

Part One



Effia

THE NIGHT EFFIA OTCHER was born into the musky heat of Fanteland, a fire raged through the woods just outside her father's compound. It moved quickly, tearing a path for days. It lived off the air; it slept in caves and hid in trees; it burned, up and through, unconcerned with what wreckage it left behind, until it reached an Asante village. There, it disappeared, becoming one with the night.

Effia's father, Cobbe Otcher, left his first wife, Baaba, with the new baby so that he might survey the damage to his yams, that most precious crop known far and wide to sustain families. Cobbe had lost seven yams, and he felt each loss as a blow to his own family. He knew then that the memory of the fire that burned then fled would haunt him, his children, and his children's children for as long as the line continued. When he came back into Baaba's hut to find Effia, the child of the night's fire, shrieking into the air, he looked at his wife and said, "We will never again speak of what happened today."

The villagers began to say that the baby was born of the fire, that this was the reason Baaba had no milk. Effia was nursed by Cobbe's second wife, who had just given birth to a son three months before. Effia would not latch on, and when she did her sharp gums would tear at the flesh around the woman's nipples until she became afraid to feed the baby. Because of this, Effia grew thinner, skin on small birdlike bones, with a large black hole of a mouth that expelled a hungry cry

which could be heard throughout the village, even on the days Baaba did her best to smother it, covering the baby's lips with the rough palm of her left hand.

"Love her," Cobbe commanded, as though love were as simple an act as lifting food up from an iron plate and past one's lips. At night, Baaba dreamed of leaving the baby in the dark forest so that the god Nyame could do with her as he pleased.

Effia grew older. The summer after her third birthday, Baaba had her first son. The boy's name was Fiifi, and he was so fat that sometimes, when Baaba wasn't looking, Effia would roll him along the ground like a ball. The first day that Baaba let Effia hold him, she accidentally dropped him. The baby bounced on his buttocks, landed on his stomach, and looked up at everyone in the room, confused as to whether or not he should cry. He decided against it, but Baaba, who had been stirring banku, lifted her stirring stick and beat Effia across her bare back. Each time the stick lifted off the girl's body, it would leave behind hot, sticky pieces of banku that burned into her flesh. By the time Baaba had finished, Effia was covered with sores, screaming and crying. From the floor, rolling this way and that on his belly, Fiifi looked at Effia with his saucer eyes but made no noise.

Cobbe came home to find his other wives attending to Effia's wounds and understood immediately what had happened. He and Baaba fought well into the night. Effia could hear them through the thin walls of the hut where she lay on the floor, drifting in and out of a feverish sleep. In her dream, Cobbe was a lion and Baaba was a tree. The lion plucked the tree from the ground where it stood and slammed it back down. The tree stretched its branches in protest, and the lion ripped them off, one by one. The tree, horizontal, began to cry red ants that traveled down the thin cracks between its bark. The ants pooled on the soft earth around the top of the tree trunk.

And so the cycle began. Baaba beat Effia. Cobbe beat Baaba. By the time Effia had reached age ten, she could recite a history of the scars on her body. The summer of 1754, when Baaba broke yams across her back. The spring of 1757, when Baaba bashed her left foot with a rock, breaking her big toe so that it now always pointed away from the

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other toes. For each scar on Effia's body, there was a companion scar on Baaba's, but that didn't stop mother from beating daughter, father from beating mother.

Matters were only made worse by Effia's blossoming beauty. At twelve, her breasts arrived, two lumps that sprung from her chest, as soft as mango flesh. The men of the village knew that first blood would soon follow, and they waited for the chance to ask Baaba and Cobbe for her hand. The gifts started. One man tapped palm wine better than anyone else in the village, but another's fishing nets were never empty. Cobbe's family feasted off Effia's burgeoning womanhood. Their bellies, their hands, were never empty.

In 1763, Adwoa Aidoo became the first girl of the village to be proposed to by one of the British soldiers. She was light-skinned and sharp-tongued. In the mornings, after she had bathed, she rubbed shea butter all over her body, underneath her breasts and between her legs. Effia didn't know her well, but she had seen her naked one day when Baaba sent her to carry palm oil to the girl's hut. Her skin was slick and shiny, her hair regal.

The first time the white man came, Adwoa's mother asked Effia's parents to show him around the village while Adwoa prepared herself for him.

"Can I come?" Effia asked, running after her parents as they walked. She heard Baaba's "no" in one ear and Cobbe's "yes" in the other. Her father's ear won, and soon, Effia was standing before the first white man she had ever seen.

"He is happy to meet you," the translator said, as the white man held his hand out to Effia. She didn't accept it. Instead, she hid behind her father's leg and watched him.

He wore a coat with shiny gold buttons down the middle that strained against his paunch. His face was red as though his neck were a stump on fire. He was fat all over and sweating huge droplets from his forehead and above his bare lips. Effia started to think of him as a rain cloud: sallow and wet and shapeless.

“Please, he would like to see the village,” the translator said, and they all began to walk.

They stopped first by Effia’s own compound. “This is where we live,” Effia told the white man, and he smiled at her dumbly, his green eyes hidden in fog.

He didn’t understand. Even after his translator spoke to him, he didn’t understand.

Cobbe held Effia’s hand as he and Baaba led the white man through the compound. “Here, in this village,” Cobbe said, “each wife has her own hut. This is the hut she shares with her children. When it is her husband’s night to be with her, he goes to her in her hut.”

