

## Aishatu's Dinner

**T**here are strangers in my house. Noisily, they move things about in my kitchen as if I am deaf and cannot hear them. I have abandoned my kitchen for Aishatu's dinner. Her servants are busy chopping okra into green octagons trailing slime, and dicing beef into sharp cubes for the deep fryer.

Aishatu, my sister-in-law, supervises from the middle of my kitchen. She grabs a spatula from a maid frying plantains and wordlessly turns the brown-crisp wedges floating in boiling oil so that the yellow, puffed-up top, like a fat man floating on a rubber tube, has the bottom taken from under him. The maid, without Aishatu saying a word, knows she is being taught a lesson and pays avid, exaggerated attention. With a nod, Aishatu commands her to bring over the white plastic strainer lined with paper towels. The plantains will go in there.

Tonight is Aishatu's big dinner. Those that matter in business in Lagos will be there. The Central Bank governor in a white frock and maroon cap will sit at one end of the table. Aishatu at the other. I will be at the dinner, too. But only because I am married to Aishatu's brother.

Danladi wooed me in his sister's house. Now we have a place of our own. But at will, his sister seizes my kitchen and overwhelms me in my own home. Of course, there are reasons. He owes her a lot: she paid for his education, got him his first job, and her kitchen is broken—a freak fire. But no one asked me. No one put a hand on my arm and said, "I hope you don't mind."

It is evening, time for Aishatu's dinner. I have two sons. They run up to me as I leave for Aishatu's house. Idrisu, my older, gentler son, is holding onto my hand, mock-begging me not to go. His brother Ahmed stands in the middle of the hallway and petulantly asks me if I have forgotten I need to put him to bed. My husband blasts the car horn. Even though the car is already down the driveway, I can hear his screaming complaint—"Come noooow, you are going to make us late." The nanny is gathering the boys when I walk out the door. I see the glowing red brake lights of my husband's car. I open the car door and step in.

The traffic is unexpectedly light on Victoria Island. Danladi keeps commenting on this as if it is a miracle. I don't think of traffic. In the evening's hazy dusk, if you keep your eyes off the road, you see the street boys loitering at street corners. They are a dirty, ramshackle team.

Arsenal, Bayern Munich, Utah Jazz—soiled, second-hand jerseys, incongruously united on this street, on these boys. “Poverty United,” I muse. Playfully they shove each other while they wait for traffic to slow so they can plead for small notes. Improvised squeegees at hand, threatening the windscreen. “Strengthen your possession by giving Zakat and heal your sick by giving Sadqa and pray to deter any difficulties,” I recite quietly.

Aishatu is dressed in white. A flowing dress that hugs her hips before being released in a flurry to the ground. She has preserved her beauty well. Cunningly. Like a shrewd shopkeeper placing the best fruits outside where they can be seen, she has framed those springs of her youth—her pert, full breasts—in the suggestive, deep cut of her white dress.

There is something like the schoolboy in her walk: quick, jaunty steps, bounding with optimism. “Mariam, come, you people are late,” she calls out as we walk through her door. Then she looks up. She smiles. “Heeey! Sister-in-law! You look nice!” She puts her arm over my

shoulder while bending her neck to look at my dress. She likes the dress but gently mocks the silk scarf with which I have concealed my hair. “Danladi, Danladi!” she shouts. “You won’t let this your wife out of *purdah*. And you, Mariam, you are listening to him?”

“Hadja,” I plead, smiling. She laughs. And I laugh with her. Even though I know she likes that I dress the way I do and that I am a good wife to her brother. She is the only woman in our family who does not wear a hijab. She has three divorces behind her - three divorces and a son she dotes upon.

This morning, two hours after we woke up, my husband grabbed me by the waist. Aggressively. I know that insincere confidence, the way he is when he has taken one of those little blue pills hidden in the toffee candy can he keeps on his nightstand. He starts off strong and even growls at me. But it does not last long. I can feel him as he withdraws, limp, trailing slime. He retreats to the bathroom with his face in a scowl. He must hate me at moments like this. But I don’t care. I deserve more from him. I deserve to be loved.

The walls of Aishatu’s huge rooms are decorated with large paintings. There is a giant sculpture of a mother and child in the furthest corner of her foyer. It is made of polished wood. Eighteen of us sit at the dining table in Aishatu’s large, formal banquet room. Serving tables line

the walls. There are six women. Three of us are married to men at the table. It is the women I understand. Men are a mystery to me. I know things about how a bag is clutched and what is whispered when hands are held to say hello. The contours in a grimace tell me who is loved and neglected. As I sit down to dinner, I wonder what they see, those who look at me.

