

## The Night Mirror

**Y**ola was running. She could hear Faran, one of her older brothers, laughing just behind her. She had tried to be clever and had dodged between the main hut and the granary, but now she realised why Faran was laughing: it was a trap. The others had cut her off. Gabbin was hopping up and down, yelling. In front of her was a circle of older women sitting on the ground; before them was spread a sheet with a neat pile of sorted millet seeds at the centre. 'Home' was the great tree at the centre of the compound. She decided to jump clean over both the sheet and the women. It would be a huge jump. She stepped back to increase her take-off, accelerated, coiled and sprang. As her foot pressed down on the ground, she felt it give slightly. As she was thrown skyward by the blast, she heard her own scream.

'Eehh ... eehh ... Quiet, child ... quiet ... you're all right. You're safe now.'

Yola realised that her mouth was open. Had she really screamed? Yes, her back was arched to scream again. She closed her lips tightly, but it became a silent scream, slicing through the hospital walls and racing like a jackal through the town. Past her home, up the hill where ghost soldiers from years ago hesitated in their work, spines chilled, suddenly uneasy, as the jackal passed by.

‘Eehh ... easy, my child ... relax ... it was just a dream.’

Gradually her back unbowed. Her mother was pressing a cup to her lips.

‘I was jumping, Mother. I was jumping so high.’ She paused. ‘Mother ... my leg’s hurting again.’

‘It will love, they say it will. You must be brave.’

In the ceiling above her, a fan turned lazily, it moved the thick, hot air and stirred the frightening smells of the hospital. She watched a fly on one of its arms turning ... turning. It must be giddy, she thought.

Yola remembered very little about the drive to the hospital. Mother told her she had been taken on a moped. All she remembered was the smell of the man’s sweatshirt; he was a mechanic and he smelt of oil. She was tied on to him in case she fell off. She drifted in and out of consciousness.

When they had arrived at the hospital, the doctor was cross. He was from a different tribe and was fuming and fussing in his own language. Was it her fault? But when he spoke to her in English, he was kind and said that he was just angry with the people who made landmines. She hadn’t even known what a landmine was. She had asked him if Managu were safe, but he didn’t seem to know who Managu was.

Someone in the ward said, ‘Power cut.’

Yola was called back to the present. She looked up. The fan had stopped turning. The fly buzzed, spiralling down. She knew it would be giddy.

There’d been a power cut during her operation, too. She told the surgeon how she had woken to see them all crouched over her, faces masked, foreheads streaming with sweat, and how one of them had said, ‘She’s coming round.’ The surgeon had laughed when she told him this.

‘So you did wake? Yes, we had to put you to sleep again;

we've so little anaesthetic, I'm sorry. You see the lights went out for half an hour and I couldn't see a thing. Then they got the generator going. I'm afraid we didn't save your knee,' he added, smiling as he walked away.'

They all talked like that, as if she had no leg, but she could feel it. Let them talk, secretly she knew that her leg was still there. If she believed that it was there hard enough, then it would be. But when the doctors came to work on her, she closed her eyes tight, she could not look, she would not look! Yet the questions came.

'Which leg is it, Mother?' she whispered for the twentieth time.

'It's your left, chook.'

'It can't be Mother, I can still feel it. It feels like it's there.' Her mother mopped her forehead.

'The doctor says it will feel like that. He says you were lucky. Your body's not hurt.'

Yola noticed that Mother was crying quietly. She took her hand; it was rough with work. A surge of sympathy for that poor, worn hand tipped the balance – it was time for her to look at her leg. But how? There was a sort of basket over the foot of the bed, under the sheet. Probably to keep the weight of the sheet off her. It was no use looking to see how the sheet lay against her legs. She stared at the ceiling, grappling with the problem.

The fly had recovered from its giddiness and began to work its way up the window to where a small flap was tilted open for ventilation. Yola watched its passage to freedom. She was a prisoner. Was she going to spend the rest of her life staring at the ceiling, too frightened ever to look down at what might not be there? The power came on again and the fan resumed its lazy turning. Someone turned on the lights; night was turning the

windows of the lighted ward into mirrors against the dark. The small window at the top was tilted at an angle, the fly had got to it and was walking about on its mirror surface. Yola noticed, looking at the reflection in the glass, that she could see the foot of her bed.

