

Just Dance

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The moment it happened, Hajiya Maryam just knew she would get the blame for her son's revelation at this society wedding. Like she had been blamed for everything under the sun that went wrong since she married and claimed Kazzaura's pride and joy as her very own husband. It seemed like she took something from legions of Kazzaura women that they could never get back. She was her husband's uwargida.

They could keep whispering and sneering. It was nothing new. For three decades she had always known that being his wife didn't stop these so-called society women from pressuring their brother to marry a northern woman - one of their own - only to diminish her, and it had not worked. Her stature kept rising, and they remained obsessed with her joy.

These women had no clue what she was made of. Before she came to Kazzaura, back when she was still known as Miriam Ugwunze - one of the most sought-after Igbo babes in her class at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka - she'd been a pageant girl who became known as the brainy beauty. She was tall, statuesque really. They called her the 'Queen of Figures' or more often 'Brainy Lioness'. Academics was her thing and campus beauty contests were something she did because her friends were doing it. It was never that serious for her. She actually liked school and was not overly concerned with landing a husband like her friends. She had career ambitions and wanted to be a chief financial officer of a Top 100 company or run a commercial bank.

It was in a debate club event that she met the man she would marry, a fellow student few took note of. He was tall, like she was, and was going to be a quantity surveyor. A Hausa guy from up north. Tall and handsome, she thought when they first met, and she

dubbed him 'TH'. He called her his gap-toothed princess. Their relationship started off as a campus fling. They just talked. About everything. And slowly they fell for each other. It wasn't that love at first sight thing. It was a steady burn that eventually consumed them. She didn't know then that it would be a love of a lifetime. Miriam just thought he was funny. TH was a year ahead of her and graduated with distinction. First class honours. His family came down: parents, some sisters, assorted family members. Later on, he told her his father had even more children and that the woman he called mama was just one of his father's wives. His father was down to earth, and it turned out was quite the successful man up north. She had never heard of his family before. But they oozed wealth and closeness.

Studying in Nsukka and this relationship with him had been a great escape from her own dysfunctional family situation. She wondered what she was going to do without TH when he left. Miriam told herself that her only path was to work on graduating with distinction and then leaving the family in the east to seek her greener pastures.

But TH wasn't done with her. For the mandatory youth service year, he had managed to get himself posted back to the east. When he graduated, she assumed it was going to be the end of their relationship, but he worked out a posting with the National Youth Service Corps, to end up in Asaba, just over the Niger Bridge and just a few minutes from her own hometown of Onitsha-Oba. He found a place to stay in an enclave of northerners called 'Ogbe Hausa' and was happy there. TH spoke Hausa with them but perfected his Igbo with the indigenes. When she wasn't on campus, she stayed with him there in the tiny room he had rented for the year. Every so often they would drive down to the outskirts of Enugu to picnic under the canopy of tall trees at the pine forests. They would always hike to the nearby limestone cave to swim under the waterfalls. It was easy dating. Being with him was stress-free.

She loved her hometown of Onitsha-Oba, but really couldn't wait to get away from it. Her father was a trader and made a good life for his offspring in his compound. But he had several wives and concubines and as the children got older, tensions arose. Papa was exceptional in many ways but also a total mess in other ways. He expected excellence and seemed to believe like most men in his generation that his fatherly duties ended with paying school fees and that housework was the job of the women. He worked hard. He provided for the home and he married more women just because he could. Miriam's mother had died long ago and the beautiful stepmother who had raised her, managed to

instill in Miriam the confidence that she could do anything. But more importantly, that she could do better in picking a husband. “Nne, be ready to be able to stand on your own two feet,” she would say.

Growing up, those of her father’s children that he had not brought home (the offspring of his concubines) wanted to be inside so badly that it was warped to Miriam the extent that they would go to sully her father’s good name or use it when it suited their purposes. They did not know that those inside barely got time with him. Papa was so proud to see Miriam graduate with distinction from the university. His job was done. She was posted to southern Nigeria, to a storied university town, to do her own national service. Once she settled in Ibadan, TH who was now living in Lagos came to see her, and she knew she would be spending the rest of her life with him.

Whenever he proposed, she’d say yes.

One weekend TH took her home to Kazzaura to see proper Arewa people, *the core north* as he put it, and didn’t seem to give a whit of attention to what anyone said about the improbability of their union. Miriam felt it in her bones that a proposal would be coming soon. He had gotten along so well with her father when he attended her own graduation and they spoke many times while she was busy during graduation weekend.