Nuhu is seated beside Aishatu. Aishatu is still standing, joking, and making seating suggestions. Even though she barely looks at Nuhu, her hand rests casually on his shoulder, like something she owns. I see these things out of the corners of my eyes.

I see it all, even though I am across the table answering a question from a polite Igbo man about to sit beside me. I notice him, too. The suit, the crisp, white shirt, the rich, red-patterned tie. The conscious, self-important air—like the high cardinal of an evangelical church—that only a certain type of Igbo man, uniquely among Nigerian men, adopts when dressed in a business suit.

I see things out of the corners of my eyes. My husband sees only what is placed solidly before him. Nothing moves him to wonder what he is not seeing.

My plate is heaped with fried plantains, moi-moi, and fried rice. Dinner is buffet style with a twist. Aishatu's

servants walk to the buffet table on our behalf. We only need to tell them what we want to eat. The polite Igbo man beside me does not even do that. “Just select something. I don’t eat goat meat.” Eba, pounded yam and okra and *efo-riro*. Giant peppered snails and giant grilled prawns. The selection is wide. I expect the servant to be flustered, but he takes off without hesitation. When the servant returns, the plate he proffers is accepted without comment. I notice the servant’s thin moustache. He is confident in his starched white tunic.

Politely, the Igbo man asks me what I do. How I know Aishatu. I tell him I am married to her brother and that I am a housewife. Nothing I say interests him much. I can feel his anxiety. He is conscious of status. He wonders what it means that he has been seated next to me.

Nuhu is making them laugh at his end of the table. His arms are spread out, the left one slung over the chair beside him. He is dressed casually in a blue, simple caftan. Everyone knows who Nuhu is. He is Nigeria’s second richest man. His wife is not here. Aishatu leans in when he speaks, as if the words belong to her.

“Aminu, Aminu,” Aishatu shouts across the table to the Central Bank governor. “You have to tell the President that people are suffering *o!*” Awkwardly, the Central Bank governor smiles. He is thinking through his response, trying to decide what kind of audience he has.

“You think he does not know?! Is there anyone in Nigeria who does not know?” There are a few nervous laughs. The businessmen are playing it safe.

Nuhu laughs a full, throaty laugh. Eyes turn to him. Aishatu is smiling in anticipation. “You people are all the same,” Nuhu says. “You are all thieves. Yes, you, Aminu. Especially you.”

The table has become infused with energy. Everyone is ready for hasty words, heated recrimination, and easy conflict. I see past that. I see two men trying to impress one woman. And I am bitter with envy.

Aishatu's house has always seemed to me to be on the verge of chaos. People come in and out. No one's place is defined. Nuhu is married to someone else. Yet every day, without fail, he eats lunch at Aishatu's house. A meal she often cooks herself. And before lunch, they roll out mats, face the East and pray together. My house has order. People come in knowing who they are. In it is a husband I cannot love.

What is the cause of this bitterness that stalks me? What curse grasps my throat in the mornings so I cannot breathe for seconds, and when I close my eyes, I imagine someone is strangling me with a silk, paisley-patterned scarf? Why do I look around this table, lost, as if I have stumbled onto a strange tribe to which I do not belong? Around the table, no one else questions their right to

be here, to eat this food, to drink Aishatu's champagne. To have eight white-clad waiters scrambling, scraping, outdoing each other in creative, craven displays of obsequiousness. They have houses in Victoria Island and Ikoyi and well-appointed flats in Maida Vale. They spend small fortunes on garish watches and custom jewellery, cultivating affected tastes in cigars and champagne. Such expensive carelessness, at the same time banal and grotesque. I ask myself *What am I doing among these people?*, as if the answer is something I do not know.

I am wrapped in this thought, wallowing in its mood, when Nuhu turns his attention to me. Across the table, loud enough for everyone to hear: "Hadja Mariam, you are the only honest person at this table. Tell me..."

Aishatu interjects, "What do you mean by that? Mind yourself, *o*." Aishatu speaks with a smile as if in jest. Nuhu continues. He wants to know what I think of the Central Bank governor's policies. Suddenly, I am a woman gathered with family and friends over a meal. Just like that, it feels like I have been welcomed with a hug into a room.

I married Danladi because I thought I was in love with him. I laugh now when I think of that. How easily we give our lives to things we barely understand. Danladi's promise was always a comfortable life. Instead of a man that wanted a wife, I saw love.



A few months ago, I stepped into Aishatu's living room and saw her washing Nuhu's feet in a basin of warm water. They had not heard me. She was talking to him. He was leaning over, playing with her hair. Their voices were low, so quiet I couldn't hear. I almost cried. Sometimes the words we use mean very little, and the things we think our words define look very different when finally, in life, they confront us.

