

DANCING

There is music blasting from Ayoola's room. She is listening to Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." It would be more appropriate to play Brymo or Lorde, something solemn or yearning, rather than the musical equivalent of a packet of M&M'S.

I want to have a shower, to rinse the smell of the hospital's disinfectant off my skin, but instead I open the door. She doesn't sense my presence—she has her back to me and is thrusting her hips from side to side, her bare feet stroking the white fur rug as she steps this way and that. Her movements are in no way rhythmical; they are the movements of someone who has no audience and no self-consciousness to shackle them. Days ago, we gave a man to the sea, but here she is, dancing.

I lean on the door frame and watch her, trying and failing to understand how her mind works. She remains as impenetrable to me as the elaborate "artwork" daubed across her walls. She used to have an artist friend, who painted the bold black strokes over the whitewash. It feels out of place in this dainty room with its white furniture and plush toys. He would have been better off painting an angel or a fairy. At the time, I could tell that he hoped his generous act and his artistic talents would secure him a place in her heart, or at the very least a place in her bed, but he was short and had teeth that were fighting for space in his mouth. So all it got him was a pat on the head and a can of Coke.

She starts to sing; her voice is off-key. I clear my throat. "Ayoola."

She turns to me, still dancing; her smile spreads. "How was work?"

"It was alright."

"Cool." She shakes her hips and bends her knees. "I called you."

"I was busy."

"Wanted to come and take you out for lunch."

"Thanks, but I normally eat lunch at work."

“Okay o.”

“Ayoola,” I begin again, gently.

“Hmmm?”

“Maybe I should take the knife.”

She slows her movements, until all she is doing is swaying side to side with the occasional swing of her arm. “What?”

“I said, maybe I should take the knife.”

“Why?”

“Well...you don’t need it.”

She considers my words. It takes her the time it takes paper to burn.

“No thanks. I think I’ll hold on to it.” She increases the tempo of her dance, whirling away from me. I decide to try a different approach. I pick up her iPod and turn the volume down. She faces me again and frowns. “What is it now?”

“It’s not a good idea to have it, you know, in case the authorities ever come to the house to search. You could just toss it in the lagoon and reduce the risk of getting caught.”

She crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. We stare at each other for a moment, then she sighs and drops her arms.

“The knife is important to me, Korede. It is all I have left of him.”

Perhaps if it were someone else at the receiving end of this show of sentimentality, her words would hold some weight. But she cannot fool me. It is a mystery how much feeling Ayoola is even capable of.

I wonder where she keeps the knife. I never come across it, except in those moments when I am looking down at the bleeding body before me, and sometimes I don’t even see it then. For some reason, I cannot imagine her resorting to stabbing if that particular knife were not in her hand; almost as if it were the knife and not her that was doing the killing. But then, is that so hard to believe? Who is to say that an object does not come with its own agenda? Or that the collective agenda of its previous owners does not direct its purpose still?

FATHER

Ayoola inherited the knife from him (and by “inherited” I mean she took it from his possessions before his body was cold in the ground). It made sense that she would take it—it was the thing he was most proud of.

He kept it sheathed and locked in a drawer, but he would bring it out whenever we had guests to show it off to. He would hold the nine-inch curved blade between his fingers, drawing the viewer’s attention to the black comma-like markings carved and printed in the pale bone hilt. The presentation usually came with a story.

Sometimes, the knife was a gift from a university colleague—Tom, given to him for saving Tom’s life during a boating accident. At other times, he had wrenched the knife from the hand of a soldier who had tried to kill him with it. Finally—and his personal favorite—the knife was in recognition of a deal he had made with a sheik. The deal was so successful that he was given the choice between the sheik’s daughter and the last knife made by a long-dead craftsman. The daughter had a lazy eye, so he took the knife.

These stories were the closest things to bedtime tales we had. And we enjoyed the moment when he would bring out the knife with a flourish, his guests instinctively shrinking back. He always laughed, encouraging them to examine the weapon. As they oohed and aahed, he nodded, reveling in their admiration. Inevitably, someone would ask the question he was waiting for—“Where did you get it?” —and he would look at the knife as though seeing it for the first time, rotating it until it caught the light, before he launched into whichever tale he thought best for his audience.

When the guests were gone he would polish the knife meticulously with a rag and a small bottle of rotor oil, cleaning away the memory of the hands that had touched it. I used to watch as he squeezed a few

drops of oil out, gently rubbing it along the blade with his finger in soft circular motions. This was the only time I ever witnessed tenderness from him. He took his time, rarely taking note of my presence. When he got up to rinse the oil from the blade, I would take my leave. It was by no means the end of the cleaning regimen, but it seemed best to be gone before it was over, in case his mood shifted during the process.

Once, when she thought he had gone out for the day, Ayoola entered his study and found his desk drawer unlocked. She took the knife out to look, smearing it with the chocolate she had just been eating. She was still in the room when he returned. He dragged her out by her hair, screaming. I turned up just in time to witness him fling her across the hallway.

I am not surprised she took the knife. If I had thought of it first, I would have taken a hammer to it.

KNIFE

Maybe she keeps it under her queen-sized bed or in her chest of drawers? Perhaps it is hidden in the pile of clothes stuffed into her walk-in closet? Her eyes follow mine as they roam the bedroom.

“You’re not thinking of sneaking in here and taking it, are you?”

“I don’t understand why you need it. It’s dangerous to have it in the house. Give it to me, and I’ll take care of it.”

She sighs and shakes her head.