

THE
HOUSE
OF
SHELLS
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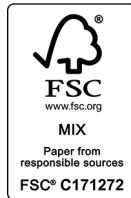
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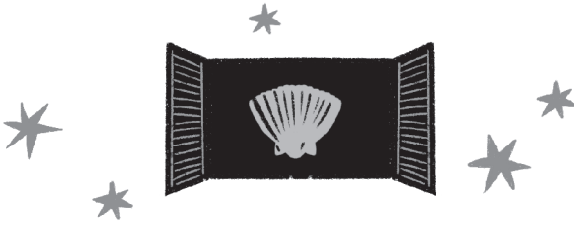
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*For Shola, Enina and Leila
I love that you share my love for books
This one, is another one
for you*





*In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet;
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And the repeated time.*

Wole Soyinka, 'Abiku'

1



THE WEIGHT OF A NAME

‘**K**o-ku-mo!’

Kuki jerked up, her story notepad dropping out of her hands on to the floor. The page she had been writing on disappeared between the others, along with the wisp of an idea she had just had to save the situation for her heroine.

Aunty’s loud voice calling her full name was always a shock. Everyone else called her Kuki.

Kuki struggled out of bed, and hurried towards the kitchen. She already felt guilty even though she was sure she hadn’t done anything wrong. Or had she?

Since they had moved into Dr D’s house, his sister came round and hovered over them like the

Wicked Witch of the West. Gone were the quiet, cosy times of just Mum and her in their little flat. Even though Kuki wanted to be happy for her mum that she had found a new husband after so many years, sometimes she couldn't help being angry with her for disrupting their lives.

‘Yes, Aunty?’ she said timidly, sticking her head into the hot kitchen. Her eyes immediately began to water from the thick peppery palm oil fumes that filled the air. Aunty was sitting on a stool at the kitchen table, a shiny gele tied meticulously around her head, her arms and neck covered with glittering jewellery.

‘Your mother is pregnant and should be resting,’ she said. ‘Why are you not here helping her in the kitchen? A big girl like you! Quick, cut slices of yam, two for each person.’

Kuki glanced at her mum who was at the sink washing a bunch of leaves. She had to stretch her arms to reach the tap because her belly was in the way.

Mum rolled her eyes and winked at Kuki. ‘I told Kuki to rest because she had a tough week in school,’ she said.

Unfortunately, that was the worst thing to have said.

Aunty immediately turned to examine Kuki. 'Are you feeling weak?' she asked, her eyes narrowing.

Kuki shook her head quickly. 'I feel perfectly fine, Aunty. I'll just go get the yam,' she said, hoping that would be the end of the matter. Since the day Aunty had heard that Kuki had been ill when she was a baby and fainted once when she was little, she had begun to act strangely, constantly asking her about how she felt.

Kuki hurried to the small storeroom at the other end of the kitchen and grabbed a yam.

Aunty was rummaging in the glittery handbag on her lap when she returned. 'In fact, I have something for both of you,' she said.

She pulled out a black plastic bag and tore it open. A package of crumpled newspapers fell out with a metallic thump. She began to separate layers of newspaper until a curious heap of metal chains and bangles decorated with feathers and colourful threads, clattered on to the table.

'This is protection for both of you,' Aunty said.

‘They are special amulets welded together by a famous Babalawo that my friend recommended.’

‘You went to a Babalawo?’ Mum asked, her eyes as wide as if they were about to plop out of her head. ‘Goodness, Bisola, why would you go to some shady juju man shack to get these?’

‘It wasn’t a shack and he wasn’t shady,’ Aunty retorted sharply. ‘He had an office which was very well kept. He is a very modern Babalawo.’

‘Well, that’s even worse,’ Mum said, placing her hands on her hips. ‘You shouldn’t patronize such people. That only keeps such superstitious beliefs alive. And I have told you so many times, we do not need any protection! We are perfectly well and fine, and nothing will happen to us.’

Kuki reached out to pick up one of the bracelets. It had thin red threads intricately woven through a chain with a tiny bell attached to its centre. It actually looked quite pretty. She had never seen anything like it before.

‘Kuki! Do not touch those godless things,’ Mum cried.

But Kuki’s fingers had already stopped in mid-air. The beautiful bracelet had suddenly felt wrong

to her – as if it were too bright, too harsh. She shuddered. Were these things really juju?

‘Please go to your room, Kuki. I want to talk to your aunt,’ Mum said.

‘Ahn-ahn, you should take these things seriously, Grace,’ Aunty said. ‘Why are you being so stubborn? And you should stop calling that child Kuki! Call her by her full name. K-o-k-u-m-o! Remind her every day that she will not die.’

Her words cut through the air like daggers and the usual worry stabbed the inside of Kuki’s belly. Not because she was afraid that she would die. She felt strong and full of life and, like her mum, she didn’t believe in superstitions. But her name – which meant: ‘this one will not die!’ – was such an awful reminder for her mum of the time just after her birth, when Kuki had been very ill and spent weeks at the hospital.

Kuki sighed. She wished she hadn’t been given such a heavy name to bear, tainted with fear and worry. Her father had given it to her, only to abandon them shortly afterwards.

As she edged towards the door Kuki glanced back nervously.

Her mum looked as if she had just drunk a cup of concentrated, bitter Agbo during a bout of malaria. ‘Kuki does not need any reminder of that,’ she said. ‘She knows it!’ Mum picked up her knife and chopped off the stems from the leaves with one angry stroke. ‘Bisola, I would appreciate it if you would not bring such things into this house.’

‘Grace, why won’t you be sensible?’ Aunty said. ‘You are pregnant and at your most vulnerable. You have to protect yourself.’

Kuki stood in the corridor, out of sight, her fingers kneading her T-shirt. Aunty’s voice was quiet as if she was trying to sound soothing and kind, but her words were razor sharp.

‘Bisola, you should know by now that I do not believe in these old folk tales about wicked spirits, these Abiku, that haunt families and hurt children. But even if I did, Kuki is almost thirteen now. She is the living proof that we have won and overcome. Nothing will happen to us, to this baby or to Kuki!’