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DAUGHTER AND HIS HOUSEKEEPER

by Joan Anim-Addo

My love is like the undergrowth which covers the estate,
the only possession inexpugnably mine.

—Nancy Morejón

Dust set flying by horses' hooves drumming. Clouds of it rising. And the drumming. Always the drumming. The wiry woman of uncertain years hidden beneath worn calico and madras cloth coughed in the darkened room and cleared her throat a little. Daughter, she had called her by way of acceptance. Never any other name. A pungent citronella smell tickled her throat. She shrugged; Massa Boss would be displeased. He would also in the end be more comfortable.

She double checked the painted wooden door off the verandah. It was already shut and she adjusted the jalousies to let more breeze into the Great House. She allowed her eyes to search the boundary of shadowy trees in the direction of the dry ravine and she sighed. This house just sometimes felt like hers, but it could never be hers, she knew full well; not that she ever dreamt of wanting it. She ran a finger the burnt brown of nutmeg shells along the contours of the porcelain basin in which a slender oil lamp stood on the large dresser. Another night. No rains, thank God. She turned the brass knob a touch and watched how the flame brightened to resist shadows enveloping the room. His housekeeper. Here in this place, she answered to many names. How she hoped Daughter would come.

Glancing towards the open mahogany door of Bossman's library, she listened, nodded and walked along the hall towards the top of the stairs. Even their creaking carried so many years of familiarity. Closing the door with habitual care and stepping into the warm night, she grimaced. Sometimes, she thought, I remember who I really was. Really.

Beyond the outhouse that served as kitchen, she breathed easier. *Horses' hooves drumming.* She rubbed at her right temple as she took the path that led to the ravine.

The provision store damaged by the last hurricane knelt almost in her track, its mouth closed by a cross of rough wood. The moon would soon peep over the hill. With that thought in mind, she slipped behind the damaged storehouse, stamped the ground to scare away any lurking wildlife and parted the bushes to retrieve the stash of food she had left hidden there. The small sack seemed still intact. She returned with it to the storehouse.

How they had marvelled that while the larger stores built off the ground had taken the brunt of the storm, its anteroom or *ole quarters* as *they* called it stayed rooted to the ground, its wattle and daub frame barely touched. Listening with every muscle, she slipped the hasp and bent at the doorway. A man could hardly stand indoors but it was built for *them*

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and that was all the space *they* needed. She paused there, small doorframe in hand, scanning trees silhouetted by night, watching towards the ravine.

Mama?

A human whisper among the croaking of frogs and the shrill of crickets. Here's one name, she sighed, stumbling on legs gone to sleep. She hobbled, relishing the sensation of dull speed, towards the distant lime tree to look. The moon had back lit the hills. Wasn't yet standing high overhead.

Come! she called, growing bolder at the thought of her daughter in the dark.

How slender the girl looked, she thought when her shape emerged. How vulnerable. Wordlessly, she hugged her. She led her towards the doorway and pointed to a rough wooden crate covered in an old krukus bag inside the entrance. Made her sit. Sat huddled herself in the doorway, watchful of motion indoors and out.

I was fine, there in Woodlands, Mama, Daughter said. We sent word to say so.

She sounded surly, her mother thought and she exploded, then.

Words! Damn them. I care for them only in Bossman's library, as a job. I know well that I cannot take possession of words. Nor can you, nor anyone else we know. And even that library where Bossman walks today puffing himself up with quiet pride, it will pass. It will disappear in a hurricane or be eaten up by termites, or be bought by some other traveller. Och aye, as he says every day here in Dunfermline Estate. Mark these words. Don't think words are for us.

Once I had words. She spoke quieter. But you? No, Daughter, we are not allowed words. I know—how I know—we can't trust words, either. And since we're not allowed to speak them, have not been allowed, they come out wrong. They get us trouble, words. They unsettle the dust. They trouble you and everyone about you, from your masters to your own flesh and blood. *Bon dieu*, I have so forgotten how to speak. Let me try again though it's like climbing a steep path, that path that I don't want to remember, must not conjure lest I crack *again*. You have got to learn once and for all that here, on this plot, and every other plantation, we are caught in a world where words are snares. We cannot trust words.

She paused, then. Now, please eat!

She pointed to a sack hanging from a low beam in the corner of the room. There's lime juice in that jar behind you.

Daughter does not stir in the storeroom now filled with moonlight. They watch each other until shaking her head, her mother says. There's nothing to you. All skin and bones. It grieves me to see you so. Please eat, she begs, lifting and pushing the battered door against the light.

To keep out mosquitoes, she explains. Human ones, too.

"Mama, who is fatter? You or me?"

Caught out, the mother's laugh is a punctured sigh.

Sh! Eat. Anyway, they're used to me mumbling to myself. Won't sound strange to anyone here. She laughs dry and bitter.

Mama, who is my father?

God, child, are you in trouble?

Mama?

Okay. Okay. You eat. Give me time to draw the words.

I want to tell. I have to start by speaking about a man who would have been your father, about your grandfather, about why we must always toil, about when I was young and had thoughts of love, burning to jump the broomstick. I know that is what is on your mind.

Yes, I *was* young in that other life that some of us call *the Ole Country*. If I strain my eyes enough, I see in the light of so many masantos, men adjusting their robes, their *ajakba*, to keep the mosquitoes at bay. *Ajakba!* You see, words I had forgotten. And my Papa is shaking his head and asking: What good would another wife do?

Oh, what's the point? I should not even speak of it. I need a talking drum to tell of it. A drum! Let me whisper or trouble will surely come.

