa, who stood watching the dispute and appeared to be shut in her own despair, worn out from the noise around her. Esiha nodded as if to say “enough,” turned, and headed for their place, and Nkwa-daa left the girl and followed suit, a limp in her walk from all the standing that seemed to weaken her knees and leave her feet swollen.

Time was running out. Whatever they had to do, they had to do it fast.

THIS IS ONE WAY to say it: they had no plan and yet, the minute she took the job and walked through the towering, polished wooden doors, Esiha knew she couldn't *not* do anything. This was the same place. The same bloody tile, with its dramatic veining and glossy finish that Helen had walked on because the man wouldn't see her in his office, not for a discussion of that kind. They should go home, where he could be comfortable and take his time to listen to her. Esiha never saw the rooms in the house—it was Adoma's job to clean them, and she was partly relieved that nothing triggered her imagination, visions of her daughter vulnerable and naked on one of the sheets. Relieved too that the man had kept his distance from the kitchen altogether, coming and going through his wide office doors—his domineering presence lurking through the halls, always up to some official engagement.

He barely glanced at them when they served people at the table. He appeared so shut off, so indifferent about their presence and movements that it was as if he did not see them. Or rather, it wasn't that they were invisible to him—he could not, after all, miss the clinking of utensils as the women set them on the table or the fact that his bowl of lentil soup did not magically appear before him but was carefully set down by two hands—but did not find them worthy of his attention and time and in fact, of even registering their presence.

Anyway, Fridays were the days his wife took Ben to the park. With a persistent nudge from her friend, Nkwa-daa asked the madam if she could take her boy to the park this time. The madam declined politely, a little surprised about the unusual request; so far, the women's nanny duties had been restricted to feeding and changing Ben, collecting all his toys and scrubbing those that needed scrubbing, and simply watching him closely when he was in the kitchen. But she did think about it when she went to bed, turning in her silk nightgown for the empty side of the mattress; the familiar absence of her husband did not scare her anymore. She had grown used to it over time and treated herself to shopping

sprees whenever the fear crept up on her. It was a good distraction, like so many of their properties had become over the years—a veil draped over their faces to keep them from ever coming to terms with their lives and what they'd made of them. Giving Ben to the maid would certainly give her more time to meet with a friend at the spa or spend some time at the public library. She'd always wanted to do that—to be away for a while and experience the town and its people, put herself out there. So she said yes to Nkwa-daa and agreed to go with her the first time.

They sat on the bench and watched Ben play with the other rich kids. Nkwa-daa wasn't sure what to do or say. Their closeness to each other in that moment was odd. Without it being said, each one's place had always been clear and both parties assumed their roles without thinking. One set the rules and insisted on what needed to be done, and the women bent their heads and lives low in subservience. All of it felt strange and Nkwa-daa hoped her uneasiness didn't show. She prayed she wouldn't have to speak. In fact, she hoped the woman would forget she was sitting next to her, which would not surprise her much. The madam wore a white lace pleated tank top tucked in her wide-leg pants. She had twisted her long hair at the back and kept it in place with a leopard-print hair clip—not a single strand of hair in defiance. Hanging loosely on both ears were sparkling silver earrings. She was stunning, an observation Nkwa-daa was sure no one was more convinced of than the woman herself.

“May I ask why you offered to do this? It's . . . quite nice of you, actually. I see how Ben is fond of you folks in the kitchen. But I'm just curious, you know. Do you have any children? Where are they? You must miss them, slaving away in the kitchen like this.” She looked at her son as she said this, her eyes all dreamlike and distant.

Nkwa-daa fidgeted with her hands in her lap. They were dry and rough and in serious need of some lotion. They sat on the same bench; the woman's pumpkin-orange bag, the size of a small pillow, was the only thing that separated them. The woman smelled of lavender and expensive oils. Next to her bright bag, Nkwa-daa was reminded of just how faded her skirt was. It was as if someone had stabbed a needle through the fabric and drawn out

all its blue, just as life had dealt with her—sapping her of her very strength.

She wasn't sure which of her questions to answer first, so she said simply, "Ben is a sweetheart. No, no children."

The woman lit a cigarette and looked ahead as the sounds of children shrieking and chasing after each other rang in their ears. Nkwa-daa wasn't sure if the woman had heard her, but she liked it that way and hoped that would end their conversation. What smart words do you say to a wealthy woman with a fancy bag like that and skin so smooth, so soft you want to touch it? Nothing. You only watch.

"You like them? I got them for my birthday. Never worn them. Well. Until this morning."

Her madam touched the earring on her left ear and her finger lingered on its sleek surface. She did not really look at Nkwa-daa as she spoke. She seemed to glance at the area around Nkwa-daa, to scan with her eyes but not really to focus on her. And so it took a while for Nkwa-daa to know she was being spoken to, and an even longer while to decide on what to say in response. But before she could think of anything, the woman reached behind one ear and took out the earring and then the other. They were pear-shaped, sterling silver. Nkwa-daa pulled back, both nervous and unsure of what was happening.

