
Opening Extract from...

The Spider King's Daughter

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Chapter 1

Let me tell you a story about a game called Frustration. A dog used to follow me around when I was ten. One day, my father had his driver run this dog over in plain view of the house. I watched from my window. The black car purring on the grit, the driver's hands shaking as he prepared himself for a second hit and my father, sitting in the back seat, watching.

The car reversed. Again his tyres rolled over my dog and then he sent for me.

I was calm until I reached him, his head bowed in the black funeral suit that he wore throughout my childhood, his arms folded.

'I'm so sorry. I know how much that dog meant to you. I don't know how this idiot didn't see it.'

I knew he was lying. He knew I knew and in that moment, I felt an anger fill me, so strong it would surely have killed one of us if I let it loose. Somehow, it was clear to me that this would be the wrong thing to do. I strolled over to the dog and prodded it with my foot. Blood had streaked its fur and it was whining in pain. My father studied my face, searching for the smallest

hairline of a crack. I just stood there, looking at the animal.

Finally I said, 'Daddy, please can we run over my dog again?'

Both he and the driver were visibly shocked. My father nodded. The driver shook his head, his knuckle bones popping out of his dark skin.

'Do as she says.'

'Aim for the head,' I said, leaning against the car and taking a perverse pleasure in the driver's shrinking away. I turned and walked towards the house in that stroll that children have on the first day of their summer holidays. I called over my shoulder almost as an afterthought, 'Daddy, please make sure he hits the head this time.'

Abikẹ: 1

Mr Johnson: 0

Every morning I wake up and know exactly what I have to do.

1 Bathe.
2 Make sure Jọkẹ does the same.
3 Eat breakfast.
4 Make sure Jọkẹ does the same.
5 Ditto my mother.
6 Take Jọkẹ to school.
7 Leave school for work.
8 Make sure Jọkẹ never does the same.

It has been my morning routine for about two years. Lately,

it has become more difficult to make number 5 happen. She cries when I ask her to eat. I have his voice, Jọkẹ tells me, so my mother's salty tears drip on to the slice of bread meant for breakfast. This morning when we left, she was still in her nightie with her hair scattered from sleep. There was a time she would have hated anyone to see her looking like this. Now she is like a tree in the dry season. Every day a piece of her old self falls off.

'Bye, Mummy.'

'Have a good day at school, both of you.'

I have told her that I don't go any more but sometimes she forgets. Once I shut the door, Jọkẹ came to life.

'Did you know Mrs Alabi had a baby? The one that lives there,' she said, pointing at a peeling door. 'It was a boy and she is very happy because finally her in-laws will leave her alone.'

'Jọkẹ, I've told you to stop listening to gossip.'

'It's not gossip if Funmi told me.'

'Who is Funmi?'

'Don't you remember Mr Alabi's daughters, Funmi, Fẹmi and Funkẹ? They came to the house when we moved. You didn't like them. You said they wore too much make-up. It's only Fẹmi that wears too much. The others are OK.'

We were by the main road preparing to cross. A few feet away, there was a footbridge. We had not taken it since the first day I walked Jọkẹ to school and found my pocket empty on the other side. A red Toyota passed, then a Benz, then a small break. I gripped Jọkẹ's hand as we dashed across.

'Don't talk to those girls,' I said once our feet touched the pavement.

'Why not?'

'Because I said so and I've seen one of them smoking.'

'Which one?'

'Her name started with F.'

'All their names start with F.'

'I know.'

'Why won't you tell me? I won't tell because last time you told me something and told me not to tell—'

As she talked, I watched Wednesday, a regular hawker on this route, chase after a black jeep with his sales rack clutched to his chest, his muscular legs pounding down the road. The driver was teasing him. Slowing down and then speeding up, moving towards the highway with Wednesday's money. For a moment, it seemed like Wednesday would make it. The moment passed. Slowing down into a jog and then an amble, he continued walking in the direction of the vehicle, unwilling to believe that the owner of such a fancy car would steal. As the jeep sped on to the highway, naira notes, like crisp manna, floated to the ground.

Bastard.

'Are you listening to me?'

'Yes.'

'Then what's your answer?'

'To what?'

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A man in a yellowing starched shirt shoved past, nearly pushing us into the road.

'Look, Jọkẹ, I have to watch the pavement. This place can be dangerous.'