The white man’s eyes grew clearer as the translation was given, and suddenly Effia realized that he was seeing through new eyes. The mud of her hut’s walls, the straw of the roof, he could finally see them.

They continued on through the village, showing the white man the town square, the small fishing boats formed from hollowed-out tree trunks that the men carried with them when they walked the few miles down to the coast. Effia forced herself to see things through new eyes, too. She smelled the sea-salt wind as it touched the hairs in her nose, felt the bark of a palm tree as sharp as a scratch, saw the deep, deep red of the clay that was all around them.

“Baaba,” Effia asked once the men had walked farther ahead of them, “why will Adwoa marry this man?”

“Because her mother says so.”

A few weeks later, the white man came back to pay respects to Adwoa’s mother, and Effia and all of the other villagers gathered around to see what he would offer. There was the bride price of fifteen pounds. There were goods he’d brought with him from the Castle, carried on the backs of Asantes. Cobbe made Effia stand behind him as they watched the servants come in with fabric, millet, gold, and iron.

When they walked back to their compound, Cobbe pulled Effia aside, letting his wives and other children walk in front of them.

“Do you understand what just happened?” he asked her. In the distance, Baaba slipped her hand into Fiiifi’s. Effia’s brother had just turned ten, but he could already climb up the trunk of a palm tree

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using nothing but his bare hands and feet for support.

“The white man came to take Adwoa away,” Effia said.

Her father nodded. “The white men live in the Cape Coast Castle. There, they trade goods with our people.”

“Like iron and millet?”

Her father put his hand on her shoulder and kissed the top of her forehead, but when he pulled away the look in his eyes was troubled and distant. “Yes, we get iron and millet, but we must give them things in return. That man came from Cape Coast to marry Adwoa, and there will be more like him who will come and take our daughters away. But you, my own, I have bigger plans for you than to live as a white man’s wife. You will marry a man of our village.”

Baaba turned around just then, and Effia caught her eyes. Baaba scowled. Effia looked at her father to see if he had noticed, but Cobbe did not say a word.

Effia knew who her choice for husband would be, and she dearly hoped her parents would choose the same man. Abeeku Badu was next in line to be the village chief. He was tall, with skin like the pit of an avocado and large hands with long, slender fingers that he waved around like lightning bolts every time he spoke. He had visited their compound four times in the last month, and later that week, he and Effia were to share a meal together.

Abeeku brought a goat. His servants carried yams and fish and palm wine. Baaba and the other wives stoked their fires and heated the oil. The air smelled rich.

That morning, Baaba had plaited Effia’s hair. Two long braids on either side of her center part. They made her look like a ram, strong, willful. Effia had oiled her naked body and put gold in her ears. She sat across from Abeeku as they ate, pleased as he stole appreciative glances.

“Were you at Adwoa’s ceremony?” Baaba asked once all of the men had been served and the women finally began to eat.

“Yes, I was there, but only briefly. It is a shame Adwoa will be leav-

ing the village. She would have made a good wife.”

“Will you work for the British when you become chief?” Effia asked. Cobbe and Baaba sent her sharp looks, and she lowered her head, but she lifted it to find Abeeku smiling.

“We work *with* the British, Effia, not for them. That is the meaning of trade. When I am chief, we will continue as we have, facilitating trade with the Asantes and the British.”

Effia nodded. She wasn’t exactly sure what this meant, but she could tell from her parents’ looks that it was best to keep her mouth shut. Abeeku Badu was the first man they had brought to meet her. Effia wanted desperately for him to want her, but she did not yet know what kind of man he was, what kind of woman he required. In her hut, Effia could ask her father and Fiifi anything she wanted. It was Baaba who practiced silence and preferred the same from Effia, Baaba who had slapped her for asking why she did not take her to be blessed as all the other mothers did for their daughters. It was only when Effia didn’t speak or question, when she made herself small, that she could feel Baaba’s love, or something like it. Maybe this was what Abeeku wanted too.

Abeeku finished eating. He shook hands with everyone in the family, and stopped by Effia’s mother. “You will let me know when she is ready,” he said.

Baaba clutched a hand to her chest and nodded soberly. Cobbe and the other men saw Abeeku off as the rest of the family waved.

That night, Baaba woke Effia up while she was sleeping on the floor of their hut. Effia felt the warmth of her mother’s breath against her ear as she spoke. “When your blood comes, Effia, you must hide it. You must tell me and no one else,” she said. “Do you understand?” She handed Effia palm fronds that she had turned into soft, rolled sheets. “Place these inside of you, and check them every day. When they turn red, you must tell me.”

Effia looked at the palm fronds, held in Baaba’s outstretched hands. She didn’t take them at first, but when she looked up again there was something like desperation in her mother’s eyes. And because the look had softened Baaba’s face somehow, and because Effia also knew

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desperation, that fruit of longing, she did as she was told. Every day, Effia checked for red, but the palm fronds came out greenish-white as always. In the spring, the chief of the village grew ill, and everyone watched Abeeku carefully to see if he was ready for the task. He married two women in those months, Arekua the Wise, and Millicent, the half-caste daughter of a Fante woman and a British soldier. The soldier had died from fever, leaving his wife and two children much wealth to do with as they pleased. Effia prayed for the day all of the villagers would call her Effia the Beauty, as Abeeku called her on the rare occasions when he was permitted to speak to her.

