

## DUPLICITY

By Aniekan Augustine-Edet

"Ginger tea, anyone?"

Nulia stared at her cousin like she had just offered them a human head and not a pot of ginger tea. She thought, for the thousandth time that day, that Cousin Ivie's smile was eerily mechanical- too wide and too bright, like her lips were being tugged and lifted by some marionette strings. The Ivie she knew had never smiled like that, had never even smiled. A smile from Ivie used to mean a slight twitch of the lips, a ghost of something that never fully materialized. But ever since she had returned from her two month stint at Sister Solana Grace's house she smiled endlessly, cooked endlessly, cleaned endlessly. A Stepford wife in a young girl's body, programmed to serve, pamper, beseech and obey.

"Nulia, would you like some? I know you complained about having a sore throat this morning. A cup of ginger tea with some honey and lemon is just what you need." Ivie was standing right beside her now, her long beige skirt brushing against Nulia's arm. Nulia leaned back slightly, conjuring a nervous smile of her own as she turned to face her cousin. Even the sharp, tart aroma rising from the teapot could not mask the overpowering smell of jasmine and rotting flesh that stubbornly clung to Ivie ever since she had come back from that Solana woman's house.

No-one else seemed to notice the smell. Just like they didn't notice that Ivie no longer wore her old clothes. The Ivie she knew swore she would be buried in a mini skirt and nothing more but now she dressed like a Mother Superior, all long skirts and shapeless blouses with impossibly high collars. "Um, no thank you, Ivie. I'm okay."

"I'll have some, Ivie. Kanyinulia doesn't know what's good for her." Nulia's mother looked at her disapprovingly over the top of her wire-rimmed glasses while Nulia pretended to be entranced by the ancient green spiral patterned rug spread across the parlor floor.

"Okay, Auntie. I'll pour you a cup." Ivie flitted to her mother's side like a bird, setting the tray with the pot and teacup on a stool before her.

As she began to pour, Nulia wanted to lean closer to her brother Lotanna and ask him, *Doesn't Ivie seem...different to you? Like, not herself.* But she could see from the vacant look in his eyes that he was completely lost in another one of his daydreams, and decided not to bother.

Nulia sighed and turned her attention back to her cousin, even more perplexed than before. Ivie was still pouring. Her face was serene as the tiny china teacup began to overflow, steaming ginger tea spilling from the mouth of the cup and splashing onto the tray. Nulia watched, transfixed and horrified, as Ivie continued to pour. She wanted to say something to stop her, to warn her mother, but her mouth felt like it had been sewn shut. The tray was full in seconds and the tea trailed down its edges in a steady downpour till it reached her mother's bare feet.

Ivie did not stop pouring.

Mother jumped up as soon as she felt the scalding heat and gave her a resounding slap across the face. "Ivie! Have you gone mad? Can't you see this tea pouring on my body?" The teapot fell from Ivie's hands, smashing to pieces as she jerked back, looking around like someone who had just woken up from sleep but could not remember falling asleep in the first place. A strange silence filled the room, interrupted only by the squeaking of the ceiling fan.

Nulia braced herself for one of Ivie's infamous explosions but her cousin just stood there, quiet as a dormant volcano. And then, she smiled. It was a disarming smile, white, blinding- and all wrong. Mother was so taken aback that she just stood there, barefoot in the searing pool of ginger tea. Lotanna was momentarily roused from his daydream, and Nulia was finally certain. This was not the Ivie she knew.

"Oh Auntie, I'm so sorry. I'll clean up this mess right away." A piece of the broken teapot had lodged itself in her foot but she did not seem to notice. She breezed out of the room with the litheness of a ballerina, leaving a trail of blood, broken china and confusion in her wake.

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Nulia was right in her assumptions, though she had no inkling of the full truth. The girl currently humming Richard Stoltzman's 'Maid with Flaxen hair' and sweeping up the broken china on their living room floor was not the Ivie she knew.