But before Miriam’s National Youth Service year was up, Papa fell ill. Even in a house full of people, no one seemed to notice he had difficulty breathing until it was too late. He died enroute to the hospital. His funeral and interment in his compound were heartbreaking. Children and relatives came out of the woodwork including of course those he had never wanted around him. There was a rush to grab all his other properties and the men laid claim and pushed their sisters aside to take whatever they could. Papa’s wishes and his previously stated desires were discarded. He left no will. All these strangers came to reap where they had not sown. It was messy. Miriam concluded that polygamy must be the worst thing in the world.

TH proposed after the funeral. Miriam hightailed it out of there to Ibadan and TH went back to the east and spoke to her uncles and relatives with wine, beer, kola nuts and some goats, taking along his younger relatives and friends. He knew not to show up without an entourage. He paid whatever her uncles demanded for the dowry. Miriam was absent. She had secured a position in Lagos at First Bank and the new job was her excuse for not making the trip back for her own traditional engagement. She reasoned

that she wasn't getting married for her family, but TH insisted on doing what any Igbo man would do. She didn't care that they were skeptical of him being a northerner. Miriam's family was one of those families in Onitsha-Oba that still had lingering scars from the civil war when northern soldiers had slaughtered Igbo people. But even though they never talked much in public about the after-effects of the war, she knew deep down that in her household marrying a northerner would not exactly be embraced. It was viewed with so much skepticism and unspoken fear. It was fine for TH to be a friend, to show up at graduation, even to be a fling, but marriage? Mba! No, that was not expected.

Miriam listened, smiled, and thanked everyone of assorted relatives and townsfolk who called her in Lagos with their concerns. But her mind was made up. Now she acknowledged to herself that there was nothing tying her to that place after the way they had behaved when her father died. After their appalling quest for his assets, she didn't believe they really cared about her. Or who she married. It was all for show. She told her uncles that TH was the one for her and thanked them for their blessings. Blessings she could care less about.

TH was ever charming and his entourage of friends and cousins all vouched for him. "I love Miriam. I will do anything for her," TH told her family members at the uncle's home. He did his duty according to the local tradition. Having satisfied them, he returned to Lagos where they tied the knot in a civil ceremony at Lagos City Hall but then had a religious ceremony at Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church in Yaba, as they had promised the family patriarch. Their friends and the groom's parents came down for that ceremony. Miriam's close cousin, Valentine, walked her down the aisle. It was a small wedding but filled with love and only those they cared about showed up. But they had done their duty.

The couple flew to Miami, Florida for their honeymoon. All had been arranged by TH. Sometime after their native law and custom ceremony, he had asked for her passport so he could arrange for benefits for her at his company and begin her change of name. She had been so caught up in her church wedding and believed their honeymoon would be something that would be small. A weekend in a Lagos beach resort perhaps. But after their wedding reception and everyone had said their goodbyes, Miriam found out her girlfriends had packed her bags for her, and they waved her and TH off. Only for a driver to take them straight to the airport to catch a flight to America. This marriage

and this husband were full of surprises.

For a time, they made their home in Lagos while visiting Kazzaura as often as they could. TH's father and his wives were hospitable, but Miriam felt his sisters and the younger crowd were weird and standoffish. Her husband's mother had died young just like her own mother, so his stepmothers and their elder children had a deep bond with him. She loved her husband, and he loved her deeply. She soon converted to Islam and left the 'Alleluia-Amen' life behind. They did the Hajj to Mecca as a couple and she returned to Nigeria from Saudi Arabia as Hajiya. Miriam Ugwunze was now Hajiya Maryam.

But she still sang the church songs she had grown up with, especially her father's favorite Igbo praise songs like the great Onyeka Onwenu's 'Alleluya' which TH joined her in singing and dancing every time she cooked. She embraced her new life with her husband and his snobbish half-sisters, cousins, and friends. All of them to him were his sisters, he was the centre of their world. His other siblings, the younger children of his father, were okay although they didn't visit often. "Don't worry about them. They'll come around. They've had me their whole lives and now they have to share." It didn't matter as they didn't live near them and she only had to deal with them when they popped into Lagos or when she went to Kazzaura for the holidays.

