

# THE DEED

by  
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...another option is Yuan Lee. Last term, everyone at school kept saying he was my boyfriend because we were always together during break last term, but he's not really. He can seem sexy if I try. His Chinese father came over to teach our farmers how to grow paddy rice. Then he stayed and his wife eventually came over and they stayed some more. When our government got tired of Mao style paddy farms, his parents started a restaurant called Green Bamboo where they cook a lot of white rice.

Last year, he asked my friend Remi and I over to his parents' restaurant as my birthday treat and he made sure we got a whole platterful of freshly fried springrolls which are my favourite. I watched his lips form the words,

"Good springrolls need the pastry rolled so thin you can see through it. The filling has to be cold so it doesn't stretch the pastry and make it tear."

Maybe it was then that he started to creep into my consciousness as a Possible. Remi protested that those instructions were not clear enough:

"They never turn out right, even if I leave the stuff in the fridge overnight."

He laughed, eyes bending up at the corners, his floppy black hair brushing his eyebrows, "To cook, the oil has to be really, really hot so it singes brown almost as soon as it reaches the pan."

I think he'd be gentle. When we were at the beach after Tunji's party, Yuan and I were leaning against his car as we waited for the others. It was quite dark as the moon was not up yet and the stars pinpricked the sky's velvet. There was a bit of a breeze off the sea and when I said I was cold he took his sweat top off and put it around me in my strappy dress. He tucked me in under his shoulder and it felt kind of cozy.

I don't want to try to wait for this falling in love business, or aim for passion, even though it sounds attractive enough in Mills and Boons romances. I want to get this sex thing over and done with so my life can move on. Among the girls I know, some have already done it. Amina and Mahmoud did it behind the school kitchens when we were still in the third form. She needed to go to the nurse for a spare uniform as stuff had

leaked onto her skirt. I remember that after school, she walked funny all the way to the bus stop. Now, when Amina talks about boys and men, she seems to be having a great time. She says sex can be mysterious or straightforward, either a fantastic experience or as simple as what dogs do. Her cheeks climb up her face, her deep dimples show as she talks. It seems as if she's defying life itself, as if the choice has been hers all along. She's able to brush off what my mother, and probably hers, might think. She's started to claim life in her own way.

Moira, on the other hand, says she's going to wait for the right one; she won't do it until she's sure. She has a crush on Idris, who bounces on and off my list. When we've talked about him, she does that "ooh, he's so cute" thing. I can see that Idris obviously has the experience. And everyone seems to like him. Girls like Moira giggle and the Amina types look him up and down. The shape of his back, his shoulders in his white school shirt as he walks away down a corridor catches my eye. I tend to keep very still inside, not wanting to let any smoochy type of longing jump free. Sometimes I ache to be noticed by him, wanted and pursued. Yet at other times, I feel like I'd just be another pair of knickers in his drawer, taken simply because I was there.

And the largest mango in my pile? The biggest bonga on my stall? My best friend's father, Frederick Adams, forty two years old with a pot-bellied future, a short full beard, hair closely trimmed to his head and fingers which can make the skin sing. Nothing much has happened yet, of course. Just one leaning-over-to-open-the-car-door touch. Just one let-me-introduce-this-youngster-to-Motown dance.

"I bet you youngsters don't know about this kind of music. Want to dance?" he'd said. But he hadn't stuck to the usual uncle-y arms length version of dancing. He's on the list because I think he might teach me quickly. This is so obviously one of the things that will have to remain secret, be doubly hidden and buried from my mother (and Remi), with me having to pinch my words. But just the once with him might be enough.

It's almost as if I can see a list of names in my head, with mini head shots alongside, each taken in a studio with a full glare of lights, so that as I peer into each photo, I can see the pimple above Reuben's eyebrow, notice that Yuan's eyes are set slightly too close together, linger over the pout in Idris' lips, observe the sheen on Frederick Adams' face. I

can choose whether to put a tick, a question mark or an X against each name on my list. It's in my power. It's up to me.

My mother knocks on the door and enters with my birthday greeting and a promise of an akara breakfast. As I sit up, part of the sheet covering my body slips to show half a boob and an entire nipple. Upstanding and free, I know the nipple looks like the eraser end of a wood wrapped pencil when tickled by air. My mother's smile freezes into a half-frown. Displays of flesh in teenage females, especially her own daughters, are always a worrying sign, regardless of whether I am safe in a bed at home or not. "Cover yourself up" has greeted every excess shoulder, leg or chest exposure. "You can't go around looking like a chagga." A slutty whore. Today, her look does the job. As I pull up the sheet to cover myself, the smile returns. My mother firmly believes in cloaking one's body's treasures. On a day like today, who am I to tell her otherwise?