Millicent's mother had been given a new name by her white husband. She was a plump, fleshy woman with teeth that twinkled against the dark night of her skin. She had decided to move out of the Castle and into the village once her husband died. Because the white men could not leave money in their wills to their Fante wives and children, they left it to other soldiers and friends, and those friends paid the wives. Millicent's mother had been given enough money for a new start and a piece of land. She and Millicent would often come visit Effia and Baaba, for, as she said, they would soon be a part of the same family.

Millicent was the lightest-skinned woman Effia had ever seen. Her black hair reached down to the middle of her back and her eyes were tinged with green. She rarely smiled, and she spoke with a husky voice and a strange Fante accent.

"What was it like in the Castle?" Baaba asked Millicent's mother one day while the four women were sitting to a snack of groundnuts and bananas.

"It was fine, fine. They take care of you, oh, these men! It is like they have never been with a woman before. I don't know what their British wives were doing. I tell you, my husband looked at me like I was water and he was fire, and every night he had to be put out."

The women laughed. Millicent slipped Effia a smile, and Effia wanted to ask her what it was like with Abeeku, but she did not dare.

Baaba leaned in close to Millicent's mother, but still Effia could hear, "And they pay a good bride price, eh?"

"Enh, I tell you, my husband paid my mother ten pounds, and that

was fifteen years ago! To be sure, my sister, the money is good, but I for one am glad my daughter has married a Fante. Even if a soldier offered to pay twenty pounds, she would not get to be the wife of a chief. And what's worse, she would have to live in the Castle, far from me. No, no, it is better to marry a man of the village so that your daughters can stay close to you."

Baaba nodded and turned toward Effia, who quickly looked away.

That night, just two days after her fifteenth birthday, the blood came. It was not the powerful rush of the ocean waves that Effia had expected it to be, but rather a simple trickle, rain dripping, drop by drop, from the same spot of a hut's roof. She cleaned herself off and waited for her father to leave Baaba so that she could tell her.

"Baaba," she said, showing her the palm fronds painted red. "I have gotten my blood."

Baaba placed a hand over her lips. "Who else knows?"

"No one," Effia said.

"You will keep it that way. Do you understand? When anyone asks you if you have become a woman yet, you will answer no."

Effia nodded. She turned to leave, but a question was burning hot coals in the pit of her stomach. "Why?" she finally asked.

Baaba reached into Effia's mouth and pulled out her tongue, pinching the tip with her sharp fingernails. "Who are you that you think you can question me, eh? If you do not do as I say, I will make sure you never speak again." She released Effia's tongue, and for the rest of the night, Effia tasted her own blood.

The next week the old chief died. The funeral announcements went out to all of the surrounding villages. The proceedings would last a month and end with Abeeku's chief ceremony. The women of the village prepared food from sunrise to sunset; drums were made out of the finest wood, and the best singers were called upon to raise their voices. The funeral attendants began dancing on the fourth day of the rainy season, and they did not rest their feet until the ground had completely dried.

At the end of the first dry night Abeeku was crowned Omanhin,

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chief of the Fante village. He was dressed in rich fabrics, his two wives on either side of him. Effia and Baaba stood next to each other as they watched, and Cobbe paced the crowd. Every so often, Effia could hear him muttering that she, his daughter, the most beautiful woman in the village, should be up there too.

As the new chief, Abeeku wanted to do something big, something that would bring attention to their village and make them a force to be reckoned with. After only three days in office, he gathered up all of the men of the village to his compound. He fed them for two days straight, got them drunk on palm wine until their boisterous laughing and impassioned shouting could be heard from every hut.

“What will they do?” Effia asked.

“That does not concern you,” Baaba said.

In the two months since Effia had begun to bleed, Baaba had stopped beating her. Payment for her silence. Some days, when they were preparing meals for the men, or when Effia would bring back the water she had fetched and watch Baaba dip in with cupped hands, she would think they were finally behaving as mothers and daughters were supposed to behave. But then, other days, the long scowl would return to Baaba’s face, and Effia would see that her mother’s new quiet was only temporary, her rage a wild beast that had been tamed for the moment.

Cobbe came back from the meeting with a long machete. The handle was gold with carvings of letters that no one understood. He was so drunk that all of his wives and children stood around him in a circle, at a distance of two feet, while he shuffled about jabbing the sharp instrument this way and that. “We will make the village rich with blood!” he screamed. He lunged at Fiifi, who had wandered into the circle, and the boy, leaner and quicker than he had been in his days as a fat baby, swiveled his hips, missing the tip of the machete by only a few inches.

Fiifi had been the youngest one at the meeting. Everyone knew he would make a fine warrior. They could see it in the way he climbed the palm trees. In the way he wore his silence like a golden crown.

After her father left and Effia was certain that their mother had gone to sleep, she crawled over to Fiifi.

“Wake up,” she hissed, and he pushed her away. Even in half sleep he was stronger than she was. She fell backward but, with the grace of a cat, flipped back onto her feet. “Wake up,” she said again.

Fiifi’s eyes flashed open. “Don’t worry me, big sister,” he said.

“What will happen?” she asked.

“It’s the business of men,” Fiifi said.

“You are not yet a man,” Effia said.

“And you are not yet a woman,” Fiifi snapped back. “Otherwise you would have been there with Abeeku this very evening as his wife.”

Effia’s lips began to quiver. She turned to go back to her side of the hut, but Fiifi caught her arm. “We are helping the British and the Asantes with their trade.”