Then TH got admitted into a graduate program at the London School of Economics. And they left for Britain. Those two years abroad were blissful. While he worked on his masters' degree, she took short term accounting courses and prepped to become a certified chartered accountant. But they made time for each other and TH took her a few times to Paris for long weekends. They would walk all day and then in the evening, they would hunt for and devour Ivorian food that TH had turned her onto. Petit Bassam in the eighteenth arrondissement became their favorite restaurant and Maryam developed a love for Ivorian avocado salads. Before they would leave, TH would splurge and take her out to the Paris Ritz for afternoon tea and pastries and she would down several cocktails before he dragged her off to bed.

When they returned to Lagos, they would sometimes schedule a weekend break and head to Abidjan. Those weekends in France had spurred a new love: all things Ivorian. And now, Abidjan was a short flight from Lagos so an easy getaway to recharge their batteries. They would dance all weekend at the city's numerous nightspots particularly

the lakeside boites in Cocody and Blockhauss, and both fell in love with the local musical quartet Magic System. Their hit 'Premier Gaou' was a favourite. Often TH would break into the first part of the chorus: *Et on dit premier gaou n'est pas gaou oh* and Maryam would boisterously finish: *C'est deuxième gaou qui est niata oh (ah)*.

Sometimes Maryam wondered aloud if she could have been a singer. By now she had moved on to United Bank for Africa. Soon TH started to get more and more work in the nation's capital. But he had his eyes on Kazzaura, so they both decided it was time to spend more time there. Their land was plentiful and the house they built was large, but she needed to stop treating it as a country home for holidays with the family but as their primary home. Especially if TH decided to run for office. TH seemed to think more and more that he could do it. And he was laying the groundwork for politics but for now he was making a lot of money running his own business. And funding politicians who aligned with the causes he supported. He was becoming the power and the muscle behind many a governor. So, she did as he wished. Kazzaura became their base. Maryam wore the gyale veils and sometimes even put on the hijab, but she largely ignored her husband's sneering sisters and although the younger ones came around, they just politely dealt with each other. She tried hard to really assimilate. Covering up was not her thing but even when it made her uncomfortable, she put on the veils. Maryam knew that she had to respect her husband's culture and his crowd, but she wished they had bothered to try just a little bit to make her feel welcome and a part of them. But they always seemed to find ways to remind her that she was an outsider. Slowly she stopped trying to fit in. Maryam removed her husband's flock of Ladoum rams and cows from their home to another piece of land he owned that was already farmland, and she got landscapers to turn the grounds into sculptured gardens. TH didn't have a problem with that but his sisters shook their heads and commented that she didn't understand that a man's wealth was to be on display with his expensive animals in the compound.

Yet her life was good. She knew that she didn't have to get the locals to be completely happy there. Especially since a few of her in-laws were an exception and were warm. She made it work for her. Maryam made her home a very comfortable one, splurging on the interiors, and she entertained her friends from Lagos for long weekends. She flew in the sophisticated crowd she wanted. She had uniformed housekeepers and wanted her home to feel as comfortable as any deluxe resort. She had a giant king size bed with a huge canopy installed in their bedroom and had thick carpets and exquisite lamps installed all around. Their bedroom was their sanctuary within the already very comfortable house.

All her sheets and fluffy towels she got from Harrods whenever she was in London. She loved the store so much that she got all the household items from there down to the British made orange and bergamot soaps and lotions she put in all the guest rooms. She served her guests exquisite tea and shortbread in fancy China sets. And once a week pampered her husband with a huge bubble bath and rose scented candles. They soaked while sipping hibiscus juice in their large marble bathroom. During his graduate school days when they couldn't afford much, bubble baths were their Sunday indulgence. Their cheap joy they called it. Now she made it a routine in her new home. The red soil in Kazzaura reminded her of Onitsha-Oba so she took to planting hibiscus plants so the bright red flowers would further remind her of her childhood home. She planted jacaranda and frangipani trees and tended to her gardens knowing that she was creating a plant paradise in their compound. She planted lots of polyalthia, the weeping trees on the edge of their property, and as those trees grew they created a natural wall so few could see inside the property from the road outside. Her flower beds bloomed each year and she kept adding newer, more exotic plants. Maryam constructed a fishpond, and it took some time before she learned the right kind of fish that would thrive in it but once she did, it was a serene surprise to her guests.

