

Caine Prize Stories 2009:
Shortlist

The End of Skill

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THE SECOND TIME JIMMY had a soul exchange with his father was the day they talked about the fate of the Adweneasa cloth. It was exactly what Jimmy had hoped to avoid, for he knew that if it happened, his father would speak to that part of him over which he had no control. When their eyes locked in that inexpressible way, he heard the word come out of his lips. The one he had promised himself he would not say. His father's reaction shattered his daze.

"He did what?"

There was a painful silence.

"Speak up boy, and let me open my ears well this time because I didn't hear you right."

Jimmy looked into his father's face again and knew he had heard him very well. He could not stand the burning gaze, full of pain and angry questions. He dropped his eyes.

"I said he put it on the..."

"Silence!"

Obediently, he swallowed the last word. He dared not protest against being ordered to speak and to shut up at the same time. He might be a grown man now – a 'guy' in town, a hero to his younger brothers, a success story – but when his father spoke to him like this, he might as well be five years old again. He kept his eyes on the floor and his hands behind his back.

"Let us not offend the ancestors with this talk."

His father put down the shuttle he had been gripping tightly throughout their conversation and climbed out of the loom. For an angry man, his movements were gentle, contained, and even graceful.

They walked out into the compound. After the inner sanctuary of the old man's weaving room, the heat and glare of the dry-season March day were like a blow to the senses. They walked past the fragrant cooking fire and the main weaving shed where 12 boys and young men were engrossed in their work, pretending not to notice the troubled pair pass by. As he skirted the line of warp threads stretched out before the looms, Jimmy caught the eye of his younger brother. Kwabena

kept his fingers moving so that their father would not catch the look that passed between them. "You fool," it said. "You went and told him, didn't you?"

The sound of clicking shuttles receded as they stepped over the little gutter that circled the compound, stopping finally at a disused weaving shed. Jimmy quickly pulled out the weaver's stool, dusted it off with his hands and set it down for his father. He shooed away a hen and her chicks and perched on a rusty tin trunk.

"Kweku."

"Yes, Da."

His father never called him Jimmy. That was the name he had given himself after he had left home. But it had taken over so much now that he only remembered 'Kweku' on his trips back home. His father had never given any indication that he was aware Kweku had any other name.

"What did the white man do with our *Adweneasa* cloth?"

"Father, he treasures the cloth so much. If only you could understand."

On their short walk between his father's weaving room and the old shed, Jimmy had racked his brains for a way to convey to his father that foreigners simply had different ways of expressing their admiration. Jimmy had never doubted the ambassador's profound appreciation of the cloth. "Ah, what a masterpiece," he had said the day Jimmy brought it to him. As he unfolded the great cloth, Jimmy saw the same awe in his eyes that lit them up every time he brought him a piece. "Ken-tay is so beautiful," he said, shaking his head with the mystery of it as he stroked the perfect web and traced the colourful geometry with his fingers. "You really are a master."

Jimmy did not bother to explain that he had not woven any of it. It made no difference anyway, because he could have done so. But why waste time explaining that it would take one man four months to weave such a cloth on his own, and that all his father's apprentices had worked on it. What mattered to the ambassador was that he had his cloth and it was beautiful. What mattered to Jimmy was that he would be paid. But the ambassador was not ready. He wanted to know more about the cloth. Its name, the meanings of its motifs. Jimmy was impatient for his money but he was no fool. He would not be standing in a cool, plush ambassador's residence in Accra, about to receive several crisp bills of a coveted foreign currency, if he had not learned that there was more to a good sale than the exchange of goods and money. That was what set him apart from other young kente weavers. They slaved away in villages under their masters, in crowded city craft markets and in the dusty din of urban roadsides, making a pittance. Jimmy had carved a niche for himself. He had "made connections" and was now the envy of them all.

