

Eggs

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Grace à Dieu and her friend Solange pick their way by moonlight down the dirt paths of their Bangui neighborhood, wandering towards the main road where streetlamps will light their way to the Bar Etoile. Other than the steady singing of crickets and the sporadic bark of a dog, the neighborhood is quiet. Most of the houses they pass are closed up for the night, wooden shutters secured, faint slits of orange light from a kerosene lamp seeping through an occasional crack in a shutter. The humid night air sticking against her skin, Grace tries to remember not to lick off the lipstick that Solange applied to her lips. She is unsettled by Solange's uncharacteristic silence, although her friend did mention at the start of their walk that Alexi might be at the Bar Etoile—information that made Grace's stomach contract into a knot. Grace can't tell if she's nervous about seeing him or if she's just hungry—she hasn't eaten since midday, when she bought a stick of fermented cassava at the market where she sells dried fish.

Despite her hunger, Grace feels lucky. She finally has a place to live and a new friend in Solange. Although it's only been two years since her mother died, she's almost forgotten wandering with her two younger sisters from their village for several days to reach the capital of the Central African Republic. A distant aunt took in her sisters, but insisted that Grace, who was thirteen at the time, was old enough to fend for herself. So she slept outdoors and picked up odd jobs around the market, carrying loads for merchants, until she was able to get a market stand of her own, and finally a place to sleep—a one-room, mud hut with a thatched roof that leaks when it rains.

Yes, her luck has finally changed. And the next step—if her luck holds—is to find a man with the means to live in a more permanent home, a house with a solid tin roof, more than one room, and a latrine that's not communal. A place that's big enough for her sisters to come live with her.

This is where Solange comes in. She, too, has plans to meet the right man, and has expressed clear ideas how to go about it. Two years older than Grace, Solange already has a baby who is being cared for by the mother of the baby's father. Grace knows that her own experience with men—she's only slept with one person, a boy about her age who went back to his village a month ago—is eclipsed by her friend's, and she is grateful to have found such a good source of information and advice.

Approaching the main road, Grace hears the bustle of the nighttime crowd, the clamor of an animated Congolese song from distorted speakers. People are either walking briskly to get somewhere, hanging around idly, or hawking wares. Several boys brush past them, carrying wooden trays of cigarettes, chewing gum, or cola nuts. Two women sell *kangoya* out of large jugs on tables, their clients seated on benches, drinking the milky palm wine from tin cans. Solange, too, runs a *kangoya* stand that Grace passes on her way home from the market. Two months ago Solange called her over, cracked a joke, chatted with her; now Grace stops to talk with her every day. When Solange suggested she come out with her tonight, she didn't hesitate to say yes. Solange always knows how to make the people around her laugh, and Grace wants to laugh. Besides, she feels grown up around her older friend, and Grace is eager to finally become an adult, to leave behind her childhood and the memories of her mother's illness.

A green bus rolls by, honking, and then a taxi. While Solange pauses before a roadside stand, pawing through wares displayed in a propped-up wooden case, Grace stares at a boy nearby holding a stack of square cardboard egg trays, with several layers of boiled eggs arranged in a tall pyramid on the top tray. Eggs were one of the few things that her mother ate towards the end of her illness, boiled and mashed up, or scrambled and fried. Grace brought her the food as she lay on a dirty foam mattress. A *pagne* cloth had been spread over the bed, but the ends were too short to stay tucked under the mattress and it kept bunching up beneath her. By then her mother was so thin that Grace feared her bones would tear through her skin.

Solange's laughter pierces Grace's thoughts. "It's always good to be prepared," she's telling the vendor, then adds with a wink: "It's too late to dig a well when the house is already on fire." He laughs, making an abrupt, cough-like sound. Though she doesn't understand what her friend is talking about, Grace is used to Solange spouting proverbs, most of them borrowed from her late father, a preacher who had three wives.