Soon she had a grand boulevard of polyalthia trees lining the driveway from the gate to her front door. The trees looked like soldiers standing at attention since the branches grew downwards towards the roots. Maryam made use of all seven acres on the property and turned it into their very own promised land. It felt like it was an escape from the harsh world outside. And then she added some ostriches which roamed around the grounds in pairs. She found them more pleasing than the cows and sheep that her husband's sisters preferred. In dry Kazzaura, their home was a lush, green oasis and she spared no expense in landscaping and watering her gardens. Her gardeners always seemed to be working on something. She and TH had an Olympic size swimming pool

with green chaise lounges built into the sides of the pool put in after Fatima was born. The green cushions and white sun umbrellas with large bamboo stems she acquired were in sync with the lawns and white flowers in her pool area. When she descended the blue tiled steps to do her morning laps, she was reminded of their Miami honeymoon. Knowing how much she loved tennis; TH had suggested they build a tennis court too. She had a sunken court built with a hard surface painted bright green to simulate the grass courts at Wimbledon. She had modern lighting systems built in and around the court so she could play after dark. The gadgets were skillfully hidden behind plants or hedges, so the impression was that one was playing tennis in an English garden. Maryam had many friends come play with her at home. She didn't stop going to the country club, but she hosted more friends at home now. She made sure the wide seven-foot hedges around the tennis court, and those by the pool area were always immaculately clipped. And she planted more and more trees

Maryam hadn't gotten pregnant yet even though the marriage was several years in and the Sneering Ones started murmuring loudly about homes needing to be filled with children no matter how lavish they were. And when they began asking questions about when, the couple brushed them off. TH and Maryam would decide when they wanted to expand their family. For the last few years, he had been so focused on his quantity surveying business and securing contracts. But now they were both doing well, and Maryam had been tapped to open and head up the American accounting giant Price Waterhouse Cooper's northern Nigeria office. It was a big opportunity for her to shine professionally, and she did. Soon enough she stopped taking the contraception pills. Then they got pregnant with a son Abba. Two years later, a daughter, Fatima came. Both times Maryam went to London to give birth. Now their family was complete. It was them four against the world. They spoke to their children in Hausa, Igbo and then English. The kids began learning Arabic and French from tutors at a young age. That's when the resentment started to become palpable. TH was getting more successful, and his sisters and her other relatives took to giving Maryam names behind her back. Sometimes it was 'Abroad Wife' because of the trips to America for business meetings and their holidays. Other times it was 'Degree Wife' because she had been so proud of her education and never did anything without thinking it through or asking questions. Or reminding them that she too graduated with distinction, like their brother. Maryam knew what pained them the most was her unwillingness to completely let go of her Igbo heritage and the fact that she and her husband also spoke to the kids in Igbo was

grating to them.

Maryam sometimes needled them when they visited, by speaking Igbo to her husband. His fluency and his reflexive responses to her seemed to only add to their aggravation. She ignored their cattiness. She and her husband had an unshakeable bond. The relatives mounted the pressure for him to take another wife. But she wasn't worried because TH didn't have a roving eye. He was too busy making a fortune. And at home, he was as tactile and as romantic as he was years ago when they were in the university. When they were alone, he would play some Michael Jackson and insist they dance because it was the weekend. 'Pretty Young Thing' was his favorite song from the King of Pop. Or he would revert to 'Premier Gaou'. He kept dancing with her and telling her how amazing she was. Maryam was pretty. She knew it. But she wasn't a spring chicken anymore.

And then just like that, one day he delivered the horror of horrors. He had succumbed to the pressure. TH told her that he was taking a second wife. She felt like her entire world had collapsed when he sat her down in their bedroom and told her that his engagement to a Kazzaura noblewoman was imminent. Everything slowed down around her. She heard the wind blowing and the tree leaves rustling outside their bedroom. She could even hear the birds chirping loudly in her aviary which was at the other end of their compound. She heard the words. She knew what they meant, but she still couldn't comprehend. She was totally confused. It wasn't April Fool's Day. He didn't seem to be joking. Her husband was cool and calm as per usual but deadly serious.

And then she lost it. "What the hell. I moved here for you. I even converted for you. I have given you children," she wailed.

"All on your schedule," he retorted.

She was stunned. She was angry.

Her husband TH remained calm. "It is just something I need to do. And it doesn't mean I don't love you. You know that. I just need to marry again." As if it would make things any better, he added: "It will be a very lowkey thing."

