

THE WHIP

(A NOVEL EXCERPT)

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CHAPTER ONE

I do not understand the white man. He often acts like he is not his brother's keeper and yet he picks up his phone in the middle of the night and says to the gentleman at the other end, 'Officer, could you please come over right away? I have reasons to believe that Mr. Lagbaja is assaulting his wife,' or 'Officer, could you please drive over to Elm Street? I suspect that Mrs. Lagbaja is assaulting a minor.'

We are not like that where I come from and we *are* our brother's keeper. We do not, however, waste valuable talk time or interrupt an activity in the night with such a frivolous call to an officer

whom we all probably know is having a well-earned snooze at the other end. I suppose this is why I feel no constraints as I unleash my anger with satisfying ease.

To appreciate the picture I paint here, you need to understand that I live in one of

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the many suburbs of Lagos, in a part called Surulere. My house on Animashaun Street is in a relatively middle class neighbourhood and we do not have the commotion of a night market or record dealers blaring music from mammoth loudspeakers way past midnight like they do in the inner parts. There is nothing to drown out the shrill cries that can be heard six houses down the street and yet no one will pick up his phone and make that call. I feel certain of that as I let my anger express itself through the whip.

The whip, like you probably know, is a formidable tool. Seasoned users know not to use it too often for maximum benefit. I use it like I do my pen; deftly and with an unwavering sense of purpose.

I favour the type Mother did in her time. About half an inch in diameter and twenty-four inches in length with decreasing thickness from top to base, it is made from two lengths of tightly-coiled goat skin. It is the type used by cattle breeders in the north of my country to drive cows, to bring the erring cattle back to the herd and maintain some form of order with a specie not particularly admired for its intelligence.

The distinctive sound of the whip as I bring it down time and again on my target

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is nothing compared to the shrill cries of pain that fill the room. I pay no heed to the cries. My attention is focused on the anger within, and I do not stop until the anger is spent. Or perhaps I only stop when my enraged brain cells finally registers the pain in my shoulder-blade.

My arm drops to my side and I blink. She is in a heap at my feet. The position is always the same; body length coiled tightly into a ball, arms raised to protect the face leaving the back and behind exposed to the length of the whip. Welts and bruises are already visible on the exposed flesh of the neck and upper shoulders.

I feel no remorse. Now that my arm is spent, my voice springs to life again. 'How many times do I have to warn you to be careful when doing the dishes, you stupid girl?'

My anger resonates with each word, making it just as punishing as the whip. 'Is it too much to ask that you be careful while doing the dishes? Have I not whipped enough sense into you for you to know by now to be careful?'

I speak like I expect answers from the heap at my feet. Unreasonable, I suppose, but this (what I will always refer to as the sermon after) is just as important as the whipping. It is designed to exonerate me and drive home to my target the enormity

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of his sins. I do not expect that you appreciate the significance right away, but Mother used it effectively and so do I.

The cries are still consistent, perhaps in direct resonance to the pain wracking the body. I bring the whip down one more time. 'Will you stop that noise at once?' I bark. 'Will you stop screaming as if I've killed you?'

The cries die down at once, giving way to seemingly evenly orchestrated gasps and the sniffles of a running nose. From beneath the arms, a face finally emerges, an inch at a time; huge eyes with intensely dark pupils dilated with pain and anguish, a broad nose flaring a little at the nostrils and dripping snot and full lips pulled slightly apart with each gasping breath. Even as I watch, two huge tears well up from within those eyes and roll down those cheeks, disappearing under a well-defined chin.

A face designed to inspire pity...mercy. I feel none. I take a deep breath and gaze round my surroundings. *Why does it always happen like this?* I wonder. The beating starts off in one room and ends in another as they try to flee. *Why on earth do they ever think they can escape my wrath when I am in this mood?*

I revise the last thought almost immediately. 'This mood' implies that I have

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these periods of intense anger when I wield the whip. This is certainly not true of my person. I only submit to this form of anger, which I let loose through the whip, when 'they' behave badly or, as in this case, break a dish.

10...15 lashings of the whip for a broken dish? For goodness' sake, people break dishes all the time.

Not in my house, they don't! Besides, I wasn't keeping count plus this isn't her first time. The girl has to learn!

I refuse to submit to this inner struggle. Tapping the tip of the whip lightly against my ankle, I glance round the sitting-room. The room, which had been alive with after-dinner activities and the lively chatter of little voices before the 'event' began, had emptied very quickly. The hurried exit is evident in the hastily turned off television set with the red indicator power light still on, the games strewn on the carpeted floor, the depressed cushions, still warm no doubt from human contact, and in the plastic cups half-filled with liquids.