“Oh,” Effia said. It was the same story she had heard from her father and Abeeku just a few months before. “You mean we will give Asante gold and fabric to the white men?”

Fiifi clutched her tighter. “Don’t be stupid,” he said. “Abeeku has made an alliance with one of the most powerful Asante villages. We will help them sell their slaves to the British.”

And so, the white man came to their village. Fat or skinny, red or tanned. They came in uniform, with swords at their sides, their eyes looking sideways, always and ever cautious. They came to approve of the goods Abeeku had promised them.

In the days following the chief ceremony, Cobbe had grown nervous about the broken promise of Effia’s womanhood, nervous that Abeeku would forget her in favor of any of the other women in the village. He had always said that he wanted his daughter to be the first, most important wife, but now even third seemed like a distant hope.

Every day he would ask Baaba what was happening with Effia, and every day Baaba would reply that she was not yet ready. In desperation, he decided to allow his daughter to go over to Abeeku’s compound with Baaba once a week, so that the man could see her and remember how much he had once loved her face and figure.

Arekua the Wise, the first of Abeeku’s wives, greeted them as they came in one evening. “Please, Mama,” she said to Baaba, “We weren’t expecting you tonight. The white men are here.”

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“We can go,” Effia said, but Baaba clutched her arm.

“If you don’t mind, we would like to stay,” Baaba said. Arekua gave her a strange look. “My husband will be angry if we come back too early,” Baaba said, as if that were enough of an explanation. Effia knew that she was lying. Cobbe had not sent them there that night. It was Baaba who had heard that the white men would be there and insisted that they go pay respects. Arekua took pity and left to ask Abeeku if the two of them might stay.

“You will eat with the women, and if the men come in, you will not speak,” she said once she had returned. She led them deeper into the compound. Effia watched hut after hut pass by until they entered the one where the wives had gathered to eat. She sat next to Millicent, whose pregnant belly had begun to show, no bigger than a coconut, slung low. Arekua had prepared fish in palm oil stew, and they dug in until their fingers were stained orange.

Soon, a maidservant Effia had not noticed before came into the room. She was a tiny girl, only a child, whose eyes never lifted from the ground.

“Please, Mama,” she said to Arekua. “The white men would like to tour the compound. Chief Abeeku says you are to make sure you are presentable for them.”

“Go and fetch us water, quick,” Millicent said, and when the servant came back with a bucket full of water, they all washed their hands and lips. Effia tidied her hair, licking her palms and rubbing her fingers along the tight baby curls that lined her edges. When she finished, Baaba had her stand in between Millicent and Arekua, in front of the other women, and Effia tried her best to seem smaller so as not to draw attention to herself.

Before long the men came in. Abeeku looked as a chief should look, Effia thought, strong and powerful, like he could lift ten women above his head and toward the sun. Two white men came in behind him. There was one who Effia thought must be the chief of the white men because of the way the other glanced at him before he moved or spoke. This white chief wore the same clothes as the rest of them wore, but there were more shiny golden buttons running along his coat and

on the flaps above his shoulders. He seemed older than Abeeku, his dark brown hair flecked with gray, but he stood up straight, as a leader should stand.

“These are the women. My wives and children, their mothers and daughters,” Abeeku said. The smaller, more timid white man watched him carefully as he said this and then turned to the white chief and spoke their strange tongue. The white chief nodded and smiled at all of them, looking carefully at each woman and saying hello in his poor Fante.

When his “hello” reached Effia, she couldn’t help but giggle. The other women shushed her, and embarrassment like heat began to move into her cheeks.

“I’m still learning,” the white chief said, resting his eyes on Effia, his Fante an ugly sound in her ears. He held her gaze for what seemed like minutes, and Effia felt her skin grow even hotter as the look in his eyes turned into something more wanton. The dark brown circles of his pupils looked like large pots that toddlers could drown in, and he looked at Effia just like that, as though he wanted to keep her there, in his drowning eyes. Color quickly flooded into his cheeks. He turned to the other white man and spoke.

“No, she is not my wife,” Abeeku said after the man had translated for him, his voice not bothering to hide his annoyance. Effia hung her head, embarrassed that she had done something to cause Abeeku shame, embarrassed he could not call her wife. Embarrassed, too, that he had not called her by name: Effia the Beauty. She wanted desperately then to break her promise to Baaba and announce herself as the woman she was, but before she could speak, the men walked away, and her nerve faded as the white chief looked over his shoulder at her and smiled.

His name was James Collins, and he was the newly appointed governor of the Cape Coast Castle. Within a week, he had come back to the village to ask Baaba for Effia’s hand in marriage. Cobbe’s rage at the proposal filled every room like a hot steam.

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“She is all but promised to Abeeku!” he yelled at Baaba, when Baaba told him that she was considering the offer.

“Yes, but Abeeku cannot marry her until her blood comes, and we have been waiting years now. I tell you, husband, I think she was cursed in that fire, a demon who will never become a woman. Think about it. What creature is that beautiful but cannot be touched? All of the signs of womanhood are there, and yet, still, nothing. The white man will marry her regardless. He does not know what she is.”

Effia had heard the white man talking to her mother earlier that day. He would pay thirty pounds up front and twenty-five shillings a month in tradable goods to Baaba as bride gift. More than even Abeeku could offer, more than had been offered for any other Fante woman in this village or the next.