'Fine! Don't listen to me. I'm going to Obinna's party.'

'Who is Obinna?'

'I just told you!'

'Well, whoever Obinna is, you're not going to his party.'

When had she become old enough for parties? I had taken her to the market to buy her first bra and sometimes I woke to find red spots on her side of the bed. Still she was only fourteen, barely a teenager.

'Whatever. I don't like Obinna anyway. He has too many pimples.'

I took her hand again and was grateful when she did not pull away. Too soon we were at the gates of her school. She drifted forward, looking for her friends.

'Have fun at work.'

She said this every day though I had never explained to her what I did. Trader was the vague description I had given to my job and she had never probed.

'Have a good day at school. Make sure you wait for Miss Obong.' I had arranged for Jọkẹ to walk home with her English teacher who lived near our block.

'Do I have to? Everyone goes home by themselves. I look

like a baby.'

'You have to.'

'I'm stopping once I turn fifteen. Deọla!'

She shouted and was gone, running through the gates.

Chapter 2

I don't usually buy things sold on the road. A hawker I met today made me break my rule. Our eyes caught in traffic and that was all it took for this boy selling cheap ice cream to start approaching my car. I turned my head but he continued to advance. A gap opened in traffic. My driver crawled across the space.

'Drive on.'

'Don't you wan buy something?'

'Drive on.'

My driver sped up. The hawker gave chase. Traffic eased up and we found ourselves skimming along the road. In the side mirror, I could see a figure running after us. Another fifty metres and the figure was still there, although smaller.

'Slow down.'

'Eh.'

'I said slow down.'

This hawker was a fast runner. There were only ten metres between us.

'Speed up.'

'Eh.'

'Speed up!'

The car jerked ahead. Now the idiot was going too fast. I could see the hawker disappearing behind us.

'Slow down! Slow down!'

My driver pressed his foot on the brake bringing the car to a sharp standstill. I grabbed the armrest but the momentum pitched me to my knees.

'Aunty, sorry o.'

'Can't you follow the simplest instructions?'

As I struggled back into my seat, my elbow pressed a button and the window slid down.

'But—'

'But what? Don't you listen? I didn't tell you to stop.'

'I no understand.'

'Idiot! I said slow down.'

I turned to find the hawker beside my car. He was very good-looking. Dark and chiselled like something out of a magazine. I glanced at what he was selling. Sugary milk, frozen and wrapped in plastic for distribution to the masses.

'May I have one, please?'

'What flavour?'

'Vanilla.'

'One hundred naira.'

I stuck a two-hundred-naira note out of the window and waited. You never pay a hawker until you have what you're buying firmly in your hand. I was given my change first, then my ice cream.

'Thank you.'

When he left, traffic had descended again, leaving every vehicle pressed against another. Once I was certain he was gone, I flung the plastic thing out of the window.

'Tomorrow, take this way home.'

There was a time I wanted to be a lawyer, though of a different kind to my father. He was a bad speaker, rarely went to court and had a squint from reading the small print of contracts. It was his colleagues who inspired. Sometimes they visited our house still in their black gowns, coming straight from a case I had read about in that morning's newspaper.

Law was not to be. Instead, I am a hawker now, a mobile shop, an auto convenience store. I have grown used to the work. There are days when the rain is so heavy that the water rises to my knees. Other times, peoples' tyres squash my toes and often people call me and then refuse to buy. I have learnt to appreciate the few customers who treat me like a human being.

There was a girl I sold ice cream to today. She was sitting in the owner's corner of a jeep although she was too young to have bought the car. Her small body leant against the door leaving most of the back seat empty. While I was observing her, she looked up. Briefly our gazes held and before she could look down and dismiss me, I strode towards her with my sack of ice cream. When I was a few feet away, traffic mysteriously disappeared. The jeep zoomed ahead.

I gave chase. Half-heartedly at first but when I saw the car slow down, I picked up speed. Ten metres from the jeep, it sped up again. I kept running. The car was beginning to

diminish and so was my anger. Then the car slowed down. Something cracked inside me and all I wanted was to spit in the face of the girl in that back seat. Stringy, phlegmy, spit that would run down her shocked face. Once I was a few feet away, I knew saliva would be the last thing coming out of my mouth.

I heard shouting. It was coming from the jeep. I moved closer. From the back seat, the girl clearly said, 'I told you to slow down!' Suddenly everything was all right.