The woman, with the confidence of one who is familiar with having her way, grabbed Nkwa-daa's hand and placed the jewelry in her palm. The earrings were beautiful and sparkling, a glorious thing nestled in her coarse and dull hands, exposing the lumpy arthritic joints knotting her fingers. Nkwa-daa wished she could hide her hands or cover them with a handkerchief and then take the earrings. But she said thank you and like an afterthought, asked why. The woman looked at her with an expression that Nkwa-daa couldn't tell whether it was disgust or disbelief, but she recovered quickly, showing a tight smile that did not reach her eyes. Nkwa-daa thought she had ruined the moment. Now the woman would take back her earrings and walk out of the park and take her son with her.

But the woman appeared to give the question some thought before she said, lowering her gaze, "I frankly do not know. I saw

you looking and thought you might want them.” She spoke fast then, the words toppling over each other. “But of course, that was a silly assumption. Silly of me too. Why would I think that? People are allowed to admire things without needing to own them. Not that you can ever afford these but . . . I don’t mean . . .” Her cheeks turned red, and it fascinated Nkwa-daa to see how easily her skin filled with color, how one’s emotions could knock past all walls of defense to intrude and ride on their flesh.

If Nkwa-daa thought it was unsettling to be sitting so close to her, it was even harder to watch the woman fumble for words. She was always so poised, so upright in her heels, not a strand of brown hair out of place on her head. Her face was beautiful, with eyebrows that were always drawn over and a very small dimple in her left cheek. They were utterly different women and yet, for a brief moment, one would think they had swapped places. “Thank you,” Nkwa-daa said slowly, closing her fingers over the earrings, finally claiming them. “No, thank *you*,” the woman said. Her voice trailed at the end, perhaps searching for a name, but when it wouldn’t register, she said again, “Thank you.” And this time, she looked directly into Nkwa-daa’s eyes and clasped her delicate hands over hers.

THEY GOT RID OF Adoma easily. Esiha only had to break a few pricey dishes—brought out for special occasions like fundraisers—and the woman was furious, a torrent of cries flowing out of her. They could get new ones, she said, but these were her favorites. How could this have happened? She even went down on her knees, picking up the pieces, taking one last look at the floral design that lined the broken rims of the plates.

The girl was absent-minded lately and moving very slowly, Esiha told the Madam. Adoma could use a break; she interrupted their operations in the kitchen and Esiha was confident she and Nkwa-daa could handle the work without her. The whole time Adoma stood there, in shock, a scalding wrath stirring in her. For some reason, she couldn’t talk. Her mouth was dry and her words failed her when she needed them most. She was asked to leave that very night. The women filled up a sack bag with fruits for her, and because Nkwa-daa had heard her go on and on about the beds

and the soft sheets upstairs, she had managed to find a sheet in the laundry pile and rolled it into a ball to tuck into the bag.

“There’s some money tied in a sock for you,” Esiha told her, handing the sack bag to her. “Find something to do. If your grades are bad, take that exam again.”

Adoma flinched when she heard the word *grades*. Her mission was not a secret after all.

“But do not come back here,” Esiha continued. “Do not ask to see the man. I know you think this is what you want,” there was a quiver in her voice, but the woman held herself together, “but you’re wrong.”

“You think you know me,” the girl spat back, locking eyes with Esiha. Her eyes were burning, and maybe the women could tell her legs were shaking, but she was going to say what she was going to say, going to do what she was going to do, even if she had to find another way.

“I know Helen, old woman. I know your daughter and what she did here and her filthy—” The riot rising inside her was instantly stilled by a slap from a hand she was not expecting. It was Nkwa-daa’s; she had stepped from behind her and struck the right side of her face. Adoma was shocked, betrayed, even; she had always preferred Nkwa-daa’s gentle spirit to Esiha’s hot blood and mistrust, which seemed to seep into everything she did. The side of her face stung, and her tears flowed freely now, from pain and also from rage at being let go like this, like she was expendable and unwanted. With one last dark look from Esiha, the girl turned, picked up the sack they’d given her, and stepped out through the back door. But not before Adoma had noticed Esiha’s sudden muteness; the woman seemed to stiffen and weaken before her at the mention of Helen’s name. She had finally left Esiha with no words. It served her right, she thought. It served her bloody right.

THEY WASTED NO TIME and got to work the next day. It was a Friday.

“I will leave the house shortly after you leave for the park. We will meet at the train stop in Salaju. I will sit by the window. When you see me, come.”

“With the boy?” Everything about this plan scared Nkwa-daa to

death. There was no way they were going to get away with this, and yet she knew her friend's mind was made up. Esiha was going to get back at the family, and Nkwa-daa was going to be a part of it. It was simple, and also the vilest thing she'd ever had to be part of.

“Yes. With the boy.”