As my mother closes the door, a memory slips in to sit alongside me and remind me of when her Good Behaviour Snippets began in earnest. It must have been when she was suddenly shocked into blood reality that I had left my childhood behind. I hadn't been all that shocked with my sudden thrust into womanhood, just plain disgusted by all that followed.

I remember rifling through my mother's drawers in her room one day when she and Aunty Minny were having one of their deep talks. There are often useful things in my mother's cupboards – lost earrings, eye liner, and hair combs. I used to take everything out and pick my way through. When I opened her jewellery box, I'd find a mass of different coloured crepe papers – deep purples, peacock blues, golden yellows, and bright green – wrapping up an assortment of necklaces, brooches and earrings. I'd take out her heavy yellow stranded necklaces which she let me try on in front of her dressing table mirror.

That morning I found a cardboard tube with some cotton wool packed tight down one end, a smaller piece of tube stuck in the other, and a string dangling out. The cotton felt smooth and rounded at the top, and when I examined it closely the smaller tube just pulled apart from the larger one and I could see that the string was connected to the cotton.

They were both sitting on the bed, faces turned to each other and talking in low voices.

I'd heard snatches:

"We tried talking to her."

"But, of course, his wife is in England."

"I hope he'll help support her and the child."

Their conversation concerned a third party – another woman who'd made the wrong choice. Terrible sharings about personal problems in progress meant I had to leave the room when the detail was being dissected. Mama usually said "Your aunt and I have to think things out loud that young ears cannot bear."

"What's this for?"

They stopped talking and in the very long pause that followed, I chattered on, asking about the greenish blue stone in my mother's necklace.

"Aquamarine," was the immediate answer.

I was therefore not prepared for that gush of blood a year later, at my very first dance at Isatou's house. I had on my blue dress with the full skirt and tight waist. Slightly off-shoulder and specially tailored by Abi's mother, in whose garage I had spent a couple of afternoons, watching the tailor in order to hurry the dress along. At the party, I stood up and made my way into Isatou's kitchen to ask for a drink. On the way back, I noticed a couple of fifth formers, who usually ignored me, whispering together and throwing a few looks my way. Soon after, Isatou's mother appeared at my shoulder.

"Come with me, dear. Your dress is soiled, can I give you something to use?"

What did I know of blood then? There had been no pain, yet she said, "The red splashes are a confirmation of you becoming a woman."

She must have talked to my mother on the phone because Ma had a pack of sanitary towels ready when I got home.

"You know what to do now, don't you? Use these supermarket bags to throw away the used ones. Wrap them in two bags. You'll need to take them out to the bin with the heavy metal lid so the cats don't get to them."

And what I was left with were these heavy things between my legs that chafed the skin they rubbed against. And they smelled. My first party was over, and only my cousin Tunji had asked me to dance.

As I try to drift back into sleep, the green baize door in the kitchen bangs shut, waking me up for sure. Ma starts her clatter in the kitchen, and plans are afoot for today's meal. I make my way into the kitchen where she has a bowlful of akara mixture ready. The beans were soaked, peeled and pounded yesterday, so all I have to do is to drop teaspoonfuls of cream coloured mixture into sizzlingly hot oil and watch it deep-fry. My bean balls puff up nicely; get themselves russet coloured without burning, as if they are keen for me to have a nice birthday breakfast.

When Osman comes back with the bread, my akara is resting in a covered calabash on the side and the fried onion and pepper sauce is sputtering in a small saucepan. He stands outside the door, stiffly holding a batch of loaves wrapped in an old flour bag.

When we were little, he gave all of us pet names, mine was after my favourite orange coloured forest fruit. My sisters were solom solom and saydame, after theirs. These were all fruits that were best bought up-country and we'd beg him before he went home to bring some back for us, rushing to him with a clutch of hastily grabbed dalasi notes in our hands – "I want fourteen," I might say, "so I can eat one for every day of the Christmas school holiday." Taiwo would ask for her solom soloms unpeeled, Kainde would ask him to remember to find the biggest, creamiest tasting yellow saydames. "And don't forget," my sisters would chorus, "bring us two bags each." And Osman would nod and tickle us under our chins and arms, and we would wriggle and squeal.