'May I have one, please?'

'What flavour?'

'Vanilla.'

'One hundred naira.'

I looked at her face while she was bringing out her wallet. Her skin was so smooth I wanted to slide my finger along it. She passed me a two-hundred-naira note with a smile that showed her perfect, white teeth. It would have been so easy to sprint off with her money. I gave her the change before placing the ice cream in her palm. Someone else would have to show her that the world was not filled with honest hawkers and unicorns.

'Thank you,' she said. Words I don't hear often. I nodded and walked back to the side of the road.

Chapter 3

'Funkẹ, which university are you going to?'

'My mum thinks I should choose Brown but I think it's too expensive. The tuition fees alone are forty thousand dollars. What about you, Chisom?'

'I think Duke. Their fees are even higher.' The whole class could hear the triumph in her voice.

'So, Abikẹ,' Funkẹ said, turning to me, 'have you decided where you're going?'

'Yale.'

The good thing about applying from Nigeria was that most of the process could be done by someone else. My father had paid a PhD holder to fill out my forms and sit the SATs for me. I had taken the exams under a different name and been pleased to see that my score would have been adequate.

'Wow. So, Abikẹ, how much are Yale's fees?'

'It doesn't matter, Chisom. The cost makes no difference to my dad.'

Forest House was filled with people like these girls: a little money, a lot of noise.

⁂

'Settle down, class, settle down.' Mr Akingbọla bustled in, his trousers gripping his buttocks. 'I said, settle down.'

Someone at the back shouted, 'Bum-master in the building.'

'Who was that?'

He turned to face us with his large nostrils flaring. 'I said, who was that?' He slapped the teacher's desk. 'Don't let meh hask hagain.'

When Mr Akingbọla was agitated, he spread his aitches freely. This always made the girls titter and the boys copy their fathers' deep laughs.

'Hexcuse meh, sir, have you travelled before?'

'How can he? He's too endowed for the plane seat.'

Again another wave of laughter swept through the room.

'Silence. Can you talk to your fathers like that?' He was fast descending into his trademark rant. We were spoilt, we were useless, we would never amount to much.

'Even if your parents are successful, you—'

Already, half the lesson was gone. A paper plane flew through the air and landed on his desk. This was getting ridiculous.

'Listen to Mr Akingbọla.'

I needed only one person to hear me.

'Listen to Abikẹ.'

'It's true.'

'Some respect, please.'

'Yeah.'

The class fell quiet.

'You will not succeed.' Mr Akingbọla's voice rang out, our sudden silence reproaching him. He shuffled his papers, arranging and re-arranging until he was calm.

'Today, we are going to continue our lesson on titration. When we want to find out the acid concentration of a substance this process can be used. What other processes can it be used for? Chike.'

Chike answered and Mr Akingbọla droned on, the questions that followed every statement always managing to miss me. I felt no need to display my knowledge. On previous occasions, when he had put me on the spot, the class was allowed to become uncontrollable. He learnt fast.

'Next week,' he said in closing, 'we are going to conduct a practical experiment on acid-base titration. Make sure you . . .'

I wonder if the hawker will be on the road today.

The Datsun stopped abruptly, narrowly missing my legs.

'Clear from there,' the driver said, banging on his horn.

'Are you mad? You no dey see road?'

'My friend, comot or I go jam you.'

'You dey craze? Oya jam me.'

'Comot.'

'I said jam me today.'

The man swerved into the next lane.

'Idiot.'

'Your mama,' I spread the five fingers of my right hand and spat.

Fire for fire: that is the only way to survive on the road.

When I first started I used to mind my manners. Yes please, no thank you, like my mother taught me, but those manners were for a boy who was meant to go to university and work in a law firm. She never told me what to do if a customer sprinted away with my money. She never gave me advice on how to handle the touts that came here sometimes asking for 'tax'. I had dealt with one that morning, a slim, feral-looking man.

'Trading levy,' he had said.

'I don pay your people already.'

'Nah lie.'

'I tell you I don pay. No harass me. They know me in this area.'

'Who are you?'

'You don't know me?'

He was clearly a newcomer unattached to the main body of touts or he would have called my bluff. Instead he spat and moved on to the next hawker.

'Trading levy.'

I looked round and saw that there were only a few of us left on the road. Traffic had eased which meant that it was time for our break. To save money, I rarely bought lunch outside but I liked to sit with the boys while they ate.

