The Thief in Duty's Guise

I was told to hold on tightly to my bag. This church wasn't Makola or Circle, you couldn't tell saint from sinner.

At Makola you knew everyone was a thief, even Obolo who looked you straight in the eye and told you, *'Ah customer, I'm reducing the bankye price because it's you oo*,' and then went on to sell it for twice the price; Even Alhaja who showed you the *'fresh tomatoes, newly delivered from Sunyani,'* piled high for *'just twenty Ghana cedis customer, just twenty cedis,'* only for you to discover the newspaper padding buried deep and high in the tomato container, almost to the top, after she poured the tomatoes into the polythene bag.

And Circle, *Accra Circle!* The miracles they worked! Some *Abokyi* sold Brother an iphone whatever — even he did not know the number — but he came home with a bar of soap. *A bar of soap.* He went mad.

"I swear I saw the phone," was his shamefaced defense. He tapped his tongue with his finger, pointed to the ground, and then up to the sky, or ceiling; Evidence that he did not swear falsely.

Little Sister was in stitches.

"I touched it. I watched them put it in the box and in the bag *feeli feeli*. *Shey* these people work magic *anaa*?"

"It is not your phone, or lack of it, I worry about," I told him, "It is what you will tell Daa about where your school fees went."

"Ah but sister won't you help me?" He begged.

I helped him.

Brother bought an iphone the next week. A six. Six plus. Even I still had a Nokia, without internet.

We found out a year later that there was no school in the picture for Brother. He never went past registration, and the year he bought the phone was supposed to be his final year; the last of three years. Daa and Maa were too uneducated to guess. Maa hardly understood the joke when Brother confessed that he took money for three separate books: *Geo, Gra,* and *Phy.*

I said nothing when Brother came home with the phone, or when he confessed to never going to senior high. I just packed my bags, took the bus back to Takoradi and cried in my flat. The money I gave him — The school fees now turned phone money— was half of the money I had been saving to buy a piece of land.

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Although I wanted to say, *'Go back to those people you stayed with when you were supposed to be in school'* when Brother called to ask for rent money, I held my tongue.

"Big *Sistee*," he sucked his teeth and I knew he was scratching his head too, "You have to help me *oo*. They *don* sack me," he said.

"They cannot sack you from a school you did not attend. Were you working or what?" I asked.

"No, your Maa and Daa. They have sacked me from the house. I need a place to stay *today today* oo."

"Come to Takoradi."

"Ah no oo sister, *wetin* Takoradi *wan take give we*? Me I *no know sef* why you still *dey* there. *Mans must to hustle oo. How we go dey blow be dat*."

It was the '*I am going to start working*' that made me send the money. This time not from the land savings, from my tithe.

Brother made sure he received the alert before he got off the phone. He was going into music — rapping — He would be on the verge of *blowing* once he signed to this record label his older friend had launched.

"*My big sistee dat I know you always gat ma back Jah bless*" he captioned alongside my picture on his whatsapp status. That was his thank you. Little Sister sent me a screenshot.

"No punctuation?" I texted Little Sister back.

"LMAO :)" she responded.

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Brother was now in prison.

He was a *Sakawa* boy. The phone I paid for was his office, the room I rented was their headquarters.

I did not know Brother could speak in an American accent until I saw the videos in court. Or a British accent. Or an Australian accent. *French? Welsh? Scottish?* Hell, I didn't even know he knew that much English.

He was a fool, Brother, he showed the people his face. Which thief does that?

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So, apparently, not only the Makola and Circle people were thieves. Brother was one, so anyone else could be.

That was why I held on tightly to my bag.

The entire service; worship from singers with voices sneaking into separate directions, praise dancing among men who just wanted to touch your buttocks, testimonies so we could be jealous of people's good news, even the word, passed by so quickly. I grabbed my bag, ready to leave, when the pastor halted us all.

He pointed at me.

"*Me?*" I tapped on my chest and mouthed.

"Yes you. Come forward."

I had not expected him to call me, although I did come to the church hoping for some kind of breakthrough.

"Do you know me?" He asked when I got to the front.

"No Papa," I said.

"Have we met before?" He gestured to me to come forward, closer to him.

"No Papa, we haven't"

"Come closer, turn around and say it loudly for them to hear. Have we met before?"

"NO PAPA. NEVER. You have not seen me before." I shook my head as I spoke.

"But I know you…."

The congregation clapped.

"Do you believe that I know you?"

"Yes Papa" I did not know why I raised my hands, but I did.