The Ivie she knew-or what was left of her-was currently buried deep under the floorboards of a little green house, where countless girls had met the same end at the hands of Sister Solana Grace. Sister Solana Grace, a seemingly ageless beauty who embodied her name, exuding both light and effortless poise. Sister Solana Grace, whose transformative powers were more diabolic than divine. Desperate mothers sent their daughters to her, the ones that were unruly and out of control, in the hopes that they would be cured of their wilful natures. That is how Ivie came to be in her possession- that is how she died and was reborn.

Ivie did not remember the events that took place before her second birth, but if she did she would be able to recall the feeling that washed over her the first time she stepped over Sister Solana Grace's threshold. The inside of the house was reminiscent of a womb, sticky with warmth and dimly lit, with low walls curving into arched doorways and alcoves. The sitting room looked like it was designed to swallow you whole, furnished with expansive armchairs almost as wide as a giant's embrace, bulbous beanbags, and a dark velvety rug in the center with deep spiral patterns that mimicked a black hole.

As soon as Ivie stepped inside she felt strangely muffled, like she could no longer hear herself, like if she screamed no-one would hear her either. It was like being thrust into a body of water, an aqueous cage that sucked her in and held her against her will. It made her throat swell with bile.

"Your room is this way." Sister Solana said, her musical voice cutting through Ivie's haze. Everything else still sounded far away, but Sister Solana's voice was clear as day. Ivie turned to her slowly, following the direction of her slender arm, which pointed to the hallway on the left.

Her eyes barely registered the dining area, sectioned off by an alcove directly opposite the doorway, elevated slightly above the ground. Two steps.

*Two steps. Move your body, Ivie.* She forced herself to follow Sister Solana through to the archway on the left, down a dark hallway to a room at the end. The door opened to reveal some steps, and at the bottom of them was a tomb. No, not a tomb. She shook her head. It was just a room with a bed. A room with a bed and a dresser with no mirror and one window. *Normal.* But as soon as the word flashed through her mind she knew it did not fit. Normal did not belong here. If she could have remembered anything that happened before her second birth, Ivie would have been able to recall the feeling of going down those steps for the first time, like falling in a dream. She would have been able to ask herself whether descending into madness was sometimes like this-walking down stairs with no railings, knowing you might fall.

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The new Ivie, like the others, was the product of an uneasy conception. The girls that came to stay with Sister Solana Grace were all the same in the beginning; young, fresh faced and brimming with a dark and dangerous vitality. They had Eve's look in their eyes and her teeth in their mouths, aching for the proverbial fruit of the tree. It was up to Sister Solana Grace to break the cycle of the sin, to save them before the serpent came. Curing their willful natures was easy because she knew a truth that many did not-that sometimes death was also a cure, that death and birth were twin sides of the same coin. She knew how to shed tough girlskins made of trouble, how to drain them of their tempestuous blood. She knew how to conceive for them new bodies, how to tailor supple new skin to clothe them. She made them beautiful, saintly. It was dirty, immaculate work, and she reveled in it.

The conception usually began with a cut. A cut of flesh, a fingernail, a strand of hair. She preferred flesh. Working with their DNA was only a rudimentary step in the process, a catalyst. Superficial things first.

On the day of the cut, Ivie awoke to find Sister Solana standing at the foot of her bed, watching her. The effects of crossing the threshold and descending into the tomb had worn off, and she remembered her teeth. She snapped and snarled when Sister Solana came close, paring knife in hand.

“Don’t you dare come near me,” she bristled, recoiling like a touch-me-not plant. Sister Solana Grace only smiled. When she spoke her voice was endlessly patient. “Hold still, darling. I’m only taking an inch.”

Ivie tried frantically to move and that was when she realized she had been chained to the bed. She tried to escape them but they held her in their rusty embrace like a boa constrictor, their grip seeming to tighten the more she struggled. Fear gripped her chest like a vise.

“What-what did you do? Release me! Let me go!”

“I needed to make sure you wouldn’t move,” Sister Solana Grace said simply. “You need to hold still, or an inch becomes a mile.” She knelt by the bed and lifted Ivie’s dress so a thigh was exposed.

“No. *No.*” Ivie struggled, writhing under her chains like an earthworm sprinkled with salt.