He didn't seem out of love with her. Instead, he doted on her with more intensity after that night. They made love even more. Their bodies yearning for each other like they had been at university. But here they were. TH assuring Maryam that nothing would

change. She went from being confused and angry at the man who had moved mountains years ago so they could be together, to just accepting her fate. But she was bewildered. TH was the man who never cared what others said. The man who marched to the beat of his own drum. Now he was being pushed to marry a local woman, no doubt from a reputable family. And he was saying he ‘had’ to do it.

It didn’t make sense to her. And yet no one around her thought it was a big deal. Only her Lagos friends sympathised but even then, only mildly. You can’t be married to a rich Kazaorra man, an Alhaji, and be his only wife, they told her. Still, she wondered: Was this because of his sisters? Or due to his political ambitions? He wanted to be president one day or at least control one. Perhaps a northern wife would help? Maryam pondered all possibilities, but none gave her the answers or comfort. Her husband’s second wedding was quick, and TH didn’t make a big fuss about it as he said. But there was a nice dinner involved. The in-laws and their friends welcomed the new bride with open arms and treated her like she was his ‘uwargida’ - his first and only wife. The new wife was polite and very deferential to Maryam, referring to her simply as Hajiya, but that was it. In Maryam’s eyes she was just a bitch. There was no kinship. The second wife stopped working the moment she got pregnant.

They couldn’t have been more different although Maryam had to admit to herself that her husband’s second wife wasn’t a bad person, and she was easy on the eyes. But she had no real career ambition. Her ambition was to snag a good husband and her goal had been achieved. The woman had three children in quick succession. She had been working in an Abuja law firm before the wedding and didn’t bother resuming after the wedding. TH never let Maryam feel like she wasn’t important, but he tried hard to get her to stop totally ignoring his sisters and local friends after his second marriage. Maryam no longer masked her disdain for them. Her attitude had gone from politely accommodating to a simply ‘who cares?’ stance. To her, her sisters-in-law were the enemy. And so were any of their friends who attended and supported the second marriage. She was openly hostile when they visited. She never offered them tea or refreshments and then Maryam put her foot down and relegated their visits to the parts of the property where the other wife was. She had the housekeepers and security direct all relatives to the outdoors receiving areas and not inside the main house.

“It’s not their fault. It’s our culture. Blame me if you must,” TH implored her. He loved his sisters, but he couldn’t control them. While the sisters never said anything to

her directly, they complained to anyone who would listen that Maryam took her children swimming at the country club and that she probably wore bikinis while doing that. They had never actually seen her in a bikini and just assumed if she was going swimming at the club where all the European expatriates went, that she too would be in a bikini, baring her body for men - not her husband - to gawk at. It was unbecoming of the wife of their brother they said. They complained that she played tennis at the club's hard courts with mini dresses that showed off her legs, even though their brother had built her a tennis court at home. They complained that she was working all the time when with a husband as wealthy and as prominent as hers, she should be at home taking care of the house, not making a career for herself out in the world. They complained when it was sunny. They complained when it was raining. They complained when they were pregnant. They always seemed to have something to whine about. And somehow everything that was wrong was her fault.

Maryam tried to tune them out, but Kazzaura society was small. Everything they said about her got back to her. "I didn't work so hard to have to dim my light. I didn't even have to dim my light for my man, why would I do it for his sisters? Or his new wife?"

Soon enough, TH announced that he was getting married again. This time it was to a woman from Kano. The daughter of a plastics manufacturer - an aristocrat. Maryam wasn't surprised when wife number three got pregnant instantly. All of them with their children were living in her large compound in Kazzaura. TH added smaller bungalows to the property but worked hard at everyone having communal activities in the gardens. He wanted all his children to be close and his wives to love each other.

When it was just the four of them, Maryam tried to recreate her father's routine of after dinner talks with the children. She had expanded that idea and regularly had elaborate weekend picnics in her gardens. Now TH was doing it with all his children and wives. Maryam thought the Kazzaura compound that the two had designed together from the get-go, ought to have been the place where they would retire with their children and grandchildren. As TH got wealthier, she turned their home into an even more opulent lair and fancied herself as having one of the nicest, if not the grandest home in town. An estate her in-laws had now pushed her husband to bring new women into. When she and TH made these plans there had not been any talk of additional wives joining them there. But here they were all happily ensconced in her compound. The women were not bad. They were alright. Deferential mostly and they stayed out of her way. They basked