"No, you don't believe. As you're standing here, I can see your past, present, and future. Clearly. I see your future like film… *hmmm?*...But you don't believe"

The congregation screamed and clapped.

"YES PAPA, I believe!" Even I was clapping too.

"Should I tell you what I see? What I see troubles me because you're a very beautiful girl...*hmm?* I see doom in your future. Tragic things are going to happen to you. Should I continue?" The congregation screamed, clapped, and a few people were standing now.

"Tell me Papa, please tell me!" I said, raising my arms again.

"What is your name?" He was walking away from me, closer to the podium.

"Aku, Papa. My name is Aku Sika, Papa"

"Ah, Sika? Money? Bring the basket. Aku you have to sow a seed. Because what I see… what I see… *matalamade mimubibizigidredredredrededash*… Aku come closer… lift up your hands *rotokondobababba*… What work do you do, Aku?"

"I'm a nurse, Papa"

"Good. A nurse, good. Aku I see doom. Terrible things. Do you think I'm lying?"

"No Papa, I believe"

"How much money do you have with you here Aku?... No, go back to your seat, bring your bag and give everything you have here today. Sow a seed… because today, TODAY *LIBRIDIZUZUSHAGADARA BABABOSH*! We are going to lift the curse of Ham that is upon your life. Sow a seed, Aku."

I headed for my seat. An old lady handed me my bag. I walked back to the front, my walk altered because of the many eyes on me. I pulled out my wallet and raised my head to look at the pastor again.

"Go on," he said, offering me the basket. I emptied my wallet and prayed in my head as I had been taught; That this offering would be the answer to my problems.

"Aku, how old are you?" The pastor asked.

"Thirty-seven Papa"

"Are you married?"

"No Papa"

"Have you been married before?"

"No Papa"

"*Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm Bagadosh Bagadosh*… Do you know why you are not married?"

"No Papa. Tell me Papa!"

The congregation was screaming again, clapping again, some standing again, shouting, "Tell her Papa! Tell her man of God!"

"Do you want to be married?"

"Yes Papa" Tears rolled down my cheeks.

"Why are you crying? Have you been close to being married?"

"Yes Papa." I was sobbing now.

"And what happened?"

"Papa, he got another woman pregnant, took our savings and got married to her."

"When I saw you sitting at your seat, that is what I saw. I saw a man, I couldn't see him very well. It was like a dark figure, short… is he short? I couldn't see him very well."

"He is tall Papa." Someone offered me a handkerchief. I wiped my face and blew my nose.

"Yes, yes, he is tall," the pastor continued. "I saw the man leave. He walked through a door. It was like a film, and I saw you weeping, weeping…"

As if to corroborate his story, my sobbing increased. Some woman had her arms around me, consoling me.

"And I heard a voice, very audible, it was as if the person was standing beside me. It said that you've been weeping for years. How long ago did he leave you?"

"About four months ago Papa"

"Four months. Aku, do you know why you are not married?"

"No Papa"

"Aku, some people, some agents of the enemy have gathered and decided that you will not marry. They have conspired and destroyed any possibility of you getting married. And those people, you know them… But we are going to break that curse, do you hear me? Do you go to this church?"

"No Papa"

"Do you live in Accra?"

"No Papa, I live in Takoradi, I came to Accra for a nursing conference, but my family lives in Accra."

"Good. Aku, you will get married next year!"

"AMEEEEEEEEENNN!" I lifted my hands up again. I was jumping.

"No you didn't hear me, I said you will get married next year. And you will come and give testimony here. I'm not going to make you get married and then you'll forget to give me my praise." The pastor turned to the congregants, "She will get married next year…"

The congregation screamed and applauded, shouting their Amens. The drummer briefly gave a praise beat.

"Go and sit down."

"Thank you Papa! Thank You!" I turned to go.

He called me back. It was sudden, I felt the force of his palm on my forehead, heard the *whoosh,* smelled his breath.

He pushed me — Or maybe it was a force — He pushed me. I fell.

Someone caught me in time and laid me down gently on the floor. The modesty cloth followed swiftly. I closed my eyes and felt oil placed on my forehead. It trickled down into my ears.

I did not know whether to get up or keep lying there. I lay down briefly with my eyes closed and listened as the pastor called the next person.

"You. Come forward. No not you, the man with the red t-shirt. Walk quickly, we are not joking here. Is your name Kofi?"

"No Papa"

"Do you know someone named Kofi?"

"No Papa"

"You don't know anyone named Kofi?"

"No...Yes Papa"

"Is it yes or no?!"

"Yes Papa, I know Kofi"

"Who is Kofi to you?"