“Yes, *yes.*” Sister Solana purred, as she began to cut. The scream ripped from Ivie’s throat was like a chorus of angels. The older woman continued to cut, cut, cut, until she had peeled off a small rectangle of smooth brown skin. She held it to the light like a priest would hold up a piece of communion bread, gazing in wonder. Ivie drew a broken breath as she grappled with how raw the pain felt. It was agony in its purest form.

Sister Solana finally turned her gaze to Ivie.

“Do you know that your skin is nearly perfect? I almost wish I didn’t have to break it to fix you.”

Her eyes watered as she said this to Ivie, but no tears fell.

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Ivie's labor began on the third day, after a simple dinner of chicken broth and rice. As soon as Ivie swallowed the last spoonful she was overcome by a nauseating rumbling in the walls of her stomach, like there was a nesting beast within them trying to come out. Her body swayed once before it was bent over by a will that was not her own, her back cracking like the branches of an old tree.

Sister Solana Grace calmly folded her napkin and stood up like she had been expecting it to happen. She pulled Ivie out of her seat and took her to the bathroom down the hall. Ivie moaned as the beast in her belly dug its claws into her and began to climb up the walls of her stomach. When the shaking started, Sister Solana Grace forced her to her knees in front of the bathtub like it was a church pew.

It was a short labour. The same force that bent her back pried her mouth open like a vice, and a sea of dark, tarry sludge came pouring out of her. It was like onyx, a glossy, luminous black that was rank with the sickening smell of rotting flesh. When the first bout was over Ivie collapsed against the tub, panting like her lungs had been turned inside out.

"What..is happening to me?" Her throat was so raw she could barely squeeze out a whisper.

Sister Solana Grace was a study in serenity. "You are being emptied."

"Emptied of what?"

Her voice was sonorous, magnetic. "Everything," She said. And then she forced Ivie's head down as another wave of blackness came spilling out of her, just enough to fill the tub halfway. When

it was finally over and the invisible marionette strings holding her in place snapped, Ivie felt no relief. She collapsed to the ground like a discarded puppet, bile burning in her throat as she threw up something more familiar- the fisherman soup she'd had for lunch that afternoon.

That same night at the witching hour, Sister Solana Grace went into her garden and uprooted a mandrake, the nightshade plant known for its powers of fertility and its resemblance to the human form. She placed the mandrake in the tub full of Ivie's essence, stirred in some herbs, and said an unthinkable thing. As soon as the words fell from her lips the mandrake in the tub began to grow. Day by day it grew slowly. Fingers first, and then the rest. Gradually it began to take on Ivie's likeness, and though she did not see it growing she felt it becoming her, sensed it eating into her existence.

As the Ivie in the tub grew, the True Ivie became weaker. Her dewy brown skin took on a sickly grey hue and she began to look sunken, like there was something draining her from the inside. It felt like she was constantly in a state of living and dying, of being killed and being reborn. On the seventh day Sister Solana Grace took her eyes and gave them to the duplicate. By then it was almost fully made, and Ivie was too powerless to stop her. Everyday a part of her was harvested and replanted in the duplicate. The only thing Sister Solana Grace did not give the duplicate was Ivie's mind, which she believed to be corrupted. She buried it with Ivie and fashioned a new one out of clay, molding and shaping it to her heart's desire. Programming it to pamper, serve, beseech and obey.

In the end, Ivie was not Ivie at all. She became a dry husk of a girl, drained of her essence and siphoned of all her being. What remained of her was unrecognizable. She was an empty, broken shell that would never be whole again, much like the shattered pieces of china the new Ivie was currently sweeping off the living room floor.

But Nulia, who now knelt at her cousin's feet and gently pulled out the shard of broken china that was still lodged in one of them, would never know this. She soaked a pad of cotton wool in witch hazel and cleaned the wound, all the while watching Ivie's face for a sign, any indication that the

Ivie she knew was still in there somewhere, but there was nothing. Her eyes were as vacant as a home without a tenant.

"Doesn't it hurt?" She asked. Ivie did not answer. She just shook her head and smiled, like her lips were being forced upwards by unseen hands that threatened to rip her face apart.