Almost mechanically, I reach out to turn off the TV properly. I raise my hand to do so and she shrinks back with fear as though she expects the hand to come down heavily on her person. Her action infuriates me and I snarl at her, 'Will you get out

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of here at once before I start on you again?’

The exit is swift. No matter how wounded the animal, the exit is always swift when relief beckons.

I remain standing in the sitting-room, flexing the whip a little in my hands. After the event that has just transpired, the house is unnaturally quiet, the quietness broken only by the loud sniffs Maria insists on letting out as she deals with the broken dish.

Now that the situation has been dealt with, I feel empty...restless, like a volcano after it erupts, waiting for the next hundred or so years or the next episode.

My gaze dwells briefly on the clock—twenty-five past eight. I feel loath to retire to the bedroom I share with *him* but which I appear to be using alone lately.

Lately?

I feel pressured to accept a situation I do not care for. My grip tightens on the whip and I feel it cutting into my flesh. I loosen my hold, gaze down at it in disgust and toss it down on the low stool by the wall.

This feeling of restlessness grows inside me and I try to shake it off but it clings to me like the stench of rotting flesh in an undertaker’s nose. I blame Maria for the

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way I feel now. I might have spared myself this feeling if she hadn’t broken the darn dish. Perhaps I still might have spared myself if I’d had the grace to accept the quavering apology she had offered as soon as she broke the dish.

I try to release myself from this feeling with these thoughts, but the truth is that I cannot spare myself anymore than Maria could have spared herself.

‘Every wrong deed deserves punishment!’

Those words won’t go away. I am not allowed to forget them. It is so difficult to when I’d heard Mother use them so often as she wielded her whip.

CHAPTER TWO

I must have been about six when Mother first wielded her whip on me or perhaps that is the earliest I can recall. The circumstances that led to the event is a little obscure now but I think I must have helped myself (even now I refuse to yield to the word 'stolen') to a slice of cake after my younger sister's fourth birthday party. Yes, I am certain now that is what happened; a noticeable slice of cake that went missing.

I can still hear Mother's voice thudding with unleashed anger as she summons us to her presence. 'Ada! Nonso! Ndidi!'

'It' usually begins with an interrogation down the ranks. My youngest sister, Ifeoma, is exempted from this parade because she has just turned four and is still too young, I suppose, to get into trouble of that nature.

We rush to answer Mother's call in the kitchen. I can tell right away that one of

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us is in trouble. The refrigerator door stands open, but even then I do not link the rage on Mother's face to the cake until she speaks.

Like I mentioned earlier, it usually begins with an interrogation (the duration of which depends on how quickly a confession is extracted), but first she sears us with her dark angry gaze. You must understand how that seemingly effortless gaze appears to twelve, eight and six-year-olds—like the bright red glow of smouldering coals. We huddle close to each other as though we can each save the other from the onslaught.

Mother towers over us. Mother might have been slim and somewhat pretty in her youth but to look at her now you wouldn't believe it. Following the traumatic birth of my older brother and two miscarriages earlier, Mother has ballooned out and keeps on ballooning, it seems, with each subsequent birth. It is so difficult at the age I am then to say with any accuracy how much Mother had ballooned out, but when I think of it now she appears to have acquired the dimensions of a sumo wrestler. Not a very kind description, I agree, but I only use it so you might understand my one great fear as a child. I had this great fear, which, like with most childhood fears, vanished as I turned my back on my early years, that Mother was

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so big that if she died when we were still so little we might not be able to lift her out of her bed. Of course back then, I failed to realize that death brings forth allies in all manner of shapes and sizes and we might not need to touch Mother if she died. And indeed, that is exactly how it turned out although it did not happen until years later. Many, many years later.

In any case, sumo wrestlers aren't famed for their friendly looks when faced with a situation and neither is Mother as she bears down on us through fierce, narrow eyes. Her nostrils flare out a little as she speaks, 'Which one of you stole some cake from the fridge?'

The refrigerator door is still open and I hear rather than feel my heart drop to the bottom of my stomach. But Mother isn't talking to *me* just yet. She might have thrown the question at all three of us but her attention is focused with piercing intensity on my older sister, Ada.

Ada shakes her head fearfully. 'It's not me, Mother,' she says. Her voice lacks conviction. Understandably so since, at twelve, she has been on the receiving end of Mother's wrath far longer than anyone else.

Mother's gaze lingers on her for a moment longer, as though trying to decide for

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herself if she speaks the truth, before they slide over to my older brother. 'Nonso?'