Solange gives the vendor two coins and he hands her a small cardboard box, which she opens, pulling out a strip of three condom packets. Grace recognizes what they are—when she went to the hospital a few months ago for a twisted ankle, she had to sit through an informational session where a nurse waved a condom in front of the crowd of waiting patients. Tearing off one of the packets, Solange offers it to Grace, who hesitates. She's never used one before, isn't even sure how to use it. "Don't be silly, Grace," Solange insists. Embarrassed that the people around them might notice what she's holding out to her, Grace grabs the condom and tucks the packet into the *pagne* tied around her waist.

Continuing their walk to the Bar Etoile, Solange finally slips into her usual chattiness, as if energized by the noise and crowds on the main road. “I’ll bet you anything the Rabbit will be there, looking for you,” she says. “I told him we’d be there.”

Solange has dubbed Alexi, one of her regular customers at the *kangoya* stand, “the Rabbit” because of his oversized front teeth. The first time Grace saw him, she pretended to ignore him—after all, he was clearly much older than she was—even though he stared at her the whole time she talked with Solange. Since then, he has started to joke with her, and his drinking friends play along and call her his wife. Two days ago, he took her to the *mishmi* stand to eat grilled meat. They sat side-by-side, chewing and talking, hands touching as they reached for chunks of meat and dipped them into spicy red powder before popping them into their mouths. It made her feel grown-up to have a mature man seated next to her paying for her food, as if she really were his wife, as if they belonged together. And although she can’t imagine sleeping with him just yet, much less bearing his children someday, she’s decided that she likes his toothy smile.

“You could do a lot worse than him, you know,” Solange continues. “He makes good money from his taxi, and he’ll treat you well.”

Grace knows that Solange wants to meet someone who will take care of her and her baby, maybe someone like Alexi with a regular source of income. On more than one occasion, she’s said that when she gets married, she’ll be able to take the baby back from its grandmother. In the time Grace has known her, Solange has had three boyfriends who bought her things and promised that they would live together one day, but they all eventually disappeared.

Looking at her friend, dressed in multicolored pants and a flowing top, her hair in long, thin braids, Grace thinks how beautiful she looks, how effortlessly she attracts attention, fluttering around like a bright butterfly. Despite herself, she looks down at her own outfit—made of cloth printed with tiny, dark-blue flowers against a white background—and wonders if anyone will even notice her next to her vivacious friend.

“You’re so pretty,” Grace tells Solange. “You’ll find someone even better than Alexi.”

“Of course I will,” Solange answers. “Stop looking so serious when you say that—it’s very unattractive. Trust me, no man likes a serious girl.” As if to demonstrate, Solange lets loose a boisterous laugh, just as the Bar Etoile appears ahead, its walls painted midnight blue with large silver stars.

The requisite boys in dirty shorts and T-shirts are selling wares by the entrance. Grace watches one of them carry a pyramid of eggs, looking much

like the egg-boy she saw earlier. A second boy laughs and jostles him, making one of the boiled eggs fall to the ground, breaking its shell. The egg-boy looks at the smashed egg for a second, placing the tray on the ground before giving the other boy a deft karate kick. Two others throw themselves into the fray, either to pull them apart or to join in, but Grace barely notices the commotion. Instead, she gazes at the fallen egg, its brown shell shattered into a crackled pattern as intricate as a spider web. A piece of shell has split off one end, exposing the glistening surface of white underneath, speckled by flecks of red dirt, a deep gash revealing a tantalizing glimpse of the golden yolk inside. She remembers her mother’s words that if she ate an egg a day she would grow into a *ngangou wali*, a strong woman, and her stomach rumbles. She wonders if she could reach out and snatch the shattered egg without being noticed; she imagines picking off the dirt and bits of broken shell to resurrect a meal. But before she can act on her impulse, Solange grabs her by the arm and yanks her into the club.

