

DECENT DRESSING

My relationship with my mother was a simmering, still-lidded pot before she brought Mr Banjoko to our house. Maybe we could've gone on like that, despite the taut silence between us, if she hadn't brought that man into our house.

But even before that, I disliked her with a powerful intensity. It was disturbing to find that I was capable of such ingratitude, that I was so totally abnormal, as to be constantly angry at my own mother.

My anger was informed by several things. I was angry because my mother spoke to me about rape (to threaten me with it) before she ever said the word 'sex' to me. Before she acted like I knew what sex was. She was not a sex education mother. In fact, my aunt once tried to broach the topic, but my mother shut her down, insisting that her daughter had no knowledge about or use for sex. I had finished secondary school then.

Also, the way that she always forgave herself for her mistakes, while lambasting me for making similar blunders, was something I found deeply unfair. If she burned food, she simply mentioned it as an aside. But if *I* burned food, she would go on and on about it, blame my always being on my phone (false), ask if I didn't know I was a girl, ask what exactly I was willing to help with in the house, reiterate to an unseen listener that she taught me-o, she did teach me, despite how I was turning out.

I didn't go to markets on my own. Nor did I go with her, because she was a government worker and always shopped on her way back from the office. For all her disappointment at me being an unmarriageable girl, she was the reason I did not know how to buy peppers and tomatoes, how to pick out good yams, how to haggle efficiently with traders.

And so I was this paradox, because I had great theoretical knowledge, I read books extensively and learned from them, but the experience and practice and finesse needed to survive as a lower-middle-class Lagos girl, I severely lacked. I thought of myself as intelligent, then I'd buy something and realise I'd been cheated, that I was a green fool, a pigeon, that I knew nothing at all.

My greenness was a stark contrast against my economical reality. I was not rich enough to be so inexperienced. My mother was only a civil worker. My father was in a similar financial situation from what I knew; more than fifteen years ago, my mother took me and left him because he beat her.

I was angry at my mother for repressing me so much, for not recognising her good luck, because I was so good, I always stayed in that dull house, didn't go out to drink, had never drunk alcohol. Yet she did not pity me, could not spare me, could not free me. Did she not see how utterly ill-equipped for the world I was? Was I nothing, was I not to be my own human, only an extension of her? A show glass of her morals, the things she tolerated, her slideshow on Judgement Day.

But I can see it from her perspective now — it must be terrifying to have a daughter. To have failed at a marriage and seemingly have no more chances where your former partner had greater luck. (Which of course my father did, being a man, ever-valuable.) To know that if anything goes wrong with this girl, and there are so many things that could go wrong with a girl, you would be a laughingstock.

I knew how scared she was of my femaleness and all the horrors that could result from it. It was clear from how stiff she acted around sex and sexuality, about boys (who seldom came up and only in the vaguest of ways), in her disapproval of my less modest outfits.

I was angry because she constantly policed my outfits, the one avenue of self-expression that was available to me. Electricians would come to change our faulty lamp holders, and she'd say to me, "A man is coming inside. Go and dress properly." This compulsive covering began with my own uncle, her brother, when

we'd go to the family house for Christmas and I'd be asked to dress decently because he was in the living room.

And I was angry, too, that she was so worried about those repairmen, when the man who had assaulted me was a man that she had invited and told to wait with me in the house. I was nine then, and he'd wanted her to help him find a job. It was my mother who gave my abuser access to me. And she would never know about it.

How I hated the implications of her policing.

She who chose to perpetually look at me like a child, who determinedly forced me into children's clothes. Then the hideous surprise of her also seeing me as someone who could make grown men misbehave. The thing that had to be covered, so as not to tempt them.

With the repairmen and my uncle, she policed me to say "Men could harm you because they are seeing your body," and not "You are trying to seduce these men, you slut." The latter was what she communicated when Mr Banjoko arrived. Before, she never implied that I was deliberately trying to lure men with the clothes I wore; when her would-be husband came to our house, she began to see me as a sly little coquette who could conceive it in her mind to deliberately seduce a man with her luscious, youthful body.