'I-I-I-I'm not the one, Mother,' he stammers out. And then, as if to buttress his words, he adds quickly, 'I-I swear to God.'

If he hopes to convince Mother with this oath, he receives a sharp clip on the left ear instead and a swift reprimand from Mother. 'Do not use the Lord's name in vain!'

Tears brim in Nonso's eyes and he hangs his head. It is my turn now. Mother fixes her gaze on me and I can already feel myself withering inside. 'Ndidi?'

I swallow the rock that looms large in my throat and say haltingly, 'I...I...I'm not the one, Mother.'

Lying is a natural recourse, I suppose, particularly when you are at an age when you fail to understand that the consequences for breaking the eighth commandment here on earth can be quite swift *and* painful.

By now, Mother is like a ticking bomb just waiting to explode. 'So none of you stole the cake from the fridge, eh?' she bellows. 'Would you rather have me think that a ghost wandered into

the house while we were all asleep, realized we had some cake left in the fridge and decided to help itself to some?’

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Mother often speaks like that, conjuring up images of impossible scenarios into a serious situation. Of course no matter how much you long to laugh, you can't because you are so intensely aware of the seriousness of the situation and afraid your bowels might give way any time soon.

It is morning, not yet eight because Father is still home, and since it is a school holiday and we each haven't had a bath yet, my fate is sealed when Mother says suddenly, 'Show me your hands! All three of you! At once!'

Mother is a teacher and teachers, I think, are a lot like soldiers. Perhaps I should give you another glimpse of my country here so that you might appreciate why I make this analogy.

For thirteen years (from the mid 1980s to the late 1990s), we were under the capricious hold of successive military leaders who, like teachers, presided over the affairs of our land with unquestionable ability, demanding unwavering loyalty from their subjects. They let us believe that they are tolerant of our ways, but their guns, like Mother's whip, are never too far from reach. They use it, too, with frightening ease on the 'erring' university students and on the ordinary man on the streets so that others might learn not to stray. We place our implicit trust in them

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like we do with our teachers, and, bit by bit, they edge out our true identity, replacing it with an image of what they think it should be. Like teachers, they tell us that what they do is for our good and that we might not begin to see the 'benefits' until years later. So we accept their

words like we do those of our teachers and do not oppose them. Year in, year out, we keep on toeing the line, hoping that if we do we will be left alone to carry on with our lives.

Now, I'm not so sure I have helped you here. Perhaps I am not that good with analogies or explaining them, but I feel certain if you lived in my country in those years you will understand what I am trying to say. Anyway, Mother is a teacher and teachers are a lot like soldiers and so she knows exactly the right questions to ask and what to look out for. She doesn't have to look too far, either, to see the tell-tale signs of cake icing sticking to the insides of my grimy fingers.

'Nnidi?'

Mother's voice is ominous, and yet, even with all the evidence weighing so heavily against me, I still hear myself say in a whisper, 'I...I'm not the one, Mother.'

Looking back, perhaps I carried a strong conviction that I did not take that

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noticeable slice of cake or perhaps fear had dulled my powers of retraction. Even now, I still can't figure out when I did take it; on the night of the birthday party just after the refrigerator beckoned to me to take that last drink of water before joining my siblings in bed or perhaps in the morning as I carried out my morning chore of emptying the kitchen bin. My sister, Ada, would tease me for weeks afterwards, offering another option that hinted that I might have taken the cake in my sleep. I do not think so, though. I did not sleepwalk then nor did I afterwards. In any case, it doesn't matter now when I helped myself to the darn cake anymore than it did then.

'Are you still insisting that you are not the one, Nnidi?'

Mother thunders. 'Are you still lying to me?'

I do not see the raised hand but I feel the sting on my left cheek. Before I recover fully, the whip is in Mother's hand. Back then, I would think the whip an extension of Mother's hand, but I

think she must have sent Ada to fetch it as I cradled my cheek, trying to recover from the sting of that slap.

Mother, just like every whip wielder, I imagine, has her methods for meting out punishment. 'Sa aka,' she growls, an order to extend my right arm out in a

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horizontal position.

Mother prefers that we take the punishment on our palms, one after the other. Sometimes, though, she might insist on one palm for the entire whipping if the aim is to extract a confession or to drive home the consequences of one's action.

The punishment might have ended in the confined space of the kitchen if I hadn't bolted after the first lash hit my right palm. Howling with pain, I dash out of the kitchen, but Mother is too fast for me. She might be big, but she moves incredibly fast, no doubt propelled by anger. She catches up with me in the sitting-room.

