

THE GIRL WHO CAN

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They say that I was born in Hasodzi; and it is a very big village in the Central Region of our country, Ghana. They also say that when all of Africa is not choking under a drought, Hasodzi lies in a very fertile low land in a district known for its good soil. Maybe that is why any time I don't finish eating my food, Nana says, 'You, Adjoa, you don't know what life is about . . . you don't know what problems there are in this life . . .'

As far as I could see, there was only one problem. And it had nothing to do with what I knew Nana considered as 'problems', or what Maami thinks of as 'the problem'. Maami is my mother. Nana is my mother's mother. And they say I am seven years old. And my problem is that at this seven years of age, there are things I can think in my head, but which, maybe, I do not have the proper language to speak them out with. And that, I think, is a very serious problem. Because it is always difficult to decide whether to keep quiet and not say any of the things that come into my head, or say them and get laughed at. Not that it is easy to get any grown-up to listen to you even when you decide to take the risk and say something serious to them.

Take Nana. First, I have to struggle to catch her attention. Then I tell her something I had taken a long time to figure out. And then you know what always happens? She would at once stop whatever she is doing and, mouth open, stare at me for a very long time. Then bending and turning her head slightly, so that one ear comes down towards me, she'll say in *that* voice: 'Adjoa, you say what?' After I have repeated whatever I had said, she would either, still in that voice, ask me 'never, never, but NEVER to repeat THAT,' or she would

immediately burst out laughing. She would laugh and laugh and laugh, until tears run down her cheeks and she would stop whatever she is doing and wipe away the tears with the hanging edges of her cloth. And she would continue laughing until she is completely tired. But then, as soon as another person comes by, just to make sure she doesn't forget whatever (it was) I had said, she would repeat it to her. And then, of course, there would be two old people laughing and screaming with tears running down their faces. Sometimes this show continues until there are three, four or even more of such laughing and screaming tear-faced grown-ups. And all that performance on whatever I'd said? I find something quite confusing in all this. That is, no one ever explains to me, why sometimes I shouldn't repeat some things I say; while at other times, some other things I say would not only be all right, but would be considered so funny, they would be repeated so many times for so many people's enjoyment. You see how neither way of hearing me out can encourage me to express my thoughts too often?

Like all this business to do with my legs. I have always wanted to tell them not to worry. I mean Nana and my mother. That it did not have to be an issue for my two favourite people to fight over. But I didn't want either to be told not to repeat that or it to be considered so funny that anyone would laugh at me until they cried. After all, they were my legs . . . When I think back on it now, those two, Nana and my mother, must have been discussing my legs from the day I was born. What I am sure of is that when I came out of the land of sweet, soft silence into the world of noise and comprehension, the first topic I met was my legs.

That discussion was repeated very regularly.

Nana: 'Ah, ah, you know, Kaya, I thank my God that your very first child is female. But Kaya, I am not sure about her legs. Hm . . . hm . . . hm . . .'

And Nana would shake her head.

Maami: 'Mother, why are you always complaining about Adjo's legs? If you ask me . . .'

Nana: 'They are too thin. And I am not asking you!'

Nana has many voices. There is a special one she uses to shut

everyone up.

'Some people have no legs at all,' my mother would try again with all her small courage.

'But Adjoa has legs,' Nana would insist; 'except that they are too thin. And also too long for a woman. Kaya, listen. Once in a while, but only once in a very long while, somebody decides — nature, a child's spirit mother, an accident happens, and somebody gets born without arms, or legs, or both sets of limbs. And then let me touch wood: it is a sad business. And you know, such things are not for talking about everyday. But if any female child decides to come into this world with legs, then they might as well be legs.'

'What kind of legs?' And always at that point, I knew from her voice that my mother was weeping inside. Nana never heard such inside weeping. Not that it would have stopped Nana even if she had heard it. Which always surprised me. Because, about almost everything else apart from my legs, Nana is such a good grown-up. In any case, what do I know about good grown-ups and bad grown-ups? How could Nana be a good grown-up when she carried on so about my legs? All I want to say is that I really liked Nana except for that.

Nana: 'As I keep saying, if any woman *decides* to come into this world with all of her two legs, then she should select legs that have meat on them: with good calves. Because you are sure such legs would support solid hips. And a woman must have solid hips to be able to have children.'

'Oh, Mother.' That's how my mother would answer. Very, very quietly. And the discussion would end or they would move on to something else.

Sometimes, Nana would pull in something about my father.

How, 'Looking at such a man, we have to be humble and admit that after all, God's children are many . . .'