It all started when he met Cassie at the Golden Sands Hotel. That was three months after he had arrived in Accra to seek his fortune. Jimmy had big dreams and he was smart. He had kept quiet as his father poured libation to invoke the blessings of the weaving forefathers on the loom he would carry to Accra. He had friends who had gone to Accra and found work as waiters, gardeners and security men. Some of them worked for white people and earned far more than a village weaver could dream about. His friend Boateng had grown dreadlocks and found a white girl at the beach who had taken him to America. Jimmy had heard that he had become a taxi driver there and earned more than a bank manager back home. Someone who could barely speak English when he left Adanwomase!

Jimmy knew he could make it too. After all, he had a primary school education, which was more than many of the others had. With his quick brain and flair for languages, he often gave the impression of being more educated than he was. He was also blessed with good looks and natural charisma. He was what people called 'a free man' – good natured, ready to see the humour in everything. This combination of attributes made him popular with people in general, and women in particular.

At first, he had squeezed into the stuffy chamber-and-hall in a suburb of Accra, which was shared by his friend Jonas, his brother and another friend. Jonas worked as a waiter in a fast-food restaurant and he tried, unsuccessfully, to help Jimmy get a job there. Jimmy would walk around town, asking in shops and restaurants and even at some private houses, but everyone seemed to be suspicious of a footloose new arrival. What he needed was a 'connection', but how to get it was a problem. He also started weaving. He had brought his loom to Accra mainly so that he did not have to explain to his father that he had no intention of weaving. However, he soon realised that kente cloth had taken on a new life in the big city. The roadside weavers were not wrestling with the problem of trying to sell 12-yard pieces of cloth for chiefs and rich men to wear to festivals. They were selling single 'letterstrips' with messages like 'I Miss You' woven into them, which were snapped up by tourists and passers-by.

He went to the central craft market in Accra and saw an astonishing variety of modern fashion items made or trimmed with kente cloth. He bumped into Nana, one of his father's former apprentices. He was making things that Jimmy had never seen, like sets of table place-mats composed of a few strips sewn together and cut into pieces.

"You can sell a set of six like these to a rich tourist for the price of a full cloth back in Adanwomase," Nana told him. "And you don't even have to be as careful with the quality as when you are with your master back home."

Jimmy did not need any further encouragement. He was in debt now and

hardly eating properly any more. He was also excited by the challenge of making something so different. He set up his loom under a tree in the crowded compound. Nana had agreed to sell something for him if he could take a share of the sale. Jimmy's father had given him some yarns to take to Accra, which he had secretly planned to sell. Now he brought them out and began weaving a strip, which he planned to turn into a set of place-mats.

It was good to be weaving again. He had always loved it and had clearly been a born master from the time that his father began to teach him at the age of seven. He started creating new patterns as soon as he had mastered the old ones. By the time he was 14, his father would boast, "As for Kweku, my first born, I can sell his work to a chief and tell him I wove it myself. And all he will say is 'Egya Kwame Mensah, you've done it again!'"

In his loom, Jimmy found an inner peace, which he never found anywhere else. It was another world in which he and his art became one and did not need anyone or anything else. The design flowed out of him and into the cloth. He worked for hours, feeling neither hunger nor thirst. The disappointment of not finding a job and the tension over his uncertain future were lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the loom as the heddles parted the warp threads and the shuttles flew through, trailing their colours behind them.

He had often secretly watched his father at work. Even before he ever wove himself, he knew that otherworldly look on his father's face and understood that stopping work and climbing out of the loom was a transition from one world to another. The closest comparison he could think of was waking from sleep. He knew that not all weavers felt this way. Back home in Adanwomase, weaving was an occupation which all young boys were expected to follow, and many did so simply because it was the family tradition. They learned the technique and produced acceptable pieces of cloth, but they never became masters. True kente masterpieces were made by weavers who entered another world when they climbed into their looms.

