

These Things that Our Mothers Don't Dare Talk About

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| Togo |

translated by Lemuel Robinson

My mother had taught me how to clean that part of me whose name I didn't have the right to pronounce without taking care to explain the job to me. I am thus engaged in a quest for answers to the numerous questions that assailed my spirit concerning the nightingale as a young girl. No one knew what name to give to the voluptuous lady that had set herself up in the only two-room in our community, so my oldest brother Yaya declared one day that she would be called "Nightingale." I practically harassed him day and night so he would tell me why he had chosen that nickname, but he always replied that I was too young to understand. That was always the problem with me. I was too young to reveal things to, too young to participate in conversations, too young for my opinion to be taken into account. I would have to wait a few more years, but back then, well, the situation hadn't changed much.

It seemed that before the nightingale moved into our court, she lived at home in Benin at one of the most upscale residences of the capital in a big duplex, and she had a car and driver. The whole household spent their time talking about her. The nightingale was a favorite topic of morning gossip among the neighborhood moms; at noon they'd spread their mats under the mango tree in the courtyard to peel peanuts for the evening meal because it was too hot inside. Their outbursts of laughter could be heard everywhere, no matter where you were. I particularly appreciated the nightingale, but I kept from saying it out loud from fear of angering my mother and attracting the ire of our neighbors.

"Walayi, he died happy at least! Several would kill for that chance," exclaimed Zina as she twisted her daughter's hair in the hope of giving her a hairdo that resembled something

more tolerable. My mother watched her silently and then, when Zina stopped talking, asked in a concerned tone, “Died happy, you say?”

«Yes» replied Zina, not having seen the dirty look my mother was giving her. I think that what my mother wanted to make Zina understand was that a dead man stayed dead, happy or not. There was nothing at all to boast about or envy of the deceased. I don’t know if it’s because of this person who died happy or something else, but one sure thing is that my mother started keeping her distance from that day forward. How do I know? Well it’s because that evening my mother didn’t offer Zina and her flock of children any of our dinner like she usually did. Not that evening or the ones that followed.

At 12, I had hardly started to search for my bearings, to forge a personality for myself, but I already knew who I didn’t want to take after. I didn’t want to turn out like my mother who always harbored an air of sadness and wore dingy clothing. I didn’t want to resemble our neighbors that spent their time washing, cleaning, and yelling after their kids anymore. Further, I knew who I wanted to look like: I wanted to be like the Nightingale, the only one who embodied femininity in my eyes. She was a fine woman with large eyes. She was always put together, dressed in bright colors that reminded you that life was worth living. She had a new hairstyle each week, the same way that she changed companions. She knew she was the center of the neighborhood gossip but was at ease with it, and I found that attitude incredible.

I wasn’t allowed to mingle with the boys from the neighborhood, nor the girls older than me. Only the girls my age. It was one of my mother’s rules. I always did everything she wanted, except I felt that the nightingale had things to teach me, and I felt there was a sort of tacit friendship between the two of us. I saw it in the smiles she gave me each time I said hello to her or the winks that she gave me when she noticed I was raptly observing her. So little by little I was getting closer to my new best friend without anyone knowing. I offered my help with little chores when my mother wasn’t around and a respite from the indiscrete and disapproving looks of the neighborhood women. I used to weave in and out of her living room just to see her paint her nails and treat her hair. I considered each of these moments sacred because I was finally learning how to become a woman. One time I dared ask her if she was caught up on the rumors about her.

She stared at me for an instant, then asked if she could approach me. I agreed shyly and went over to a spot she made for me next to her. "You see? The woman has been gifted with an immense power and it finds itself there." And that "there" that she pointed out to me was situated at the base of my belly. After a deep inspiration, she continued, "for the instant you are a little caterpillar but the day will come when you become a pretty butterfly and there, the source of your ability will be ready for use. I was able to, that's why all these embittered women talk about me." I remember telling her, "Teach me now how to use my power," but she turned her head laughingly and suggested we slow down a bit. And that's how I began my apprenticeship in the art of being a woman. When she was in a good mood, my friend talked to me about her exploits with men, things that she was able to get just by using her power. All of these tales made my curiosity grow. I then decided one night to look more closely at that corner of myself I always ignored.

Squatting in our room in the middle of clothes and casseroles, dress rolled up to the waist, panties down by my ankles, I held a piece of my mother's mirror. I brought it as close as possible to my thighs looking desperately for the best position to explore that Ali Baba's cavern that the nightingale had told me so much about when the door swung open. Was that surprise or anger on my mother's face? I wouldn't know which to say.

My heart sank when I was caught with my hand in the bag, or should I say, near my crotch. My mother took me by my hair and pulled me down to the courtyard without bothering with my pleading. She grabbed the first thing that she saw, a spatula. She hit me repeating, "Is this how I raised you? Who taught you that? You want to throw your life away? You want to end up like me in a common court with two children, without a father?" And things got worse when Yaya added that he had surprised me several times leaving the room of the nightingale. I understood in that moment that I was going to bring problems onto my best friend. I screamed again and again, begging her to stop, but she didn't want to. She beat me until our neighbor Zina who, instead of taking my mother's claws off me, rushed to bring powdered pepper with which they powdered my intimate parts. Hunched over in a corner of the house, I wasn't even able to cry anymore. I only thought about one thing: running far away from that unhappy courtyard.

At the time, when my mother surprised me, I apologized profusely as if I recognized my

guilt. I think that if the same thing happened today, I would hold my head up and tell her, “I have had enough of taboos, I want to talk about them!”