Effia could hear her father pacing all throughout the evening. She even awoke the next morning to that same sound, the steady rhythm of his feet on the hard clay earth.

“We must make Abeeku think it was his idea,” he finally said.

And so, the chief was called to their compound. He sat beside Cobbe as Baaba told him her theory, that the fire that had destroyed so much of their family’s worth had also destroyed the child.

“She has the body of a woman but something evil lurks in her spirit,” Baaba said, spitting on the ground for emphasis. “If you marry her she will never bear you children. If the white man marries her, he will think of this village fondly, and your trade will prosper from it.”

Abeeku rubbed his beard carefully as he thought about it. “Bring the Beauty to me,” he said finally. Cobbe’s second wife brought Effia into the room. She was trembling and her stomach pained her so much that she thought she might empty her bowels right there in front of everyone.

Abeeku stood up so that he was facing her. He ran his fingers along the full landscape of her face, the hills of her cheeks, the caves of her nostrils. “A more beautiful woman has never been born,” he said finally. He turned to Baaba. “But I see that you are right. If the white man wants her, he may have her. All the better for our business with them. All the better for the village.”

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Cobbe, big, strong man that he was, began to weep openly, but Baaba stood tall. She walked over to Effia after Abeeku had left and pulled out a black stone pendant that shimmered as though it had been coated in gold dust.

She slipped it into Effia's hands and then leaned into her until her lips were touching Effia's ear. "Take this with you when you go," Baaba said. "A piece of your mother."

And when Baaba finally pulled away, Effia could see something like relief dancing behind her smile.

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Effia had passed by the Cape Coast Castle only once, when she and Baaba ventured out of their village and into the city, but she had never been in it before the day of her wedding. There was a chapel on the ground level, and she and James Collins were married by a clergyman who had asked Effia to repeat words she didn't mean in a language she didn't understand. There was no dancing, no feasting, no bright colors, slicked hair, or old ladies with wrinkled and bare breasts throwing coins and waving handkerchiefs. Not even Effia's family had come, for after Baaba had convinced them all that the girl was a bad omen, no one wanted anything to do with her. The morning she left for the Castle, Cobbe had kissed the top of her head and waved her away, knowing that the premonition of the dissolution and destruction of the family lineage, the premonition that he had had the night of the fire, would begin here, with his daughter and the white man.

For his part, James had done all he could to make Effia comfortable. She could see how much he tried. He had gotten his interpreter to teach him even more words in Fante so that he could tell her how beautiful she was, how he would take care of her as best he could. He had called her what Abeeku called her, Effia the Beauty.

After they were married, James gave Effia a tour of the Castle. On the ground floor of the north wall there were apartments and warehouses. The center held the parade ground, soldiers' quarters, and guardroom. There was a stockyard, a pond, a hospital. A carpenter's

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shop, smithy, and kitchen. The Castle was itself a village. Effia walked around with James in complete awe, running her hands along the fine furniture made from wood the color of her father's skin, the silk hangings so smooth they felt like a kiss.

She breathed everything in, stopping at the gun platform that held huge black canons facing out toward the sea. She wanted to rest before James led her up his private stairwell, and so she laid her head down against one of those cannons for just a moment. Then she felt a breeze hit her feet from small holes in the ground.

"What's below?" she asked James, and the mangled Fante word that came back to her was "cargo."

Then, carried up with the breeze, came a faint crying sound. So faint, Effia thought she was imagining it until she lowered herself down, rested her ear against the grate. "James, are there people down there?" she asked.

Quickly, James came to her. He snatched her up from the ground and grabbed her shoulders, looking straight into her eyes. "Yes," he said evenly. It was one Fante word he had mastered.

Effia pulled away from him. She stared back into his piercing eyes. "But how can you keep them down there crying, enh?" she said. "You white people. My father warned me about your ways. Take me home. Take me home right now!"

She didn't realize she'd been screaming until she felt James's hand on her mouth, pushing her lips as though he could force the words back in. He held her like that for a long time, until she had calmed. She didn't know if he understood what she said, but she knew, then, just by the faint push of his fingers on her lips, that he was a man capable of hurting, that she should be glad to be on one side of his meanness and not another.

"You want to go home?" James asked. His Fante firm, though unclear. "Your home is no better."

Effia pulled his hand from her mouth and stared at him for a while longer. She remembered her mother's joy at seeing her leave, and knew that James was right. She couldn't go home again. She nodded, only barely.

HOMEGOING

He hurried her up the stairs. On the very top floor were James's quarters. From the window Effia could see straight out to the sea. Cargo ships like black specks of dust in the blue, wet eye of the Atlantic floated so far out that it was difficult to tell how far away from the Castle the ships actually were. Some were maybe three days away, others merely an hour.

Effia watched a ship just like this once she and James finally got to his room. A flickering of yellow light announced its presence on the water, and with that light, Effia could just barely make out the boat's silhouette, long and curved like the hollowed-out skin of coconut. She wanted to ask James what the ship was carrying and whether it was coming or going, but she had grown tired of trying to decipher his Fante.

James said something to her. He smiled when he spoke, a peace offering. The corners of his lips twitched almost imperceptibly. She shook her head, tried to tell him that she didn't understand, and finally he gestured to the bed in the lefthand corner of the room. She sat. Baaba had explained what would be expected of her on her wedding night before she had left for the Castle that morning, but it seemed no one had explained it to James. When he approached her, his hands were trembling, and she could see the sweat building on his forehead. She was the one who laid her body down. She was the one who lifted her skirt.