It was not a topic one ever heard discussed. He always knew which of his father's apprentices were destined to become masters simply by watching their faces as they wove. He knew his father had seen it in him too, but they never talked about it until the day of his thanksgiving ceremony. It was a great day when Egya Kwame Mensah, bursting with pride, officially declared his first son a competent weaver. After Kweku had presented the customary drinks and a fat white ram to his father, and the requisite libation had been poured for a prosperous weaving career, they sat down to discuss his future. That was when the old man first realised that his son did not want to be a weaver. He could not take it seriously.

“Kweku, I have always been so proud of you. You are my first-born and the best weaver in the family. Yes, one day you will be even better than me. I know it already and I thank God for it. What more could a father ask?”

Kweku was ready. He had rehearsed this scene in his head dozens of times, made a mental catalogue of all his father’s possible protestations and prepared answers for each one of them. He was deeply sorry to spoil his father’s joy on such a day, but he knew this discussion could not be postponed any further. He was certain it would not end acrimoniously, for the two of them had an understanding beyond the usual filial relationship, which hinged mainly on respect from the son. Although he was not altogether conscious of it, this special understanding was not unrelated to their mutual belonging to that other realm, which they entered through the loom.

It was also due to this special understanding that Kweku knew he could no longer keep up the pretence of wanting to be a weaver. If he was dishonest about it on such a momentous day, it would be even more difficult for his father to forgive him later on. He had never actually misled the old man on this point. However, the assumption that he would become a weaver was so strong that nothing short of a direct refutation would shake it. Kweku’s silence on the issue had never been interpreted in any way as ominous. Now, finally, it was time to speak.

“Father, I know that in the olden days weavers rubbed shoulders with royalty, and that our great-grandfather wove for the King himself, but how many weavers today can make a living only from weaving?”

If it would not have been disrespectful to his father, Kweku would simply have come out and said that he did not want to be like most weavers today – a poor man. That he did not just want to be a respected village master-weaver. He wanted to live in the city, own a car and a beautiful house, travel abroad... He wanted a completely different life from his father. He was talented and driven and it showed in his weaving, but he knew he could apply that talent to other things and be successful. He could never realise his dreams through weaving, much as he loved it. However, it was precisely this love that complicated things. Even as he argued, as respectfully as he could, against his father’s objections, Kweku felt guilty in doing so. He did not intend to admit it, but he fully sympathised with the old man’s failure to comprehend that he should want to give up something he clearly loved so much. Still, he was not prepared for what his father said next. What he had prepared for was something like: “But Kweku, you enjoy weaving so much, how can you talk about giving it up?”

And his response would have been: “Yes, Father, I do enjoy it, but times are just too hard now. If I get a good job and make money, it will benefit all of us.”

Instead, his father said something so simply and quietly that Kweku would

not have been sure he had heard him correctly if his meaning had not been unmistakable:

“My son, I have seen the look in your eyes when you weave.”

Kweku looked up to meet his father’s direct gaze. They had never exchanged a look like that before. In the interminable few seconds that it lasted, it completed the conversation. For the first time in his life, Kweku realised that he had participated in an exchange between souls that was far more eloquent than the language of spoken words. And he knew that he could discard the rest of his set responses. His eyes had given his father the answer he wanted, and it came directly from his soul. But they had given it involuntarily, startling him in the process. He was uncomfortable with what had happened. It was as if his father had spoken to a part of him that he did not fully know himself and that had betrayed the Kweku with whom he was more familiar. The one whose dreams he was determined to pursue.

Now he tried to rally that person and focus on his ambition. One day, when he was rich and could buy the whole family everything they had ever longed for, cushioning his father in health and wealth for the rest of his life, the old man would forgive him for leaving their secret world. In the meantime, there would be no need for him to know that Kweku was not weaving. After all, he could not check up on him in Accra. It was pointless to cause any further pain now. Kweku wanted to end the conversation but he could not find the words to respond to the look that had just passed between them. As if in recognition of this, his father picked up the spoken part of the conversation.