Seasoned whip recipients like my older siblings, Ada and Nonso, know that it is better to yield to Mother's wishes of extending out the palms rather than leave oneself open to far worse options. At six, I do not know that and I insist on nursing my bruised palm in between my thighs. This appears to infuriate Mother, forcing her to break free of her method.

I feel the whip on my calves, my buttocks, my shoulders...everywhere. By now, I am screaming fit to raise the dead and I soon hear Father say with uncharacteristic severity, 'That's enough, Mama Ada! Can't you see she's only a child?'

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Later, I will wish Father hadn't tried to save me. 'Every bad deed deserves punishment!'

Mother snaps at him. 'She took the cake without my permission and then she lied. She deserves to be punished!'

'And don't you think you have punished her enough?' Father asks, not giving in to Mother like he usually does.

'I will be the one to decide that!' Mother replies, digging in her heels. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child!'

As Father and Mother battle over supremacy in my situation (even then I knew Mother would win), I maintain my howls and try to break free of Mother's hold on my upper left arm.

I am a skinny little thing at six, all bones and very little flesh, but extremely strong as testified to when I knocked my older brother down in a fight. I am clearly no match for Mother, though.

I think if Mother meant to stop whipping me then, she meted out the last four extremely vicious lashes or so in defiance to Father, which is why I will wish later that Father hadn't tried to spare me.

Our sympathies are usually with Father, distant as he might appear in his

relationship with us. Later, as we grow older, we would realize that Mother hadn't had an easy life with him. However, we adored Father when we were little, not least because he did not wield the whip like Mother did when meting out punishment. Father's methods are a little different and perhaps weird when I think of them years later.

I recall once when at ten I find myself in a fight with my youngest sister, Ifeoma, who's now eight (we seem to fight all the time, my siblings and I). Mother has travelled to her village to attend a cousin's funeral and Father is in charge. I can't recall how it actually came to be, but during the fight Ifeoma draws blood on my lower arm. It doesn't hurt that much but I scream like I am at death's door. Father soon calls us to order, and, after listening at length to both

sides, decides Ifeoma is to blame for the fight. Her punishment by Father's methods? Ifeoma is ordered to lick the oozing blood from my arm, which she does.

Yes, that is what Father ordered. 'That will teach you not to get into a fight next time and certainly not to hurt anyone,' Father says.

I am very certain that is what happened because it all happened in the year when we finally learn why Nonso still isn't doing well in school in spite of Mother's

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persistent whippings, but all that is for later.

And then, there is this other time when my older sister and I were in a fight (I think as the second and 'middle' girl I was always trying to assert myself back then) and I hit her in the face. It really isn't a slap, but my sister insists that it is. My punishment Father's method? Ada slaps me right back in the face. Not once but twice because Father maintained the first one wasn't hard enough.

'That will teach you not to slap anyone,' he says, 'especially not your elders!'

Father's ways were certainly different from Mother's and somewhat weird but they did not happen all the time. Not like Mother's whippings.

Anyway, back to the case of the missing cake. Mother's punishment doesn't stop with the whipping. 'Go and kneel down and face the wall! At once!'

I comply. By now, I am all sobs, snot and saliva—the 3S I like to think of it.

'Raise your hands high above your head and shut your eyes!'

Mother still doesn't leave me to suffer in peace. She stands over me 'preaching' the consequences of lying and stealing. All my brain can process now is pain and the uncomfortable feel of the hard floor on my knees, but I do manage to make out two words from Mother's sermon—hell fire and condemnation.

Mother soon stops speaking and I think it is finally over. Not by a long shot, apparently. 'And what do you have to say for yourself?' she asks suddenly.

I do not speak. Not out of insolence but from a deep perplexity on what Mother expects from me now. Mother obviously interprets my silence as the former and her hand comes down heavily on my right ear, giving it a painful twist. I do not even have the time to yelp as she says harshly, 'Did I not teach you to say sorry when you have done wrong?'

'I...I...I'm sorry, Mother,' I manage to say through loud sniffs.

Now that an apology has been dutifully wrung from my lips, I am left alone to contemplate my sins and punishment. I do nothing of the sort. Even at six, an age so young, I am filled with anger, resentment and hatred towards Mother. Later, as I grow older, I will spend those moments after the whipping wondering if Mother had really borne me or if by some strange mystical occurrence I had been placed on her doorsteps by an unfeeling God.

Mercifully, at six, these feelings do not run deep, and a few hours after I am released from my punishment I am almost back to my old self and working hard to

get myself back in Mother's good books. I go back to loving Mother again when she gives me an extra helping of boiled beans and stew (my favourite dish) at dinner...