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When I walked out of the church, deliberating on whether to walk or take a taxi home and have Maa pay the fare, I got a text from Little sister.

Sister, Daa is sick again. We rushed him to the hospital but no money to pay the bills. Maa said she doesn't have anything. Daa spent all his pension. His health insurance expired last year. Do you have anything?

It took a few dials on my phone. I didn't ask how much, just sent everything on my digital wallet. The land savings were long gone. This was money for my treatment – chemotherapy for my breast cancer. I stood motionless for a moment, battling tears.

When I told Maa the news a few days ago, she laughed. "So this small school we sent you to you now see everything as a hospital matter. All of us, our breasts pain us most times. Do you know what you did to my breasts when I gave birth to you? You were chewing it like, like gum. *Chingum*. Do you know how much pain you put me through? Here, feel it," she grabbed my hand, "There is a lump in mine too. Everyone has a lump. *Ah, na* cancer *paa*! What do we have to do with cancer?"

When Daa stumbled in from being at God-knows-where Maa welcomed him with, "Aku's father, look at your daughter. She said she has cancer." Maa let out a chuckle.

Daa said nothing.

"Did you hear me? She said she has cancer *oo*," Maa repeated.

Daa sucked his teeth. "Let humans think," he said, and carried his drunken self to his bedroom.

"Sister, do you have cancer?" Little sister asked as we snuggled on the tiny mattress in the living room that night.

"Don't worry about it. Tell me about *homos* night."

"*Ninos* night. That's what they call it in Naverongo."

I woke up late the next morning. Little sister was tiptoeing around me, arranging items and cleaning surfaces.

"Sorry, I didn't want to wake you. You know, because of the cancer."

I brushed my teeth quickly and went into the compound my family shared with other families.

"Maa can I help?" I asked Maa who was bent over washing, two basins and a bucket in front of her.

Maa did not respond.

I put my hands in the cold water of the second basin and began to rinse and squeeze, dumping thoroughly squeezed clothes into the empty bucket.

"Why are you washing like you have no bones in your body? Or is it the cancer?" Maa asked, staring at my hands. She grabbed the bucket with the clothes I had rinsed and took them over to the dry line.

I followed with the pegs.

Maa was mumbling under her breath as she dried the clothes. "You want to be lazy ah you say you have cancer. Look at the time you woke up this morning. That's why that man left you. Lazy, lazy."

"Ah! Maame, don't say that!" Our neighbor shouted from the well in the middle of the compound.

"Why won't I say that?" Maa responded. "You give birth to these children and they grow up to disgrace you. Look at her brother, and now look at this one, old and not married. And she's saying she has cancer. Is she not the same one who went to Senior High, three months, she came back saying she has depression. Depression too is it a sickness?"

I put the pegs in the bucket and left Maa's side. I went back to rinsing the clothes in the basin.

When Maa went inside to get more laundry, the neighbor told me about her pastor.

"My sister also had cancer," she said.

"What kind of cancer?"

"Leg cancer."

I raised my eyes at her.

"She had a wide and deep open sore on her leg that won't heal for two years."

"Okailey, leg cancer?"

"Yes." The pastor had diagnosed her. And he healed her too. "He even raised the dead before. I saw it live!"

"Hmm"

"You should go for the crusade next week if you're in Accra. Or pay for a consultation. He's a powerful man of God. Me and the children go on Sundays. We take the *trotro* at 5am so we can get there on time."

It was as I was headed to the church that the neighbor added, "Hold on tightly to your bag. Some of those church members are thieves *oo*."

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I took off my pumps and replaced them with the slippers I had in my bag. Then I called Little sister.

"How much is the hospital bill?"

"Thousand two hundred for now," Little sister said.

"Ok. I sent thousand three. Reserve the hundred for me."

"Sister we have to buy medicine too *oo*."

"Reserve thirty. I'm taking a taxi to come."

"Ok Sister. Maa is cooking at home, but I'm here. Can I take five to buy food? I haven't eaten since morning."

I hailed a taxi. I watched out for the most dilapidated of them all — Dark exhaust fumes, cranky noises, absent mirrors, rear windshield replaced with clear plastic sheets. I was more confident bargaining with those.

"Ridge," I said.

"Fifty Ghana madam," he responded.

"*Ah masa,* Just here *noor?* Twenty," I said

"Ah no oo, Forty-five sister. If it is just here *abi* you can walk."

"Twenty-five please"

"Forty-five"

"Thirty"

"Last, forty-five"

"*Aba* boss, I only have thirty," I said.

"Ah, madam, even *pragya* will not take that. Take a *troski abeg*."