“Kweku, the way you feel when you weave, it is not just an accident. Not all weavers feel that way. Do you know where that feeling comes from?”

Kweku felt his scalp tingle. His father’s hushed tones and direct gaze did not frighten him, but they conveyed a sense of something beyond the ordinary, which he had sensed but never consciously investigated.

“Your gift for weaving is God-given and is guided by the ancestral spirits. When you settle in the loom, they invite you into their world, in which you find the peace, inspiration and perfection that make you a great weaver. These things do not belong to the ordinary world. You may not have realised it, but I am telling you now that the spirits of our great weaving ancestors are with you when you work. When you enter the loom and lose yourself in the web, you cross over to their world. It is not all weavers who can go there. Only those with a special gift, like you and I.”

These words echoed in Jimmy’s head now as he wove under the tree in the squalid little compound. He had thought about them a great deal since that day. They had made certain things clearer to him. Once when he was a child, his father

had caught him 'practising' on the loom in his weaving room. In his confusion at being caught and his haste to vacate his father's seat, he had tripped and fallen. He knew he was in trouble, but had not been prepared for his father's degree of horror and agitation, for which he naturally blamed himself. It was only much later that he learned it was a taboo to fall in a loom and that special rites and sacrifices had to be performed to save the person who had fallen from the curse of the offended spirits. Jimmy also knew that the fixed loom in his father's weaving room was special. Although his father often wove on the mobile looms outside, it was only on the indoor one that he created new designs. Jimmy had watched him pour libation and sacrifice fowls there before. With advancing maturity, he also came to understand that it was their menstrual periods that barred his mother and sisters from that room at certain times, and even barred them from speaking to his father while he sat there. Jimmy knew that not all weavers of his father's generation were so traditional. It was their proud history as descendants of royal weavers that made the old traditions so important to his father.

The day Jimmy met Cassie, his fortunes changed forever. He and Nana were selling their place-mats and table-runners at a craft bazaar at the Golden Sands Hotel. He had brought along his loom. He knew the 22 hotel staff and the other vendors would find it odd, but he had thought about it and decided that it would probably attract people to their stall.

He was right.

"Oh look, a kente weaver," people exclaimed excitedly, hurrying over to watch him at work.

Their goods sold out long before they had anticipated, and they even had difficulty holding back a few to serve as samples. Jimmy continued to weave while Nana took orders. Nana had to admit that it had been a good idea to bring the loom, although he would never have tried such a thing himself. That was the difference between Jimmy and other people.

He always thought of that little extra that made the difference between mediocrity and excellence. What really set him apart, though, was that he had the courage to match the boldness of his ideas and translate them into action.

Cassie was the first person who asked if she could have a go on the loom. Nana smiled and was about to explain that it was too complicated for a beginner and that even weavers did not start learning on proper looms. But Jimmy stopped him with a look that said, "Of course", and stepped out of the loom and beckoned her into it with an engaging smile. Nana knew that Jimmy's father would never have allowed a woman to sit at a loom or to touch a weaving instrument, but he was beginning to realise that Jimmy, the obedient son and apple of his father's eye, had his own set of rules. Jimmy guided the heddle toeholds between Cassie's

toes, placed a shuttle in her hand and showed her what to do. She was extremely eager but, predictably, was confounded by the complexity of it. He placed his hands over hers and guided them as well as he could from behind. It was an agreeable sensation, enveloping her small, beautifully manicured white hands in his. He sensed immediately that he was not alone in enjoying the feeling. Perhaps that was why she was having trouble co-ordinating her hands and feet.