Why do I sigh? Eyes. Sometimes laughing, sometimes fierce. Fiery. Always alive. You ask if I don't want to tell. No, I suppose not. But since you've bothered me into speech with your talk of jumping the broomstick, then, perhaps. Yes, I mean. Maybe. This kind of thinking prickles my brain. Okay.

He had travelled from way behind the mountains after father died. Yes. I, too, have lived without a father. That's one way to travel the world. And isn't that the way so many of us must travel? Course, I didn't know that then. Father died in battle. I don't know what meaning, if any, that has for you. More to the point, I don't know how to explain—I mean, really explain—how many worlds have come between that one where father died in battle and this one. Muskets? No. I'm talking spears and shields. All ends in death, anyway. But nobody used to die there like we see nowadays. Not every day, except slaves, perhaps. *Except slaves*. But what did I know?

It's not easy to walk back through murky memories to that time. The pain stinks. It cuts to the bone. It's like someone holding your arm over a steaming cauldron, like being honeyed, hunh, and laid out on an anthill in the sun. Or, like being hung from the branch of a flamboyant, worrying that instant about your nakedness, the way your breasts are falling, whether the rope would hold or you'll land on your head, along with red petals in the fiery sun. And your nostrils flare at the scent; your mind numbs. Pain. And that is why I have shut it all away for so long. But I am trying to break silence; to unlock words.

Mama, what colour are my eyes?

I wanted them to carry the darkness of *the ole Country*, Daughter.

But they don't, Mama. They catch the sunlight too easily. Like my skin, Mama. I am not true Daughter of *the Ole Country*, am I, Mama?

That *is* the pain, Daughter. And so, along one path or the next, I'm getting there. Getting to the story you think you want. Don't get impatient. What would you do, drag it out of me? These things are always blown out of proportion, anyway, by the infernal imagination, especially a woman's cursed imagination. I spit on woman's imagination. Believe what you will of what I tell. I have endured it all for one single reason, I think. And that reason is you.

It all began too long ago. How old are you? Sixteen long years? Seventeen? More? Clever people, our masters, to enslave even time. Capturing and containing. Marking minutes, hours, days to control time. Measurement and precision when everybody know that sun up to sun down is still longer for some than others. Illusion and trickery. Scientific witchcraft that should not be questioned. Slaves and fools though we are, we know: days are not the same bottomless depth for everyone in every place. Is not the same for Quashie in the field as for Massa Boss. Quashie knows it. Anyway, who is me, eh? What do I know? I think that everything important happened before this place.

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Mama, you tell me again and again about *the Ole Country* but I was born here. Is Massa Boss my father?

Hush, child. Her mother's hand falls on her arm. Each listens hard beyond the other's breathing.

Hush. Don't repeat the foolish words you hear. There is no end to those. Her voice trembles. This finally is the mother of pain. For you, my hand is in the fire now and I will tell you this only once. Understand why I never was able to say it before.

Her words stumble.

He who touched me with words was not destined to be your father. I was taken by another. The rest has been sorrow. That's the crux of it. I am certain it will kill what is left of me to ever say all that again.

Daughter feels the lines of tears on her mother's face before the choked words fall.

I had not even known tears, then, for Chrissake. Not the draining tears that dry to a clamping headache. Nor tears like the thin trail of a final retching. Nor even tears that churn you into howling: Never again. Never. I would rather slit my throat first.

Now, surely, you begin to understand why I find it difficult to explain: he was not your father. Soon there were manacles, a ship full of desperate bodies, a place like this where a woman's body is the easiest prey. So, he was not your father. Don't ask me to tell you more, she pleads.

It happens all the time. You know that. Bossman returned from his *ole Country*, a place they call Scotland, at the height of the fuss. He rescued me from his brother's plantation. Brought me here to Dunfermline Estate. He took up with me. Don't ask. What do I know about how they think? I no longer cared. Was ready to die anyway. Except for you.

Daughter, we are not the people who have stories that end with lovers living happily ever after. Those people are all in Massa Boss library, in his books that trap words. Yes, I too was once soundly hexed by words. Now I prefer words trapped on pages as in Bossman's library. At least there, I am allowed still, to stay close to them.

The heavy silence between them is broken only by frogs' intermittent croaking.

I wanted you to come back here, Daughter, where I can see what is happening. And truth to tell, he is the best master I have known. After all, I still must say that I am lucky, you know. I am not nearly as grateful as I should be for all the luck I have had. Thanks to Bossman Och-ay, I have a patch of window through which the mosquitoes move freely in and out.

But, maybe that is not for you. So, stay there in the cane in Woodlands, if you wish. Take your chance in the bigger world, as you want. Massa Boss prefers the higher land, the cooler air here in Dunfermline and I hope that you will find me here for a long time, please God. Meantime, you be happy wherever you are for however long it lasts. It does not last. By the time you discover that, you will have already had your best years.

Daughter moves to sit beside her. The two hold tight to each other hearing their hearts beat indoors, faint drums against the shrieking of screech owls out of doors.

Those damn jumbie birds, her mother says.

Don't worry for me, Mama, Daughter tells her.

How so? Her mother asks. Haven't I spent a lifetime worrying for you?

Time to stop, Daughter says. Beau is worrying for me now. I just heard his whistle again. He left me here and said he would whistle for me.

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And shouldn't I meet this Beau who is stealing you away? And aren't you afraid to be walking the night like this?

You met him before and you will again, Mama, she says. There is fear and there is fear. Go in, now, before Bossman comes searching. Until next time, she whispers.

A shadow watches two women embrace by the old storehouse door. One slips into the night. The other, slower, carries moonlight on her heels. She wipes her bare feet with care on the rough coconut matting at the kitchen's entrance and steps into the darkness of the Great House.