The bar, an enormous space with a concrete floor that seems to vibrate from the booming music, is crowded with people dressed in their well-ironed, best clothes, seated on chairs at low wooden tables or dancing on the teeming dance floor. Grace is startled by the bar’s lighting—not because of the dimness, which she’d expected, but because the white clothes worn by various patrons are glowing a luminous blue-white color she’s only seen in bolts of lightning. As she and Solange weave through the sweaty crowd, taking a full tour around the dance floor, Grace tries to imitate her friend’s stroll—head held up high and hips swaying to the thumping music. They find a few empty chairs in the back and sit down.

“No one will see us back here,” Solange complains. Grace can barely hear her over the music, has just had time to understand what she said, when Solange nudges her, shouting into her ear. “The Rabbit’s coming.”

Looking in the same direction as Solange, Grace spies Alexi pushing his way through the crowd towards them, another man trailing behind him. Even though Alexi has an average build, he looks short next to his friend, who is at least a head taller. He introduces the tall man, yelling over the noise, “This is Alphonse.”

Maybe it’s the loud music, maybe she’s lightheaded from hunger, but for a moment as she gazes at Alphonse’s tall figure, Grace thinks of her father. Although he died a few years before her mother, four years after her parents had stopped living together, she remembers him as a vague, tall presence in the first eight years of her life, a shadow that slipped in and out of the house,

usually coming home just for meals. As Alphonse bends his frame to sit next to Solange, Grace peers at him more closely, realizing that except for his height, he actually looks nothing like her father. Still, the fleeting moment of familiarity has reminded her of a time when her mother was still healthy, her family intact, and for a moment she is confused by the clamor and bustle of the club.

Alexi has found a chair and is sitting next to Grace. “After a long day of work,” he says to her, “it’s nice to look at something that looks as good as you. I’ve been spending so much time in my taxi I may as well live in it. Would you like to live with me in my taxi, Grace?” he asks with a wink.

Distracted by the lingering memory of her father, Grace isn’t sure how to respond. Instead, Solange leans across Grace to shout at Alexi, “Your old taxi isn’t a place for a nice girl like Grace. A diamond doesn’t belong in a dung pile. Besides,” she adds, her voice rising an octave into what Grace recognizes as her teasing voice, “where would she cook your meals—in the trunk?”

Alexi laughs as Solange settles back into her chair. “Talking about cooking is giving me an appetite,” he says, looking around the club. “Isn’t there something to eat around here?” He makes a loud hissing noise to grab the attention of the egg-boy who has brought his cardboard trays inside.

“Give us four, and add some hot pepper,” Alexi tells the boy, who places the trays on the table and grabs one of the beige ovals from the top of the pyramid. The boy taps it with a spoon and then carefully peels the shell off, leaving some on the bottom to hold it without touching the actual egg. Splicing the top with a knife, he inserts hot pepper powder into the opening before handing the egg to Alexi and then starting on the next one. Alexi passes the egg to Grace, who takes the offering with both hands, staring down at it, forgetting for a moment the earlier hunger that gnawed at her insides.

Her mother had always been a deeply religious person, so Grace was not surprised that in her final days she called out not to her children, but to God, asking Him, “What have I done to deserve this? Who will take care of my children when I die?” By then she’d wasted away—despite Grace’s best efforts to feed her—into a skin-cloaked skeleton. When her mother refused the eggs she brought her, Grace ate them instead. Since her mother’s death she has not touched a single egg, as if by avoiding them she’ll be able to forget her mother’s illness and its aftermath.

“Aren’t you going to eat it?” Alexi asks. He’s holding another egg in his hand, his eyes and teeth glowing intensely in the bar’s strange lights. Solange and Alphonse are eating theirs, leaning into each other and laughing at a shared joke. Grace eats her egg in three bites, swallowing it without tasting it. She feels a sudden surge of her mother’s presence, her mother’s exhortation for

her to grow up, to become a strong woman. Alexi offers her the egg he’s been holding and she grabs it, suddenly eager to fill the emptiness in her belly.