On an impulse, he suggested that she sit on his lap, so that he could help her with the footwork. He knew it was an audacious proposition and did not bother to apprise himself of Nana's reaction. Following bold impulses could be dangerous, but he often felt that it was the only way to pull oneself out of a rut and force new opportunities to open up. The look Cassie gave him affirmed that audacity was not alien to her nature either. They felt this common trait pull them towards each other across the many gulfs of difference that lay between them. It was a tight fit in the loom but Jimmy would not have suggested it if Cassie had not been a slim, small woman. He acted as a full-body puppet-master, not pulling strings, but matching his body to hers and guiding her with his movements. He folded his arms around hers and moved his legs underneath her as a prompt. After a few bumpy beginnings, they found perfect rhythm. She clasped the heddle toeholds tightly between her bare toes and pumped them up and down in tandem with Jimmy, parting the warp threads to create a space for the shuttle, which he guided into place with his fingers – manipulating hers.

They became lovers the next day. Cassie was spending her summer vacation with a friend, Margaret, whose husband worked for a multinational company in Ghana. Margaret was well connected in the Accra expatriate social scene and soon became Jimmy's most important client and promoter. She had money to spend, time on her hands, and friends with whom to share her new discoveries. Within weeks, Jimmy was receiving a flurry of orders, being invited to coffee mornings where he could display, sell and take new orders; he was frequently receiving foreign currency as payment. He gained a foothold as an exciting young local artisan in many expatriate households and his 'free' character made him so popular that he even started receiving party invitations. By the time Cassie left, he was quite the flavour of the month, and was well on his way to his new, exclusive niche at the top of the kente-trading ladder. Margaret and her friends would ask, "Oh, is that a 'Jimmy'?" every time they saw a beautiful piece of kente, so that his name became synonymous with the textile within the narrow but powerful confines of the expatriate community.

Of course, charisma alone was not enough to sustain this kind of success. Underpinning Jimmy's comet-like rise to artisanal fame and glory, was the outstanding quality of his work. However, it did not take long for the volume of

his orders to exceed his capacity. The time had come to enlist help from home. Jimmy made his first trip home nine months after he had left, taking along money, gifts and a stack of weaving orders. It was a sweet return, for he had fulfilled his father's dreams in spite of himself. He rejoiced quietly in the knowledge that his father would never have to find out that he had attempted to be anything but a weaver since he left home. The old man was quite beside himself with joy to see his beloved Kweku again. Although he had expected his son to be successful in the city, he was amazed by the number of orders he brought back home and was speechless when Jimmy showed him the first dollar and euro bills he had ever seen.

For Jimmy's brothers and the other apprentices, his fashionable clothes, new slang expressions and sharp 'American Gigolo' haircut were the clearest signs of success. It had the desired effect when Jimmy asked them to weave letterstrips for him with the messages 'My Sweet Tanja' and 'Vanessa my African Queen'. He told them offhandedly that he did not have the time to do them himself as he had to focus on the main orders, but the truth was that he knew the foreign names and sugary messages would convey the requisite information about his new lifestyle to the boys at home without him having to brag about it. He was right, because when he approached the busy line of looms the following morning, a football match-like chant of "Ji-mmy! Ji-mmy!" went up. He grinned conspiratorially and told them to shut up.

The message for Vanessa showed his growing awareness of the issue of African-American heritage and its value on the kente market. Vanessa had been his greatest education on this topic so far. Thrilled to meet a kente weaver, she was effusive about what kente meant to her and the sisters and brothers back home. She already owned several kente-patterned items, which she had bought in America, including a backpack, a head tie and a dressing-gown. On the day she took him to the beach and stripped off to reveal a kente-patterned thong bikini, however, the expression, "Now I have seen everything" came to his mind. Even as he enjoyed the rear view of the tiny kente triangle pointing like an arrow to the shapely cheeks of Vanessa's bottom, he could not shake a niggling feeling of discomfiture.

"How d'you like my kin-tay bikini, Jimmy?" she asked.

"It's very sexy," he said evasively and then added in what he hoped was a casual tone, "So you like wearing kente like this?"

"Are you kidding me? Man, you know what it means to us. I feel so African when I wear it. I love it, can't you see that? I want it around me all the time. You know Jimmy, I could wear it all day long – day and night."