‘Mother,’ she whispered, ‘the basket thing over my feet is uncomfortable. Could you take it off for a moment.’

Eyes tight shut, Yola wondered if she would be able to open her eyes when the moment came. She listened to her mother’s movements as she stood and began to turn back the sheet. For a second, Yola hoped that perhaps Mother wouldn’t bother to move the basket, but no, the basket was off and she could feel the movement of air against her skin. It was now or never.

She opened her eyes and stared up, gazing at the window, now a mirror above her. What she saw was confusing at first. She could make out her right leg, black against the sheet; she wriggled her foot. Then she looked to where her left leg should be. She thought she could see it, like a ghost, beside the other one. She blinked and the image was gone, leaving just white sheet. There was nothing, no leg at all – she couldn’t understand, surely there was something left!

Gripping the side of the bed and summoning all her courage, she struggled to move what she still felt to be her left leg. Then at last she could see it! It was swathed in bandages, white against the white sheet, which was why she could not see it before. Bandages covered her thigh right down to where her knee should be. But there the bandages stopped. Like a great, soft, overpowering weight the full calamity of what had happened to her hit Yola.



She had never been in a taxi before. It bounced and bucketed in and out of the potholes on the way from the hospital and she had to brace herself against the front seat with her crutches to avoid being thrown about. Mother sat in the back, leaning forward and shouting at the driver to be careful. For the last week, Yola had thought of nothing but coming home, imagining this moment, returning to her family, to normality at last. The taxi drew up outside the compound; the engine coughed to a halt and Yola could hear the blare of music coming from inside. There must be a party going on, that was Uncle Banda's ghetto blaster.

'Mother?' she began, feeling panicky now, but Mother had hustled in ahead of her. She heard the music stop in mid-beat. That's it – kill the music, she thought.

Yola leaned forward on her crutches, but for some reason her leg wouldn't follow. She tried again, but it just wouldn't move! It seemed to be rooted to the beaten earth. Nobody come out ... don't look! she willed as she struggled against ... what? Suddenly she realised that it was shame. She never felt shame! But this was different – it was shame of her body. In hospital everyone had been sick or injured, their injuries were often a source of pride and each new skill they learned a triumph. But now Yola felt naked. She had liked her body, it was a beautiful, strong body, but now it was spoiled and everyone would see that. She hadn't even thought to ask Mother to lengthen her dress.

She turned, she would go back to the hospital, back to where people without legs were normal. The taxi would take her. But where had it gone? It had slipped away and was already half-way down the hill, free-wheeling to save precious petrol.

At that moment she heard a cough and turned back. Gabbin stood in the compound entrance, standing very straight, with a

new herdsman's spear at his side, a lethal-looking point glinting on the shaft. Someone had painted two white streaks on his cheeks – a boy's mark. Of course! he was now ten years old, and obviously taking his new status very seriously.

'Gabbin!' she exclaimed, 'I'm stuck!'

She had not seen him since her accident and wanted to hug him, but clearly for him this was some sort of ceremonial occasion. She quenched her grin, lowered her head as she would to someone very senior and made to move towards him. Fortunately, this time her leg obeyed her. With a stiff nod of acknowledgement, Gabbin turned and walked solemnly ahead of her into the compound.

They advanced slowly across the open space. Yola wondered what on earth was happening but, as is proper, kept the customary three paces behind her man. She glanced up briefly and out of the corners of her eyes saw that the compound was full of people. Why were they here, she wondered, but she focussed her eyes on where Gabbin was leading her.

In the very centre of the compound, under the great tree that had figured in her dream, sat Father in his robes on his ceremonial chair, his chief's fly-switch in his right hand. She had forgotten how frightening Father could look on formal occasions. The small noises about the compound died down. A baby cried, but that only added to the sense of quiet. Yola noted the knot of women – the gossips, as she called them – eyeing her closely. There were girls in the hospital who had been thrown out by their families. Perhaps this was how it happened.