They went on like this for weeks until, eventually, the comfort of routine began to dull the ache that missing her family had left her with. Effia didn't know what it was about James that soothed her. Perhaps it was the way he always answered her questions, or the affection he showed her. Perhaps it was the fact that James had no other wives there to attend to and so every one of his nights belonged to her. She had cried the first time he brought her a gift. He had taken the black stone pendant that Baaba had given her and put it on a string so that Effia could wear it around her neck. Touching the stone always gave her great comfort.

Effia knew she was not supposed to care for James, and she kept hearing her father's words echoing through her mind, how he had

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wanted more for her than to be the Fante wife of a white man. She remembered, too, how close she had come to really *being* someone. Her whole life Baaba had beat her and made her feel small, and she had fought back with her beauty, a silent weapon, but a powerful one which had led her to the feet of a chief. But ultimately, her mother had won, cast her out, not only of the house but of the village entirely, so that now, the only other Fantes she saw regularly were the spouses of the other soldiers.

She'd heard the Englishmen call them "wenches," not wives. "Wife" was a word reserved for the white women across the Atlantic. "Wench" was something else entirely, a word the soldiers used to keep their hands clean so that they would not get in trouble with their god, a being who himself was made up of three but who only allowed men to marry one.

"What is she like?" Effia asked James one day. They had been trading languages. In the early mornings, before he went off to oversee the work of the Castle, James would teach her English, and at night, when they lay in bed, she taught him Fante. This night, he was tracing his finger along the curve of her collarbone, while she sang him a song that Baaba used to sing Fiifi at night as Effia lay in the corner, pretending to be asleep, pretending not to care that she was never included. Slowly, James had started to mean more to her than a husband was supposed to mean to a wife. The first word he had asked to learn was "love," and he said it every day.

"Her name is Anne," he said, moving his finger from Effia's collarbone to her lips. "I haven't seen her in so long. We were married ten years ago, but I've been away for so many of those years. I hardly know her at all."

Effia knew that James had two children in England as well. Emily and Jimmy. They were ages five and nine, conceived in the few days he was on leave and able to see his wife. Effia's father had twenty children. The old chief had had nearly a hundred. That a man could be happy with so few seemed unfathomable to her. She wondered what the children looked like. She wondered, too, what Anne wrote James in those letters of hers. They came at unpredictable intervals, four months here,

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one month there. James would read them at his desk at night while Effia pretended to be sleeping. She didn't know what the letters said, but every time James read one, he would come back to bed and lie as far away from her as possible.

Now, without the force of a letter to keep him away, James was resting his head on her left breast. When he spoke, his breath was hot, a wind that traveled the length of her stomach, down between her legs. "I want children with you," James said, and Effia cringed, worried that she would not be able to fulfill this want, worried too that because she had a bad mother, she herself would become one. She had already told James about Baaba's scheme, how she had forced Effia to keep her womanhood a secret so that she would seem unfit for the men of her village, but James had just laughed her sadness away. "All the better for me," he said.

And yet, Effia had started to believe that perhaps Baaba was right. She'd lost her virginity on the night of her wedding, but months had passed without a pregnancy. The curse may have been rooted in a lie, but perhaps it bore the fruit of truth. The old people of her village used to tell a story about a woman who was said to have been cursed. She lived under a palm tree on the northwest side, and no one had ever called her by her name. Her mother had died so that she might live, and on her tenth birthday, she had been carrying a pot of boiling hot oil from one hut to another. Her father was napping on the ground and she, thinking that she could step over him instead of going around, tripped, spilling the hot oil onto his face and disfiguring him for the rest of his life, which lasted only twenty-five more days. She was banished from the house, and she wandered the Gold Coast for years, until she returned at age seventeen, a strange, rare beauty. Thinking that perhaps she no longer courted death wherever she went, a boy who had known her when she was young offered to marry her as she was, destitute and without family. She conceived within a month, but when the baby came out it was half-caste. Blue-eyed and light-skinned, it died four days later. She left her husband's house the night of the child's death and went to live under the palm tree, punishing herself for the rest of her life.

Effia

Effia knew that the elderly of her village only told this story to warn the children to take care when around hot oil, but she wondered about the end of the story, the half-caste child. How this child, both white and black, was an evil powerful enough to force the woman out into the forest of palms.

When Adwoa had married the white soldier, and when Millicent and her mother had wandered into the village, Cobbe turned up his nose. He had always said that the joining of a man and a woman was also the joining of two families. Ancestors, whole histories, came with the act but so did sins and curses. The children were the embodiment of that unity, and they bore the brunt of it all. What sins did the white man carry with him? Baaba had said that Effia's curse was one of a failed womanhood, but it was Cobbe who had prophesied about a sullied lineage. Effia couldn't help but think that she was fighting against her own womb, fighting against the fire children.

"If you don't give that man children soon, he will take you right back," Adwoa said. She and Effia had not been friends when they lived in the village, but here, they saw each other as often as possible, each happy to be near someone who understood her, to hear the comforting sounds of her regional tongue. Adwoa had already had two children since leaving the village. Her husband, Todd Phillips, had only gotten fatter since Effia had last seen him, sweaty and red in Adwoa's old hut.

"I tell you, oh, Todd has kept me flat on my back since I arrived in this place. I am probably expecting right now as we speak."