How, 'After one's only daughter had insisted on marrying a man like that, you still have to thank your God that the biggest problem you got later was having a granddaughter with spindly legs that are too long for a woman, and too thin to be of any use.'

The way she always added that bit about my father under her

breath, she probably thought I didn't hear it. But I always heard it. Plus, that is what always shut my mother up for good, so that even if I had not actually heard the words, once my mother looked like even her little courage was finished, I could always guess what Nana had added to the argument.

'Legs that have meat on them with good calves to support solid hips . . . to be able to have children.'

So I wished that one day I would see, for myself, the legs of any woman who had had children. But in our village, that is not easy. The older women wear long wrap-arounds all the time. Perhaps if they let me go bathe in the river in the evening, I could have checked. But I never had the chance. It took a lot of begging: just to get my mother and Nana to let me go splash around in the shallow end of the river with my friends, who were other little girls like me. For proper baths, we used the small bathhouse behind our hut. Therefore, the only naked female legs I have ever really seen are those of other little girls like me. Or older girls in the school. And those of my mother and Nana: two pairs of legs which must surely belong to the approved kind; because Nana gave birth to my mother and my mother gave birth to me. In my eyes, all my friends have got legs that look like legs: but whether the legs have got meat on them to support the kind of hips that . . . that I don't know.

According to the older boys and girls, the distance between our little village and the small town is about five kilometres. I don't know what five kilometres mean. They always complain about how long it is to walk to school and back. But to me, we live in our village, and walking those kilometres didn't matter. School is nice.

School is another thing Nana and my mother discussed often and appeared to have different ideas about. Nana thought it would be a waste of time. I never understood what she meant. My mother seemed to know — and disagreed. She kept telling Nana that she, that is, my mother, felt she was locked into some kind of darkness because she didn't go to school. So that if I, her daughter, could learn to write and read my own name and a little besides — perhaps be able to calculate some things on paper — that would be good. I could always

marry later and maybe . . .

Nana would just laugh. 'Ah, maybe with legs like hers, she might as well go to school.'

Running with our classmates on our small sports field and winning first place each time never seemed to me to be anything about which to tell anyone at home. This time it was different. I don't know how the teachers decided to let me run for the junior section of our school in the district games. But they did.

When I went home to tell my mother and Nana, they had not believed it at first. So Nana had taken it upon herself to go and 'ask into it properly'. She came home to tell my mother that it was really true. I was one of my school's runners.

'Is that so?' exclaimed my mother. I know her. Her mouth moved as though she was going to tell Nana, that, after all, there was a secret about me she couldn't be expected to share with anyone. But then Nana herself looked so pleased, out of surprise my mother shut her mouth up. In any case, since the first time they heard the news, I have often caught Nana staring at my legs with a strange look on her face, but still pretending like she was not looking. All this week, she has been washing my school uniform herself. That is a big surprise. And she didn't stop at that, she even went to Mr Mensah's house and borrowed his charcoal pressing iron each time, came back home with it, and ironed and ironed and ironed the uniform, until, if I had been the uniform, I would have said aloud that I had had enough.

Wearing my school uniform this week has been very nice. At the parade the first afternoon, it caught the rays of the sun and shone brighter than everybody else's uniform. I'm sure Nana saw that too, and must have liked it. Yes, she has been coming into town with us every afternoon of this district sports week. Each afternoon, she has pulled one set of fresh old cloth from the big brass bowl to wear. And those old cloths are always so stiffly starched, you can hear the cloth creak when she passes by. But she walks way behind us school children. As though she was on her own way to some place else.

Yes, I have won every race I ran in for my school, and I have won the cup for the best all-round junior athlete. Yes, Nana said that she didn't care if such things are not done. She would do it. You know

what she did? She carried the gleaming cup on her back. Like they do with babies, and other very precious things. And this time, not taking the trouble to walk by herself.

When we arrived in our village, she entered our compound to show the cup to my mother before going to give it back to the Headmaster.

Oh. Grown-ups are so strange. Nana is right now carrying me on her knee, and crying softly. Muttering, muttering, muttering. That 'saa', thin legs can also be useful . . . thin legs can also be useful . . . That 'even though some legs don't have much meat on them, to carry hips . . . they can run. Thin legs can run . . . then who knows? . . .'

I don't know too much about such things. But that's how I was feeling and thinking all along. That surely, one should be able to do other things with legs as well as have them because they can support hips that make babies. Except that I was afraid of saying that sort of thing aloud. Because someone would have told me never, never but NEVER to repeat such words. Or else, they would have laughed so much at what I'd said, they would have cried.

It's much better this way. To have acted it out to show them, although I could not have planned it.

As for my mother, she has been speechless as usual.