Later, only a few hours before the sun will rise again, Grace and Alexi are watching their two friends dance to a slow song. Their hips are glued together in an undulating rhythm, their eyes closed, Solange’s left arm wrapped around Alphonse’s shoulder, her other arm falling loosely to her side. Only a few couples are left on the dance floor, each locked together in a private dance. Leaning towards Grace, Alexi shouts, “It’s too loud in here. I want to talk to you outside.” He has to repeat himself, because she can barely hear him over the music. When she understands him the second time, she nods her head.

Outside, the air is much cooler. The egg-boy is standing in front of the club, sharing a cigarette with the boy he’d fought earlier, their brawl apparently forgotten. Only a few eggs remain on his stack of cardboard trays. Grace follows Alexi as he passes the boys, around the wall to the side of the club, stopping at the back corner. Other than the throbbing of the music through the wall, they are undisturbed. She feels him staring at her, as if he is deliberating about what he wants to say.

“Look,” he says, “I like you. I can be nice to you and help you, but you have to be nice to me, too. I work hard all day and at night I get lonely.”

He hasn’t touched her, and Grace thinks that he almost looks sad. She wants to tell him that she likes him, too, but she can’t seem to contort her tongue to form the words—her tongue feels as if it has suddenly grown too big for her mouth. Afraid that she might be appearing childish, she scrambles to think what Solange would do, then pulls the condom from the waist of her *pagne*, slipping it gently into his palm.

She watches Alexi hopefully as he opens his hand to look at her offering. His eyes seem to focus on it for a second before he jerks back his arm, dropping the condom as if it were a glowing ember that burned his hand. He takes a step backwards, obscuring his face in the shadows.

“I don’t wear those,” he sputters. “There’s no point if it’s not meat against meat,” he adds, using the expression “*nyama na nyama*,” a line from a song that was popular when her mother was still alive.

Grace, too, takes a step back, surprised by the vehemence in his tone. Until now, he has never raised his voice to her. He grabs her upper arm and pulls her to him, his voice quieter but laced with urgency: “Are you telling me I’m not clean? I thought you trusted me.”

Not wanting to upset him further, Grace remains quiet and avoids eye contact. He finally relaxes the grip on her arm and drops his hand.

“I’m sorry, Grace,” he says. “But it hurts me that you think I’m not clean. If you want me to be your friend, you have to trust me. I’m older than you; I know what I’m doing.” While he’s talking to her, he takes her hand and places it on the front of his pants, rubbing the palm of her hand against the hardness behind his zipper. She lets him move her hand there and doesn’t say anything. Leaning into her, his beer-scented breath hot against her cheek, he mutters, “Don’t worry, Grace, I know how to take care of you.” Then he pushes her hand away and unzips his pants.

Even as he crushes her against the wall, she knows that she could call out for help and that the egg-boy and his friend would maybe come and stop this from happening. But she remembers Solange’s words, *he’ll treat you well*, and she doesn’t make a sound. She lets him mash his closed lips into hers while he raises her *pagne* and fumbles with the front of his pants. She feels the rough cement wall pressing against her back through her blouse, the vibrations from the bass of the music inside pounding through her, and the sharp, tiny rips as he pushes his way inside her. Letting her body go limp, she stares out over his shoulder at the splatter of stars in the dark African sky. She feels as if her body is a separate part of her, as if she is floating away from her bones and flesh and skin, drifting up into the night air, the darkness folding softly around her like the wings of a great, blue-black butterfly.

Her mother had made it sound so easy, this process of growing up and growing strong, of navigating the precarious river to adulthood—a mere matter of eating a daily egg. Now that Grace knows the truth, now that she has an inkling of the dangers she will have to face, she can only wonder why she was in such a hurry to become the strong woman she will now have to be. ❧