Jimmy had perfected the art of keeping his father out of his mind on such

occasions, but this time the spectre of the old man rose unbidden before he could stop it. If he could see and hear Vanessa now... what would he say to the idea of a kente thong bikini making someone feel 'African'? The cloth of kings worn day and night, a kente arrow pointing to the cheeks of a woman's bottom... Jimmy shuddered. How could love and esteem be expressed in such different ways? He knew his father would never understand that a person who used kente in such ways could genuinely love and esteem the cloth. Vanessa, on the other hand, would never be able to understand that surrounding herself with something and making it a part of her everyday life could show anything but love. She had big plans to help Jimmy break into the American market, and had promised to explore export opportunities for him when she returned home. She assured him that there were many African-American companies that would snap up his cloth for graduation gowns, designer clothes and all sorts of 'heritage' goods.

Jimmy showered her with kente gifts. This fulfilled the multiple role of expressing affection, promoting his weaving for future marketing opportunities and compensating for his periodic blunders with regard to her racial sensitivities.

It took an exquisite stole, originally ordered by an ambassador's wife, to appease her the day his friend Nana called her white. Vanessa was one of those African-Americans who had more white blood than black.

In Ghana, far darker people were called 'white'. Even Ghanaians of mixed parentage were often called white. Jimmy had actually laughed aloud the first time he had heard her call herself a black woman. He was astonished by the degree of anger and pain this caused her, and was cowed by her scathing attack on him for his failure to recognise his own brothers and sisters from the Diaspora. Jimmy quickly realised that not taking her seriously on this topic would be the quickest way to end their friendship. Although he could not fully comprehend her point of view, he resolved not to make any other careless slips about her colour. He also came to realise that racial sensitivity and an awareness of the issue of heritage gained him incalculable goodwill with his African-American clients, which naturally translated into excellent profits.

However, keeping up his guard with Vanessa was harder than he had imagined, especially as it also meant worrying about his friends' blunders. The day he introduced her to Nana at the craft centre he was nervous. He had warned Nana in advance but was still fearful because he could see that Nana could not take it seriously. Nana gave Vanessa an effusive welcome, which delighted her, and when he teased Jimmy in Twi, "So this is your black woman," and laughed heartily, Vanessa assumed that they were simply exchanging some guy gossip. Jimmy laughed too but warned him again not to slip up. Nana assured him that

there was no need to worry. Everything went extremely well at first, and Vanessa took a liking to the talkative Nana. She admired his kente goods and asked about some of the patterns. Jimmy knew that Nana would be surprised by her knowledge of kente designs. She had read a book about kente and, through her persistent questions and discussions, had even taught Jimmy some new things about the cloth.

“Oh, that’s ‘Fathia is right for Nkrumah,’” she exclaimed, pointing at the cloth named for the Egyptian wife of Ghana’s first president. “And this must be ‘Family is strength.’” Nana nodded in open-mouthed admiration and asked if she also knew the names of the newer designs.

She had no idea but was eager to learn. He picked out the ones he thought she would find most interesting. “This one, for your former president – is named ‘Clinton.’”

She was duly intrigued. Jimmy explained to her that it was of the same pattern as the one that had been presented to President Clinton on his visit to Ghana.

“And this one call ‘Hippic,’” continued Nana, thoroughly enjoying himself, “for people who can’t afford.”

Vanessa looked puzzled. Jimmy did not actually know the full term ‘Highly Indebted Poor Countries’, but he explained as best he could that the cloth had been jokingly named to mark “Ghana going HIPC”. To their joint relief, Vanessa understood and found it extremely witty. While Nana cast about for another interesting cloth, she glimpsed a heavy rayon piece with a dazzling variety of patterns.

“Is this the Adwi... Adwen... I mean, the one that means ‘the end of designs’ or something like that?”

“*Adweneasa* – My skill is exhausted,” supplied Nana in garbled English, impressed again.

“Oh, is that how you translate it?” Vanessa looked confused. “So what does it mean, literally?”