Aishatu speaks for me. "I beg don't put my sister-in-law in trouble o, Nuhu! You and Aminu *wahala* too much." Smoothly, she changes the topic of conversation, each topic—the current Naira exchange rate, the escalating costs of an English public school education, her difficulties with her son's school in England—a footstone leading further away from a dangerous path. Aishatu handles it deftly. Everyone that matters says something, offers an opinion, or, coaxed by Aishatu, supplies an anecdote. You can see their self-importance restored, like birthday balloons connected to a hose and pumped with helium.

Nuhu grows silent. He never takes his eyes off Aishatu. And he is smiling. A thin, grudging smile. I think I understand what he feels. Some distances are just too far to swim. There are limits to what each man can do. Limits to what each of us can accomplish. When we observe another move beyond that limit, covering open

water we can never reach, we want to call them back to us, to make them human at our side. Aishatu in the distance is a thing I cannot comprehend. I cannot understand how she is free. I cannot comprehend how she is loved.

Nuhu holds the door as I get into my husband's car. He looks at me indulgently as if I am a wayward niece. He smiles. My husband does not know what to make of it. I can see the uncertainty creeping onto his face. The corners of his mouth twitch, the way it does when men pay attention to me. He bounds out of the car, walks over to Nuhu, and shakes his right hand with both hands. As if Nuhu, in shutting the door, has done him a great service. He is very respectful and conciliatory. As if to apologise for whatever shadow has passed through his mind. Nuhu smiles broadly and claps him on the shoulder. "*Sanu. Nagode*. We should talk more. I understand you are in IT. I hear you own your own company."

In the car, Danladi is smiling broadly. He asks me if the air conditioner is too cool. He offers to make adjustments to the settings. He has wondered when Nuhu would invite him to discuss business. Doing work for Nuhu's companies could be the big break his business needs. He had always thought he could not approach Nuhu without being asked because—and he looks me in

the eye when he says this— “he is so close to my sister.” Now, he has been asked.

The boys are asleep when we get to our four-bedroom house in Lekki. I look into their room. Ahmed is in the top bunk, in the bed that belongs to Idrisu, clutching a Batman duvet to his chest. His brother is on the bottom bunk. I pull at the blanket that has fallen off Idrisu's body. The air is cold. I reach for the air-conditioner remote control. I have long stopped noting the absurdity. It does not seem strange to me that my sons' bedroom in Nigeria is cooled, so it's cold enough for them to use the same blankets and duvets that are used in the dead of winter in England. It is the way we live.

When I return to our room, my husband is lying on the bed waiting for me. I like this room. I decorated it myself, chose the large sleigh bed, and picked the curved divan on which Danladi has thrown the shirt he wore to Aishatu's. “You looked very nice tonight.” His hand reaches out to me. I hold his hand. Allow myself to be drawn to the bed. I give him a quick kiss on the mouth. His lips part eagerly, wet with saliva and champagne. He is reaching for my patterned scarf. I smile. Look down at the bed sheets and then into his face.

“Let me get ready,” I say.

He smiles broadly. “I am waiting.”

I get up and walk into the bathroom.

I look at myself in the vanity mirror above the sink. I remove my scarf. I like the way I look. I like how Nuhu looked at me when I walked past him from the toilet at Aishatu's. He stopped me. "Hadja Mariam, they won't let you say what is on your mind! Maybe they are right. I see your face. I am afraid of what will come out of your mouth."

I looked directly into his eyes. "I don't think you are afraid at all. You are playing with me." I wanted to say more. At this moment, when his eyes were fixed on mine, when he was for a moment available only to me, I wanted to open my mouth and speak. "I know what I want. Nuhu, do you know what you want?"

My eyes remained fixed on his. In challenge.

He looked at me, and then slowly, his face widened in a big grin. He turned behind me and circled his right arm beneath my breasts. Right in the hallway. Where anyone who walked out of the dining room could see. He leaned back, dragging me into the toilet. Sharply, I turned away from him. Untangled, exhilarated, alarmed. For a moment, his face clouded in panic and anger. Then I said, "Not here!" He smiled.

Slowly I take off my clothes. I wipe off my mascara and then the foundation. I have done this every night since I was sixteen. I do it automatically, without thought. Tonight, I look at what the mirror reveals. Look closely

at the skin beneath the foundation, the eyes below the mascara. The heady elation has worn off. What is left is a piece of specific knowledge, hard, like a kernel. I feel like I know something. I also feel like I have ruined something. Something that belonged to me. I know that I will not see Nuhu alone again.

I am thinking of Aishatu when I go back into the bedroom. "I think this was Aishatu's best dinner." My husband agrees. He has turned on the TV mounted across from the bed. Slowly he is flipping through the sports channels. He is a Chelsea fan. He is trying to catch a game he missed.