Yola sensed everybody watching her, but tried to concentrate on Father and the two people seated on either side of him. Sister Martha was there on his right; she was headmistress of Yola's school. The little Irishwoman looked like an alert pink-and-grey parrot on a perch. Why was she here? On Father's

other side sat Senior Mother, hunched like a vulture, eyes darting left and right.

Suddenly, from among the gossips, came a hoarse whisper, 'Who'd give a bride-price for that!'

Senior Mother whipped around with a hiss of disapproval. The comment had not been loud, but Gabbin had heard it. Yola nearly bumped into him – he had stopped rigid, drawing himself up to his full height. Then, as Father leaned forward to rise, Gabbin forestalled him. He took a step and lifted his spear. Senior Mother straightened sharply as Gabbin's voice rang out through the compound.

'Father,' said Gabbin, 'since Yola has lost her leg there are those who say no man will give you the money to make her his bride.'

Yola heard him – everyone in the compound heard him – his voice was clear and very definite. A movement like a sudden wind swept through the gathering. Everyone had been taken by surprise, not least of all Father, who was caught still in the act of rising. They all knew that Yola's life was ruined, that no one would give a price for a girl who could not dig, or work, or carry. They knew that her fate now was to grow old as a sort of perpetual aunt in the compound. But this wasn't the moment to speak or even hint at such things. There was a confused movement; people were uncomfortable. Gabbin must be stopped, but how to do it? A delicious tingle ran down Yola's back; something very special was happening. Father held up his hand, freezing the movements around the compound.

'Go on, Gabbin.' Father was now towering above him.

In a clear, challenging voice, Gabbin said, 'Father, when I am old enough, I will marry Yola. She will be my Senior Wife and my other wives will look after her.'

Yola nearly exploded. She wanted to stop him, and at the

same time to hug him; he was breaking every taboo imaginable! Had nobody told him? No boy could marry his first cousin, even as one of many wives. Then there was Sister Martha: she'd be horrified by the suggestion. The Catholic Church took a very serious view of men, even chiefs like Father, who had more than one wife. They had a name for it but she could not remember it. The compound was filled with a stunned silence. Yola was about to move forward when Sister Martha got up and addressed Father.

'Chief Abonda, you have here the perfect little Christian!' She turned to Gabbin, 'You wouldn't see your cousin stuck, would you, little man? I call that noble.'

Then, to Gabbin's obvious horror, she swept the terrified boy, spear and all, into her arms. Yola could imagine Gabbin's face. He'd hardly ever seen a white woman before, let alone been hugged by one. Eventually, Sister Martha released him; he looked shaken for a moment then recovered his dignity manfully. Please don't anyone laugh, Yola willed. A child clapped, the thin sound of small hands, then someone else took it up, and from there the clapping spread like fire in dry grass. Soon the whole compound was full of it. Not silly clapping, but real grown-up clapping. Gathering his dignity about him, Gabbin did an abrupt about-turn. For a split second, Yola's eyes met his and suddenly she understood: Gabbin knew that he could never marry her, but he had risked looking foolish in order to give them all a lesson in manners. He wasn't going to have people muttering against Yola.

The clapping faded, Yola turned and found that Father was standing in front of her. He looked into her eyes and for a second their minds seemed to touch – yes, she realised, he understood about Gabbin, too.

'People-' he began but halted. 'People of our tribe ...'

Suddenly, Yola realised he was fighting against uncontrollable laughter.

‘People, look on our daughter, Yola, witness that we welcome her back into our family.’

At that he could get no further. Like a volcano erupting, he burst into laughter, shaking and mopping his eyes.

‘Gabbin,’ he roared, ‘we’ll make a chief of you yet.’

For a moment, Yola was engulfed in the folds of his robes. ‘Well,’ he chuckled in her ear, ‘not all girls have an offer of marriage at thirteen. You’ll make me rich yet.’

As he held her, the clapping changed to the happy roar of a party in full swing and, through and above the bellow of the ghetto blaster, Yola heard the shouts and yips of her friends. Father released her. A great weight seemed to lift from her; she threw herself forward on to her crutches and lurched across the compound towards them.