'Runner G,' someone said, announcing my presence to the group. They raised their heads from plates piled with rice and red stew, the cubes of meat almost invisible in the mounds. I slapped some palms and rubbed a few backs before joining the circle of hawkers.

The recharge card men are the undisputed leaders of our group. Their branded jerseys set them apart: yellow for MTN, lime green for GLO, red for VMOBILE. Next come those who sell the unusual: framed photographs of past presidents, pots, bed sheets, crockery. Then the food sellers of which there is a hierarchy: ice-cream sellers with bicycles, ice-cream sellers with sacks, foreign sweets, foreign fruits and right at the bottom of the list, anything local: boiled peanuts, scraped oranges, plantain chips. These local things were mostly for women, though sometimes a man who had fallen on hard times could find himself with a tray of groundnuts balanced on his head.

'So, Runner G, wetin you go chop?'

Already the owner of the *buka* was lumbering towards me, her large feet spreading dust with every step.

'Aunty, I no want chop today. Thank you.'

'Why now?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'You sure you no go eat?'

'I'm sure.'

She patted my head, depositing something slick on to my hair. 'Just manage this one.'

From a secret compartment in her bra, she drew out a clear plastic bag, unknotted it and slid a piece of fried meat into my hand.

'Thank you.'

She nodded before trundling off to another group.

'Abeg no sit here if you don finish eating.' Her voice was

harsh again, the Mama Put we all knew.

When I turned, the boys had smirks on their faces. 'Runner G, it be like say that woman want marry you.'

'Well, I have no marriage plans at the moment.'

'No be so I hear o,' one of the recharge card men said, his voice hoarse with mirth and cigarettes. 'This woman get serious plans for you.'

'Abi o? You are a young man. You still get bedroom power,' a fruit seller said, gesturing and leering at the same time.

I stood. 'I'd better be going. I have work.'

A chorus of jeering and cajoling rose from the group. 'Ah ah, oh boy no vex.'

'We just dey play.'

'You sef, allow now,' a fellow ice-cream seller said, pulling me back on to my chair. I let myself be dragged down. Not long after the conversation continued.

'You watch match on Saturday?'

'Yes o. Arsenal mess up.'

'No be so.'

'Nah so. Arsenal play rubbish. They no get good defence.'

'No talk nonsense. Arsenal get good defence. The referee just dey cheat.'

'Abeg leave football. You hear say they catch one senator with fifty million naira in his car?'

'That one nah old news.'

'No be old news. Nah last week it happen.'

'Another one don happen this week. Yesterday, they catch the man's wife with hundred million.'

'Just one family dey eat all that money?'

'Nah so I hear o.'

Chapter 4

What would Forest House people say if they saw us? Not that I care. In fact I wish one of them would drive past on a day I manage to keep the hawker for a few minutes after he has given me my change. I imagine their eyes leaving their business to follow us as he walks beside my jeep. The thought makes me smile.

I should be sensible and start taking another route but my magpie tendencies won't let me. The other day, as six ice-cream sellers flocked to my window, I was pleased to see that I could pick out my hawker easily. He stood almost a head taller than the rest and he had a shine the others lacked. He still refuses to ask for my name. If I were a hawker, I would kill to know a girl with a car like mine.

There is one thing I am uncomfortable with. He is friends with a beggar who is missing an arm and possibly a portion of his senses. This man tried to intimidate me by holding his oozing stump over my window and leering into the backseat. On one side I had my hawker; on the other was this creature. Of course I had to give him money. A whole five-hundred-naira

note and all he could say was thank you. Maybe I can befriend a hawker but surely not one who speaks to beggars.

I met Mr T about a year ago, when I was still hawking sweets. We were both chasing after the same car and surprisingly he was faster. A full five seconds before me, his pus-filled stump was hovering over the polished window of the Benz.

On one side, I held up my rack and my customer pointed at a pack of Mentos. On the other, Mr T brought his stump closer to the transparent glass and his benefactress shrank and scrabbled for her purse. Out of one window fluttered a crisp two-hundred-naira note. Out of the other sank a dirty fifty. We were both tired from our dash and we ended up sitting next to each other on the side of the road.

'Would you like some mints?'