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For my part, I had my faults too — I was twenty two and on a forced break (due to an indefinite strike by the academic staff of all the federal universities in the country) from studying a course that I and everyone else knew was useless. I remember her constantly remarking about my sleeping during that break. Now, I wonder if she resented me, too, because she had to work to provide for us, while I could just sleep and study a hopeless course. She had me relatively late, and now she was getting old and it didn't seem like she would eat the fruits of her labour anytime soon.

One day in November, my mother called me into the room and told me she was getting married.

“Are you not happy for me?” she asked. “I’ve tried, have I not? I’ve been alone for so long. Your father has remarried, how many times now?” Two times.

I nodded and said I was happy for her.

“He’s coming tomorrow. He’s an American citizen. He will spend Christmas with us. We’re getting married next year, in August.” A smile bloomed on her face.

I was stunned, but I told myself this was a happy thing. I wondered how I did not know until now. But it was not that surprising: my mother was a good keeper of her secrets.

The next day, she brought him from the airport. While introducing him to me, she was beaming, clinging to him. I calculated the time and figured out that she waited until he’d boarded the plane before telling me about him. Almost as though she had been too afraid to believe that he would really come.

Mr Banjoko was a tall, dark-skinned man with a Yoruba-tinted American accent. He’d lived in the US for over twenty years. He was not jolly, as I’d hoped.

He was as dark and moody as me. We were two unimpressed phantoms, and I was not willing to yield my own unimpressedness for him, to be cheerier so that things would not be so awkward. I sensed that he was dissatisfied by my reception of him.

I did not want to ask him about New York.

Travelling was the one thing I did not dream about. Maybe it was because I never saw myself escaping my mother, never thought she would let me go, let me see the world with my own eyes. I was too defeated by the seeming impossibility to even imagine it. All I knew was her — in every house we ever lived in together.

The willingness to serve, to submit, that erupted from my mother after Mr Banjoko came shocked me enormously. To see her bringing out fancy plates to dish his food in, cooking him elaborate meals, pounding yam for him with the mortar and pestle we never used, because he had to have the real pounded yam after so many years in America, not pondo, was incredible.

My mother had a certain defensiveness (which I now know is probably the defensiveness you need to survive as an unmarried lower-middle-class woman) that she shed completely after he arrived. She deferred to him with a totality I'd never seen in her before. What he wanted to eat was what we all ate. If he expressed little enthusiasm for a plan she had, she cancelled it. How long had she wanted a man to submit to?

I marvelled at how powerful men were. Mr Banjoko had turned this stoic career woman into a flirtatious, eager-to-please wife-in-waiting.

Once, I heard her say to a friend on the phone, "Women should have a head. We are incomplete without husbands." I felt pity for her, working so hard, building a life, raising her child, but still feeling incomplete because she did not have a husband. How selfish was I to not have realised that she was lonely? I'd been so consumed by my own problems, most of which were because of her. Maybe the fraught way we related with each other was both our faults. Maybe she was hurtful to me because I was dismissive of her life.

What boiled the pot over, of course, was my body.

My body was the one thing that was irrevocably mine, and I refused to give it up. I dressed as I wished. I went to school without bras, I went out into the compound in thin nightdresses, I wore short skirts. I overcame the shame that I'd acquired from being told to close my legs and cover my nipples and thighs since childhood.

But when Mr Banjoko came, I relented. The thought of my mother giving me disapproving stares because of a man that was her soon-to-be husband was nearly unbearable.

Sometimes he went out and I'd be near the door when he got back. I'd have to go back to my room and wear more decent clothes before opening the door for him, and every time I did this in my mother's presence, I wanted her to tell me, "Is it because of Banjoko you changed? You didn't have to." But she never did. I knew her silence meant that she was thankful to me for complying.