They were in the small kitchen. Scheming. Looking at her friend now, the crow's feet tugging at her eyes, which seemed red from too much rubbing or crying, her sunken cheeks, the worry lines stretched across her forehead, Nkwa-daa knew she was exhausted and old and yet, after all these years, that fire in Esiha was not quenched. She was after something and by all means, she was going to get it. The whole plan made Nkwa-daa sick and restless. They were going to be caught. Thrown in prison. They would be all over the news, and everyone in town would hear about their abominable offence. They would be shamed and mocked. She knew she wouldn't be able to live with herself, but Esiha eased that thought with the assurance that they would still have each other. She would not have to go through it alone.

Weeks after her daughter went missing, Nkwa-daa would hear her voice in her head, clear as though the child were right in the room with her. She would turn, expecting to see her daughter behind her, but there was no one. The voice wasn't disturbed or filled with panic. It was calm, soft, the way her girl sounded when she was just waking up from sleep. *Mama?* When she called her, it was always in the form of a question, just throwing out her name in the void and expecting a response. *Mama?* Nkwa-daa told Esiha about the voices. How she wanted to hit her head against something, how she wanted them to stop but also didn't. Was she crazy? No, her friend said firmly.

Esiha was the only one who wouldn't mock her or tell her something wasn't right with her head. Or tell her it was nothing, that she was only making up the voice. Some days she told Nkwa-daa she heard the voice too. And so they spoke back to the girl—telling stories or jokes, and other days giving an account of how they spent their time, the new gossip in town, how different things would be with her. They lived through the grief like one wandering in a forest—taking all chances, clearing uncertain paths, clinging

to the hope that there was an opening somewhere, that somehow, if only they kept walking through the woods, they would arrive at it.

Now Esiha wanted Nkwa-daa to have the boy. She would keep Ben. This baby that looked nothing like her. She would have another child and she could start all over. Yes, but only this time, the child wasn't hers, Nkwa-daa thought.

“What about you? What do you get from this?” Nkwa-daa knew the answer to this, knew exactly what had driven her friend to come into this house in the first place; she had played servant and surrendered everything for this moment. But still, Nkwa-daa couldn't believe what they were about to do, what Esiha was promising her. There was no way they could get away with this. The diplomats were powerful. How could Esiha be this resolute?

“All the satisfaction knowing how they're going to live from this day.” She did not look away from Nkwa-daa as she said this. Her eyes were cold, her voice sharp.

IT DID NOT TAKE LONG for Esiha to pack all their belongings—which weren't much—into a bag and head out through the backdoor. As she walked, she thought about the house—its raised walls, all the useless antiques placed at every corner, their class of people and their expensive wines, their money, clothes, and shoes, their eyes, oh their eyes: unseeing, dismissing, looking down at you and pressing you to the ground without the need to even say a single word. She was leaving it all behind and taking away the best and undefiled part of them.

On the train she thought of nothing else but Helen so far away from her. Sitting somewhere in a strange land, reading a book or eating some new dish. Her daughter walking around campus, acting normal while her life was falling apart when no one was watching. For one did that forget a thing like this, even when they prayed for relief and wished it away with all their heart. The damaged past is a plague that attacks at all times. There are days it sneaks up on you like a thief and plunders your very being. Even when you have nothing left, especially when you have nothing left, it finds you and persists in its merciless pursuit of you.

When the train's brakes hissed and screeched, sending a whistle

into the air, Esiha straightened her back and turned to look out the window, as she had said she would. Her heart stopped for a moment, and it was as if the air had been sucked from her lungs. Nkwa-daa stood at the other side of the tracks. Her kinky hair had been piled in a high bun on top of her head and fastened with a scarf, highlighting her broad forehead and sharp cheeks bones, which were quivering and keeping her face from bursting with heavy emotion. The wind pressed her loose dress against her body, revealing her lean frame, her flat breasts. Standing there, she looked so malnourished, so fragile, so old.

It was not the earrings or the sweetness of the child. Nkwa-daa owed that woman nothing. It was a dread far greater than getting caught. To live life the way she had, racked by grief, utterly shattered from a separation that should never be, to lose her senses every once in a while, to keep walking away from every river that called her to throw herself into it—was a terror she would never wish on anyone, no, not on a mother. It was beyond any madness she could think of, and her hands could not dare kindle the same fire that even now continued to burn her.

And so there she stood, watching her friend frozen on her seat in the train, her hand raised to her chest in shock, her lips parted as if to say something but there was no sound. Nkwa-daa shook her head, the tears already free from their hold. She heard the train horn blare and when she looked up, Esiha had turned her face from her, her flaring eyes fixed right ahead. Her rigid neck carried its bounding pulse, her pursed lips, her small poise of what dignity she had left. The train started to move. Nkwa-daa looked on, every part of her body shook, threatening to collapse. Something took hold of her then, crippling her legs, but she did not give in. Not now. She will not look at me, she thought while praying against it. There was an ache spreading through her heart, a throb swelling inside her belly, pushing itself up her throat as the train rapidly faded from view. The friend of my heart will not turn for me, she thought.

And she was right. **■**