Jimmy sighed. Naming kente cloths was a complicated business. His father was one of the few people he knew who could name most cloths with confidence. Young city-based weavers often referred to a popular chart of kente names and meanings when questioned by their clients. That was where Nana’s version of *Adweneasa* had come from. It was a particularly challenging example with a variety of different interpretations.

“Adwen...” he mused. “Nana, how do you explain Adwen?” he asked in Twi. They discussed it for a few seconds and Jimmy said:

“Something like ‘ideas’ or ‘intelligence.’”

“Wisdom,” chimed in Nana.

"Art... creativity, skill," mused Jimmy.

"I thought it meant 'designs' or 'motifs,'" said Vanessa.

"Yes, it does," said Jimmy, and Nana nodded emphatically.

Jimmy tried to explain that the motifs woven into the cloth represented the inspiration and skill of the weaver, hence the use of the same word for them. "And 'asa' means 'finished,'" he concluded. "They say that the Asante King for whom this design was first woven admired it so much that he said... er, how can I put it?"

"That the limits of weaving skill had been reached," provided Vanessa, who had read about it.

"Yes," said Jimmy, relieved for this succinct explanation. "So it means, 'the end of skill!'"

"But there's another version," said Vanessa, "that the weaver who created it used all the designs known at the time in one cloth, so it means 'all designs have been used up!'"

Although Nana was not able to follow Vanessa's American English with any degree of accuracy, the fact that she was displaying an impressive knowledge of kente nomenclature did not escape him. He could not contain his admiration.

"Ei sister, you have tried! You know kente proper!"

Vanessa was delighted. She liked being called 'sister' and had enough experience with Ghanaian English to know that "you have tried" actually meant, "you have excelled". She thanked him for the compliment.

Shaking his head in wonder, Nana gushed, "In fact, this is my first time to see a white who knows kente more than me."

Vanessa's face froze. Jimmy's froze a split second later. It took Nana a few seconds to realise what he had done. With great alarm, he apologised to Jimmy first, making it obvious to Vanessa that they had discussed her sensitivities before. This did not improve things.

She said stiffly, "I'm not white, OK, I'm black! Just because I come from America doesn't make me white. Man, don't you guys understand anything about our history? How can you say that shit when you're our brothers? I'm an African, like you!"

She stopped there because Nana was losing the battle against laughter. Jimmy was horrified. He knew exactly how Nana felt and fully understood that he had no intention of causing offence. Jimmy was slowly coming to understand that this now familiar scenario was simply a glimpse of the sea of cultural divergence, historical erosion and plain misunderstanding that churned between home Africans and their Diaspora kin. To compound his horror, he was irresistibly infected by Nana's helpless mirth. His face betrayed his own struggle between

Vanessa's anguish and Nana's artless incredulity.

Vanessa was beside herself. She rounded on him, but before she could formulate any coherent words, her face crumpled and she dissolved into tears. She ran out, hailed a taxi and was gone before Jimmy could catch up with her.

Although he was able to make amends to some extent with the beautiful 'Gold Dust' stole, things were never quite the same between them again. Their relationship eventually petered out, taking along with it Jimmy's dreams of a lucrative export business and his secret hope of being taken to America one day by Vanessa. Although he was not short of other girls to take her place and gradually to reconstruct his ambitions, he did miss her. The lessons she had taught him about African-American heritage, her struggles with her racial identity and her amazing way of loving kente had somehow touched him, and they earned her more space in his heart and memory than any woman had ever claimed.

The day he saw the Adweneasa cloth on the floor of the ambassador's living room, he heard the echo of Vanessa's voice. "I love it, can't you see that?"

It had been spread out carefully, lovingly, displaying every inch of its 12-yard length. Few applications could have shown it off so effectively. Exhibited thus in its entirety, it proclaimed the toil, skill and creative ecstasy that had worked miles of plain thread into a spectacular web of colour and art. Its predominant tones of maroon, green and yellow denoted the royal Oyokoman warp pattern and its myriad of tiny motifs symbolised a wealth of cultural and historical meaning. In the centre of the cloth stood an exquisitely carved Asante stool upon which had been placed a collection of antique brass-cast gold weights.