I offered the pack by reflex, immediately wanting to withdraw when I remembered how little I had sold. My father taught us to always act like waiters, or hosts as he preferred to say. He was an effacing man, always scanning a room looking for someone to serve. Offer your seat, offer a drink, offer your mints. It was easy to play the host when you were rich. I hoped the beggar would decline.

He took the pack, unwound the foil and placed a mint in his mouth. His jaws crushed this first white disk, then the next and the next until all that was left was the wrapping.

'How much?'

'It's a gift.'

'There's no free thing in Lagos. How much?'

'It's OK.'

'If that is so then follow me.'

I watched him walk away. The distance between us grew as pride and other things filled my head. You know you've fallen when you are a hawker that is friends with beggars.

The space widened.

If your old friends could see you.

It was about ten metres now.

If only he wasn't dead.

At this sickening note of self-pity, I propelled myself forward.

Under a nearby bridge was a pile of cardboard strips and scrawled above this heap was a sign that said: SIT HERE AND CARRY MY CURSE. Mr T took me there and asked that I sit. I bent my knees in compliance, read the message and promptly stood.

'I brought you here to pay you with something more precious than naira. Many have wanted to know what I am about to tell you. One man from America even asked for an interview. He came with a tape recorder and notebook. I refused him. You will be the first person to hear my story in the past twenty years.'

I knew that when you had fallen, the memories that charted your decline became invaluable. Yet, I did not want the story. It was too important to be exchanged for a pack of mints but it was worthless to me. Before I could say no, he had begun.

⁂

'I haven't always lived like this and I used to be quite handsome. Or so my wife told me. You smile. Because you think I was incapable of being a husband?'

His stump waved my apology away.

'You are right, perhaps I was. She was never the same after I married her. I offered all the things eighties Nigeria promised, a good job, servants, two cars. We both failed and I ended up in Oilet Grand Insurance. Do you know it?'

I shook my head.

'It was a horrible place. All day I read claims that I knew I would deny. Seven years into what I thought would be the rest of my life, I was fired. No pension. No reference. After that, things started disappearing. First my wife, then the car, then the gateman, then finally the house. Still, when my daughter and I moved here, I was hopeful.'

The cardboard pile did not look big enough for two people. Perhaps the daughter had moved out and built her own cardboard house.

'She started to lose weight a few weeks after we moved here. Her skin became stretched like the pastry of a meat pie, a meatless meat pie. With our money almost gone, I had two options: begging or armed robbery.'

'You could have become a hawker.'

'It was not so easy in those days. The soldiers could come at any time and lock you up for illegal trading. I used to leave her here and work on a nearby street. I soon discovered that poverty was not enough to be successful.

'"You are lucky to have been born like that," I said one day to a beggar who had no left leg. He smiled with teeth that were bloody from chewing kola. "Oh, this one no be luck," he said patting his stump. "I still dey pay for it." God forbid! God forbid bad thing. Then her skin stretched tighter and her belly began to protrude. I went back. He gave me an address. I went there and—'

'Were you awake?'

'Of course I wasn't awake! What type of stupid question is that? You think it hurt less because I was unconscious?'

'Calm down, please.'

'I am calm!' He banged the cardboard, his head jerking up and down. I stood, eager to distance myself from this beggar who was attracting stares. 'Come back. I am calm now. You can come back. She died two weeks later because I was too foolish to remember that you can't beg while your stump is healing, you can't think for the pain, you can't feed your two-year-old daughter.'

I stood there unable to find words that would blend sympathy into my suspicions. Where were his parents? His relatives? His friends? And how had he slid into poverty so easily? Even in Lagos, the white collar was not so loose that one could be an insurance man on Monday and a beggar by Friday.

In our case, there had been clear signs. The domestic staff were the first to go. Then our garage emptied, then the flatscreen TV was sold, leaving a square patch lighter than the rest of the wall. Yet, it was only when the landlord came to

our house with policemen that I realised that this phase of our lives was not temporary.

Still we didn't become beggars after we left Maryland. No relatives came to our rescue – my mother is estranged from her family and my father's relatives are too poor – but his friends gave generously in the months following his death. Even if there were no family members, did this beggar have no friends that could have tided him over till he found another job? And that he would have found another job, if he had really worked in an insurance company, was almost certain.

'The prophet promised that one day the opportunity for revenge would arise,' he said.

'Pardon?'

'So what is your name?'

'They call me Runner G on the road. What is yours?'

'They used to call me Mr T in my office.'