in the attention of their in-laws which was fine with Maryam. She had never had their attention and at that point she didn't need it. She developed an even bigger interest in gardening. She planted and worked with her gardeners to have little enclaves of jasmine, bright pink bougainvillea, and even more red hibiscus all over the compound. She was not going to cede this to them too. Maryam controlled the household but allowed the new wives to do as they pleased inside their chalets, but they couldn't mess with her landscaping or the main house or anything else at all really. Maryam tried hard to be one big happy family, but she put her foot down in these matters. "If they don't like it, they can move someplace else," she said to TH even though she knew he wanted all his children in the same place. In her mind, she made a good faith effort, after all she wasn't the first woman to marry a man who later on engaged in polygamy. Yet she was adamant that the home had been built by both of them and it was hers as much as it was his. These new wives carried their babies around like they were some sort of medals and made it known that they would continue to have children as long as God and their husband desired it. Maryam didn't get them. She was happy with her decision to stop at two. Her in-laws always wanted her husband to fill their home with children as it was also a sign of prosperity in their eyes. Now they had their wish.

The following year, shortly after the third wife gave birth, Maryam flew to London for some time alone. She just wanted some quiet. And while walking around, she began looking at houses and on impulse she put in a bid and then bought a small three-bedroom house in London. For some reason, she had been thinking a lot lately about the words of her late stepmother. The lady had told Maryam often that she needed to be able to stand her on two feet. And never depend solely on a man. The new wives were nothing without TH, but she could always be somebody who could stand on her own two feet. Her new home was a charming bungalow with its own quadrangle in Kennington and it was not far from a large park and a cricket ground in Southeast London. It was not a fancy neighbourhood so there was a slim to zero chance of running into Nigerian elite ladies there. Unlike in Chelsea where in summer walking down the Kings Road she was liable to bump into Nigerian society ladies. Her new neighbourhood was way under the radar. For a while, she had noticed that the Nigerian elite had favored buying homes in prime Central London around Sloane Street or in Belgravia. Maryam was likely to bump into these ladies and their personal shoppers at Harrods or anywhere in Knightsbridge and she surely would see them at the annual Chelsea Flower Show, which had always given her ideas for the house in Kazzaura. And

it was good to see these ladies representing Nigeria here. But she didn't want the corrupting influence of their kids on hers. She felt their kids loved to spend money ostentatiously and her two weren't going to be like them, throwing parties at every single club just because they could. It was best she felt, to keep Abba and Fatima away from that crowd until they had to mingle with them. Whatever money she and TH made would be spent on quality education not on frivolity.

As a result, Maryam's London house was just cozy, not fancy. It had floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding doors that allowed light to pour in from everywhere. The neighbours were very quiet, she could hear herself think. Her 'excuse' for this purchase was that it would be a base for when she sent her two kids to boarding school in the United Kingdom. She had her eye on the Cheltenham Ladies College for Fatima and Eton for Abba. She sunk her savings into the house and the deed was in her name alone. But she furnished it exquisitely with her husband's money. TH was proud of her. He must have felt that he too needed to do something to soothe her. She had gotten on so well in her career she didn't need him financially. But he paid for all the children's needs. And she had access to his foreign accounts - at least the ones he told her of. He was and had always been so close to their children. And even though the world only saw his tough exterior, he couldn't bear to be away from the children for so long. They lit up his world even when they were misbehaving. Having this house made him feel like it would be easier to see them once they were in boarding school. He could now just drop into the U.K. without needing to make prior arrangements or just pass through when he was on business and go see the kids. At 40-something TH now had eight children and it didn't look like that would be it. But he was also richer than they both could have ever imagined. He had made no distinction between Maryam's children and the others. He gave them all his attention when he was at home. They were his little army and he loved them all. Maryam was scarred by polygamy as a child. She never intended for it to be her destiny. It was an awful cultural practice in her mind. TH didn't see it that way. Polygamy was something that could protect women in certain circumstances, he reasoned. The practice dated back centuries and worked when everyone took their responsibility seriously. It was toxic in Maryam's household in Onitsha-Oba, but it needn't be with them he kept insisting to her, as they spent their first weekend alone in Maryam's London house. As they luxuriated in a large bubble bath TH reinforced that he loved her above all else. "You know you are the love of my life. And you always will be. My gap-toothed princess." Maryam was not totally convinced. "Of course, it's not

bad for you. You get to sleep with other women and revel in all the power patriarchy confers on you!”

“Ha! You see why they call you Degree Wife? And then you get annoyed!” TH said. “And they are not just other women, they are your sister wives.”