I started to dress more like myself again when I saw the media he liked. He watched American movies in which women dressed skimpier than I did, and I thought perhaps living abroad had modernised him and he'd even find me tame in my normal clothes.

Then one day, I awoke and came out of my room to realise that my mother had gone out early and I was alone at home with Mr Banjoko. When I went to greet him, he stared at my chest.

I was stunned, and I also felt panicked, and thought that the thing my mother had always warned me about was now happening, that me covering up could've and would've prevented this awkwardness: my mother's husband looking at me lewdly.

That night she came into my room to say Mr Banjoko told her to advise me to dress decently in front of males. She added, her voice rising a few octaves, "Haven't I been telling you? Nobody will say I did not teach you the right thing."

From then on, my dressing was more regulated than ever. She did not want him to want me anymore. If she couldn't repress or compete with my youth, she could subdue the other weapons I had in my arsenal that she did not.

Christmas came, and we had a grand dinner. A few days after New Year's Day, she told me he had to go back sooner than they planned because there was something he needed to tidy up at work.

My mother resumed work, and I was once again at home alone with Mr Banjoko. It was on one such day he tried to have sex with me. I came to the living room when he was there, and he asked me to help him look for the remote control that was just in front of him. I was holding it out to him when he suddenly grabbed my other wrist and pulled me down to the three-seater with him, pawing at my body. I was thunderstruck. Then I recovered, sharply elbowed his chest, and hurtled into my room.

That I'd thwarted his first attempt did not deter him. He continued to press that wilting gaze on me, only now it was longer, more bawdy and disgusting for its blatant intention. When we were alone at home, I locked myself in my room for hours. It did not save me. He would come to the door of my room and say filthy things, calling me sexy, asking if a man or boy had never fucked me before, accusing me of being immature. Saying that I knew nothing, did I forget he was American?

For the second time, my mother had put me within the reach of a predator. All while blaming everything else, blaming me, for anything that could happen to me, anything that already had. My fury at her intensified.

The day he would return to America came. He bought a night ticket, and all three of us got into the car and headed to Murtala Muhammad Airport. His cologne filled the car; he always wore such strong cologne. I could not breathe, and I shrank into my seat behind my mother, who drove.

We were hours early, and stood waiting in the departure area among other people. Later, my mother decided to go buy us some snacks since we'd be there for a while. I saw my chance, and as she walked away I thought, If only you raised me to be self-sufficient, to be able to make my way around myself, it wouldn't occur to you to go and buy snacks when I'm here, you wouldn't have to leave this man that you

clearly don't want to leave because *I* would've gone instead, and I wouldn't be able to tell him what I'm going to tell him now.

I faced Mr Banjoko. "Don't come back."

His expression turned into a frown as one eyebrow shot up.

"I'm saying don't come back. If I hear that you're coming back, that this wedding is going to happen, Mr Banjoko, I am going to send emails containing voice recordings I made of you being inappropriate with me to your job." I had practised this speech, this threat. I mentioned the name of the hospital he worked at, which I'd learned from my mother. "You're a doctor," I continued. "Think about what will happen to your American licence if I tell your hospital that one of their African doctors sexually harasses girls in Africa. Please dare me if you want."

Then I turned away from him. My mother returned with the snacks, shared them, and we continued to wait, until his flight was announced and he boarded.

On the way home, I had a pit in my stomach. I had taken from my mother the thing she'd spent all these years longing and wishing for. I knew I should not, but I felt some guilt about what I'd done, because I knew he would not come back. He wouldn't risk the possibility that I'd make good on my threat.

Suddenly I could no longer bear the scent of his cologne. I began rolling down the window at my side. "The road is free," I said to my mother, so she'd turn off the A.C.

"Roll it back up. Let's use the A.C.," she replied, her eyes straight ahead. "His perfume is still here," she added, her voice low and wistful and infantile.