Effia shuddered. "But his stomach is so big!" she said, and Adwoa laughed until she choked on the groundnuts she was eating.

"Eh, but the stomach is not the part you use to make the baby," she said. "I will give you some roots from the woods. You put them under the bed when you lie with him. Tonight, you must be like an animal when he comes into the room. A lioness. She mates with her lion and he thinks the moment is about him when it is really about her, *her* children, *her* posterity. Her trick is to make him think that he is king of the bush, but what does a king matter? Really, she is king and queen and everything in between. Tonight, we will make you live up to your title, Beauty."

And so Adwoa came back with roots. They were no ordinary roots. They were large and swirled, and when you pulled back one strand another would appear to take its place. Effia put them under the bed and they only seemed to multiply, spilling leg after leg out until it seemed the root would pick the bed up on its back and walk away, a strange new spider.

"Your husband should not be able to see any of it," Adwoa said, and they worked to push back the strands of root that insisted on peeking out, pushing and pulling until finally it was contained.

Then Adwoa helped Effia prepare for James. She plaited and smoothed her hair and spread oil on her skin, and red clay on the apples of her cheeks and the curve of her lips. Effia made sure that when James came in that night the room smelled earthy and lush, like something there could bear fruit.

"What's all this?" James asked. He was still in his uniform, and Effia could tell that he'd had a long day by the way his lapel drooped. She helped him pull off his coat and shirt and she pressed her body against his, as Adwoa had taught her. Before he could register his surprise, she grabbed his arms and pushed him to the bed. Not since their first night together had he been this timid, afraid of her unfamiliar body, the full-figured flesh, so different from how he had described his wife. Excited now, he pushed into her, and she squeezed her eyes as tightly as she could, her tongue circling her lips. He pushed harder, his breathing heavy and labored. She scratched his back, and he cried out. She bit his ear and pulled his hair. He pushed against her as though he were trying to move through her. And when she opened her eyes to look at him, she saw something like pain written across his face and the ugliness of the act, the sweat and blood and wetness they produced, became illuminated, and she knew that if she was an animal tonight, then he was too.

Once they had finished, Effia lay with her head on James's shoulder.

"What is that?" James asked, turning his head. They had moved the bed so that now three strands of the root were exposed.

"Nothing," Effia said.

Effia

James jumped up and peered underneath the bed. “What is it, Effia?” he asked again, his voice more forceful than she had ever heard it before.

“It’s nothing. A root that Adwoa gave me. For fertility.”

His lips formed a thin line. “Now, Effia, I don’t want any voodoo or black magic in this place. My men can’t hear that I let my wench place strange roots under the bed. It’s not Christian.”

Effia had heard him say this before. Christian. That was why they had been married in the chapel by the stern man in black who shook his head every time he looked at her. He’d spoken before, too, of the “voodoo” he thought all Africans participated in. She could not tell him the fables of Anansi the spider or stories that the old people from her village used to tell her, without him growing wary. Since moving to the Castle she’d discovered that only the white men talked of “black magic.” As though magic had a color. Effia had seen a traveling witch who carried a snake around her neck and shoulders. This woman had had a son. She’d sung lullabies to him at night and held his hands and kept him fed, same as anyone else. There was nothing dark about her.

The need to call this thing “good” and this thing “bad,” this thing “white” and this thing “black,” was an impulse that Effia did not understand. In her village, everything was everything. Everything bore the weight of everything else.

The next day Effia told Adwoa that James had seen the root.

“That is not good,” Adwoa said. “Did he call it evil?” Effia nodded, and Adwoa clicked her tongue three times. “Todd would have said the same thing. These men could not tell good from evil if they were Nyame himself. I don’t think it will work now, Effia. I’m sorry.” But Effia wasn’t sorry. If she was barren, so be it.

Soon, even James was too busy to worry about children. The Castle was expecting a visit from Dutch officers, and everything needed to run as smoothly as possible. James would wake up well before Effia to help the men with the imported store items and to see to the ships. Effia spent more and more time wandering around the villages surrounding the Castle, roaming the forests, and chatting with Adwoa.

The afternoon of the Dutch arrival, Effia met with Adwoa and some

of the other wenches just outside the Castle. They stopped beneath the shade of a patch of trees in order to eat yams with palm oil stew. There was Adwoa, then Sarah, the half-caste wench of Sam York. There was also the new wench, Eccoah. She was tall, and slender, and she walked as though her limbs were made of thin twigs, as though wind could snap and collapse her.

This day, Eccoah was lying in the slim shade of a palm tree. Effia had helped her coil her hair the day before, and in the sun, it looked like a million tiny snakes rising from her head.

“My husband cannot pronounce my name well. He wants to call me Emily,” Eccoah said.

“If he wants to call you Emily, let him call you Emily,” Adwoa said. Out of the four of them, she had been a wench the longest, and she always spoke her opinions loudly and freely. Everyone knew that her husband practically worshipped at her feet. “Better that than to listen to him butcher your mother tongue over and over.”

Sarah dug her elbows into the dust. “My father was a soldier too. When he died, Mama moved us back to our village. I came to marry Sam, but he did not have to worry about my name. Do you know he knew my father? They were soldiers together in the Castle when I was just a small girl.”

Effia shook her head. She was lying on her belly. She loved days like this one, where she could speak Fante as fast as she wanted. No one asking her to slow down, no one telling her to speak English.