Now they were both laughing. He supported her impulse buy and didn't quibble about paying for the interior decorators. But he realised this London house was Maryam's alone. Her space for her and the children and for him. His other wives didn't factor into this equation. TH would come with Maryam and sometimes even pop in on his own. But he never went there with other women or his other children. It would end up being Maryam's sanctuary. A place where she could escape and still be at home. She would soon begin to spend much of the European summer months there, taking her kids to Wimbledon where they would always gorge themselves on strawberries and cream. She would also go shopping and when it was time for school, Abba didn't make it into Eton. He was clearly too scatterbrained, she thought. But she found a good boarding school, Saint Edmunds College, that ended up being the right fit. He was a smart child, just not focused on academics the way she hoped; even after all the private lessons she had invested in. His sister on the other hand could live in a world of books and literature. They both passed their exams all the time and while Abba was not a dull kid, academics bored him. Nothing seemed to hold his interest.

TH made excuses for his son anytime Maryam pushed him to do something. Abba was his golden boy. And not just because he was the first son. TH's bond with his son was extraordinary. The boy could do no wrong. He even supported that cooking fantasy of his and of course Maryam had to admit TH was right. Abba had made a real go of it and was a success that was the envy of many. Abba was quite the magician in the kitchen, and she would never have seen that coming because as a child he got bored easily. But today his focus in his business had been a joy for his parents. He once whispered to his mother when she told him she was surprised he had been disciplined with his pricing and in keeping his overhead costs down: “Commerce is in your blood Mama. I got the hustle from my Igbo side.”

Maryam also believed TH had known for a very long time that their son was gay. He probably knew before she did. They had always been close. And her husband never even made an issue of it. He once told her: “We've been surrounded by gay people for so

long. Even in the university, you just didn't notice. In Asaba while I was waiting for you to graduate, there were two men in our compound that were a couple. You knew them but didn't realise it then."

But TH now had other sons, so he didn't feel the sting of Abba's gayness the way she did. If he even felt it at all. Her dreams for Abba had always included a wife and many grandchildren. TH always told her to 'leave Abba alone' when she brought up the possibility of a wife and now that independent streak the boy has acquired and fine-tuned had come back to bite Maryam at the Wedding of the Year where he decided to tell the whole family he was gay and in love.

"How many nice girls did I send his way?" She muttered to herself. "Just kill me now, biko." Her husband and daughter just took it all in stride. Sometimes she felt like her children and her husband were so close that she was the one on the outside.

Abba had grown into a perfect adult. He was a sometimes difficult child, but he had inherited his father's singular focus in business even though he told everyone it was his mother's business acumen that he imitated. And Abba kept soaring. His company was employing many people in Kazzaura and expanding across the country. Maryam wondered silently if Abba could be gay if he wanted to, but at least marry one of these lovely women in the country. They could then pump out one or two grandchildren and then he could continue doing...whatever. He was not the first and he would not be the last gay man in Nigeria to conform.

But she also feared that people in her husband's immediate family would forever castigate her and she knew they were already whispering that she brought them a gay son from Igboland. She had looked around as the wedding guests smiled and sipped their drinks and avoided her gaze. Now her Golden Boy had publicly announced he was in love with his best friend, the son of one of the Kazzaura society women who had hated her for 30 years. And all eyes were on her. Yet her husband took it all in stride, and as usual didn't even break a sweat. She watched baffled as he celebrated, as he smiled and as he downed his orange juice and mingled. She watched, as he danced exuberantly with the Lagos governor, and laughed up a storm with the powerful Lebanese-Nigerian crew from Kano, like it was just another day in Kazzaura. Maryam raised her head, she smiled and headed to the dance floor too.

Chiké Frankie Edozien grew up in Lagos, Nigeria and learned to read from the newspapers before even attending school. He is the author of the groundbreaking memoir *Lives of Great Men: Living & Loving As An African Gay Man* (Team Angelica/Jacana) which won the Lambda Literary award 2018 for biography/memoir. His work 'Shea Prince' was a Gerald Kraak Finalist and is part of *As You Like It* anthology, which also garnered a Lammy in 2019. 'Last night in Asaba' was anthologised in *The Heart of The Matter* along with other incredible stories from around Africa. He also contributed the short story *Krife* to the Relations anthology (2023). Edozien lives in Ghana where he is the director of New York University, Accra. He's also the curator of the Labone Dialogues series of public conversations that put's African continental creativity front and centre.

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