"Do you like my arrangement?" asked the ambassador proudly.

Jimmy stammered out a polite response, keeping his back to the ambassador. He could indeed appreciate the beauty of the artistic arrangement, but it took a while to recover from the shock of seeing the magnificent textile, of which his father had been so proud, used in such a manner. The room was so large that the space allocated to the cloth did not impede free movement and Jimmy hoped this meant it would not be trodden upon.

He had become used to seeing kente cloth used in all manner of new ways and had learned to harden himself to it because of the profits involved.

As Nana said, "Once they have paid, you can't tell them what to do with it. Just take your money and shut up."

But this time, Jimmy felt a strange, indefinable pain. It was one thing to see a made-in-America nylon triangle, machine stamped with the approximation of a kente pattern, sandwiched between the cheeks of a woman's bottom. It was another thing to see a full piece of Oyokoman Adweneasa kente cloth, hand-woven in his father's workshop, on the floor. The ambassador wanted to order

an identical piece as a wall hanging to complete his 'Asante kingdom' display. The thought of another generous payment helped Jimmy recover from his shock.

However, he knew his father would be curious about an identical order of such magnitude so soon after the first. He knew the old man was already uneasy about the ways in which the foreigners who were buying it were using their kente. He had asked questions before, but after his reaction to the tablecloth and bedspread orders, Jimmy had passed most subsequent orders off as wall-hangings or bodily attire.

As long as the cloth was assigned a decorative rather than utilitarian function, his father could accept it. However, the idea of kente cloth having things placed on top of it was definitely unacceptable. Jimmy did not allow the cutting of strips into small items like place-mats in his father's workshop. That could be done in Accra to save awkward questions. Naturally, the old man suspected that Jimmy was not always telling the whole truth. However, he realised, in the cold light of economic reality, that there was not necessarily much to be gained by questioning his son too closely. That year, Jimmy had paid for him to have a critical operation and for the expensive medication he had been taking ever since. Jimmy knew that his father could turn a blind eye to some things but would never forgive the use of his kente as a floor-rug.

He decided that it was not necessary for him to know this particular detail. He would think of a way to handle his questions. Before his trip home, Jimmy mentally prepared himself for their conversation, building up a stock of responses for the various different turns it might take.

The silence in the old shed lasted so long that the hen and her chicks wandered back to see if their rusty tin home had been vacated at last.

"Kweku," the old man said finally. "I have only ever heard of one other instance of kente being put on the ground. Do you know when that was?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"In 1931, when our king returned from his long exile in the Seychelles, where he had been sent by the colonial British government, he came here to Adanwomase to see his chief weaver, your great-grandfather. They wove three special cloths in preparation for his visit, and when he arrived, they spread them on the ground like a red carpet for him to walk upon. The people wept for joy. It was a wonderful tribute. You see, only a mighty king could tread upon the king of textiles."

Jimmy understood what his father was saying, but he felt torn. Conflicting thoughts buzzed around in his head. Several samples from his repertoire of responses should have been of help to him now but they suddenly all seemed inappropriate. His father saw the struggle on his face and said gently: "I know, my son, we have made a lot of money but we have also paid a price."

With that, Egya Kwame Mensah rose and walked silently back to his weaving room. Jimmy followed at a respectful distance. His father sat back in his loom. He pulled down a short strip of Oyokoman Adweneasa cloth draped on the loom frame. It was a leftover piece from the long strip he himself had woven for that magnificent cloth. He looked at it for a long moment. "Adweneasa," he murmured softly to no-one in particular, shaking his head sadly.

Jimmy closed the door and walked away. He had never seen his father cry, and he suspected the old man would rather keep it that way.

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