“My husband comes up from the dungeons stinking like a dying animal,” Eccoah said softly.

They all looked away. No one ever mentioned the dungeons.

“He comes to me smelling like feces and rot and looking at me like he has seen a million ghosts, and he cannot tell if I am one of them or not. I tell him he must wash before he touches me and sometimes he does, but sometimes he pushes me to the floor and pushes into me like he has been possessed.”

Effia sat up and rested a hand against her stomach. James had received another letter from his wife the day after he'd found the root underneath their bed. They had not slept together since.

Effia

The wind picked up. The snakes in Eccoah's hair snapped this way and that, her twig arms lifted. "There are people down there, you know," she said. "There are women down there who look like us, and our husbands must learn to tell the difference."

They all fell silent. Eccoah leaned back against the tree, and Effia watched as a line of ants passed over a strand of her hair, the shape of it seeming, to them, to be just another part of the natural world.

After that first day in the Castle, James never spoke to Effia about the slaves they kept in the dungeon, but he spoke to her often about beasts. That was what the Asantes trafficked most here. Beasts. Monkeys and chimpanzees, even a few leopards. Birds like the king crowns and macaws that she and Fiifi used to try to catch when they were children, roaming the forests in search of the one odd bird, the bird that had feathers so beautiful it seemed to be set apart from the rest. They would spend hours on end looking for just one such bird, and most days they would find none.

She wondered what such a bird would be worth, because in the Castle all beasts were ascribed worths. She had seen James look at a king crown brought in by one of their Asante traders and declare that it was worth four pounds. What about the human beast? How much was he worth? Effia had known, of course, that there were people in the dungeons. People who spoke a different dialect than her, people who had been captured in tribal wars, even people who had been stolen, but she had never thought of where they went from there. She had never thought of what James must think every time he saw them. If he went into the dungeons and saw women who reminded him of her, who looked like her and smelled like her. If he came back to her haunted by what he saw.

Effia soon realized that she was pregnant. It was spring, and the mango trees outside the Castle had started to drop down mangoes. Her stomach jutted out, soft and fleshy, its own kind of fruit. James was so happy when she told him that he picked her up and danced her around their quarters. She slapped his back and told him to set her down, lest they

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shake the baby to pieces, and he had complied before bending and planting a kiss on her barely bulged stomach.

But their joy was soon tempered by news from her village. Cobbe had fallen ill. So ill that it was unclear whether or not he would still be alive by the time Effia made the journey back to see him.

She was not sure who had sent the letter from her village, for it was addressed to her husband and written in broken English. She had been gone two years, and she had not heard from anyone in her family since then. She knew that this was Baaba's doing, and, indeed, she was surprised that anyone had even thought to notify her of her father's illness.

The journey back to the village took about three days. James did not want her to make the trip alone in her condition, but he could not accompany her, so he sent along a house girl. When they arrived, everything in the village looked different. The colors of the treetop canopies seemed to have dulled, their vibrant browns and greens now muted. The sounds seemed different too. Everything that once rustled now stood still. Abeeku had made the village into one so prosperous that they would forever be known as one of the leading slave markets in all of the Gold Coast. He had no time to see Effia, but he sent along gifts of sweet palm wine and gold to meet her once she arrived at her father's compound.

Baaba stood in the entranceway. She looked to have aged a hundred years in the two that Effia had been gone. Her scowl was held in place by the hundreds of tiny wrinkles that pulled at her skin, and her nails had grown so long they curled like talons. She didn't speak a word, only led Effia to the room where her father lay dying.

No one knew what sickness had struck Cobbe. Apothecaries, witch doctors, even the Christian minister from the Castle had been called upon to give their opinions and pray over the man, and yet no measure of healing thoughts or medicines could spit him out of the lips of death.

Fifi stood beside him, wiping the sweat off his forehead carefully. Suddenly, Effia was crying and shaking. She reached out her hand to her father's and began to stroke the sallow skin there.

"He cannot speak," Fifi whispered, glancing quickly at her bulging

Effia

belly. "He is too weak."

She nodded and continued to cry.

Fiifi dropped the drenched cloth and took Effia's hand. "Big sister, I am the one who wrote you the letter. Mama did not want you to come, but I thought you should get to see our father before he enters Asamando."

Cobbe closed his eyes, and a low murmur escaped his lips so that Effia could see that the Land of the Spirits was indeed calling him.

"Thank you," she said to Fiifi, and he nodded.

He began walking out of the room, but before he reached the hut's door, he turned. "She is not your mother, you know. Baaba. Our father had you by a house girl who ran away into the fire the night you were born. She is the one who left you that stone you wear around your neck."

Fiifi stepped outside. And soon, Cobbe died, Effia still holding his hand. The villagers would say that Cobbe had been waiting for Effia to come home before he could die, but Effia knew that it was more complex than that. His unrest had kept him alive, and now that unrest belonged to Effia. It would feed her life and the life of her child.

After she had wiped her tears, Effia walked out of the compound and into the sun. Baaba sat on the stump of a felled tree, her shoulders squared as she held hands with Fiifi, who stood beside her, now as quiet as a field mouse. Effia wanted to say something to Baaba, to apologize perhaps for the burden her father had made Baaba carry all of those years, but before she could speak, Baaba hacked from her throat, spit on the ground before Effia's feet, and said, "You are nothing from nowhere. No mother and now no father." She looked at Effia's stomach and smiled. "What can grow from nothing?"