He's become afraid of me. He no longer jokes or calls me little cabadombo.

When I open the door, I stare at his face, more out of curiosity than anything else. His eyes are focused on my feet. When I glance down, all I can see is a line of brown sugar ants following a crack in the cement pavement, heading for some nest buried underneath. "Jere jaiffe," I say as I reach for the loaves. I take longer than I need to, touching his fingers and easing the bag out of his hands. I know I have this ability to make some men uncomfortable looking at me. And it is getting stronger. I have sometimes caught thick stares, the baobab juice kind, sticky and textured, that flick away the moment I turn to face them. Even from Osman.

Osman used to help us climb mango trees, or catch avocados that we threw down from the glossy leaved trees in the back garden. He used to help us light fires in charcoal burners so we could roast maize or bake groundnuts in their shells. If we were really dirty

from playing in the muddy puddles outside the gate during the rainy season, he'd hose us down after we stripped to our knickers. The last time he helped us was after we'd been dancing in a rain storm, and were getting ready to go into the house. Osman asked us to leave our wet things outside. My t-shirt got stuck as I tried to pull it over my head so I walked towards Osman for help. He'd done the same for my sisters. But as the neck band squeezed my ears tight and I bowed my head to make it easier to yank it off, my mother drove in through the gate. I hardly had any breasts then, they were barely the size of a mampatang. With one sour look in my direction, my mother barked at me, "Get inside at once!" And to Osman, "Wait here, I need to speak to you." She'd followed me into the house, "You are growing up now, and you're no longer a little girl." And she'd sent me off to have a proper shower.

I tell Osman my mum expects him back earlier than usual because us girls were all going out to a party in the evening. Then I turn into the kitchen with the bread resting against my chest spreading a soft warmth. I reach for a knife and slice a chunk off one of the loaves. I cut through the soft vertical vein in its side, and then slobber in some onion sauce before stuffing in the crispy balls.

Ma flaps her way into the kitchen to check on her Saturday soup, into which she's flung dried kuta from the deep Atlantic mixed with tripe and rump steak from the cows at Mr. Pratt's farm up the road. Later she'll add some chopped greens from my grandmother's backyard and the okra I bought at the market yesterday. The okras are in a huge bowl of water next to a chopping board and as she starts to get them ready she says, "You should have chosen larger ones as these tiny little ones you bought will take ages to top, tail and chop."

I hate market errands.

The only part I enjoy in making the soup is when I get to melt the oil, so I ask, "Can I do the palm oil now?"

"Yes, you can. But you do need to concentrate a bit more on the whole process. Soup's not just about palm oil. It's about all the ingredients. Unless you learn to get the details right, you'll never be able to make proper food in your own house."

I go outside to collect the tin. The oil, usually stilled into a waxy orange when stored, has been left outside in a sun bright enough to turn the edges soft and red. I use a large metal

scoop to ladle out eight spoonfuls and drop them into the furiously churning pot with the beginnings: chunks of meat mixed with peppeh en yabbas, raw chillies and onions which my ma has ground in our wooden mortar. As there is so much water in the pot, the oil separates into swirls of orange, as if hesitant about mingling with what's already in there. Ma is justifiably proud of her cooking. Depending on the type of soup she intends to make, she can add various enhancements - crushed egusi seeds, fermented tamarind, or a large grey segment of crystallized soda. She would be surprised to find out I've paid any attention at all to what she tells me, "When I make egusi soup, I like to mix it with a bit of green. Some of your grandmother's Yoruba friends make it with no greens but I think that looks too coarse. Egusi needs balance."

Or, to explain the mysteries of adding the right touch of okra, she says, "To stop the okra from cutting in the soup, I'm going to add a largish chunk of lubi. I know your aunt in England uses bicarbonate of soda but I think her soup lacks depth. This is why your cousin Ladipo always comes round here on Saturdays when he's home."

Her secret she says is letting the soup come into its own. The meat has to soften, the egusi has to blend, the oil has to turn. You simply cannot hurry it along.

My mother has taught me what she knows about being wily in love. Being deserted twice by the same man in one life has limited her experience. My father ran off with his secretary when I was four (and my sisters were two), came back home with his tail curled in regret and promptly died a year later, of a stomach tumour.

She thinks, "All men have two faces – the one they show you before they get what they want. This first face is attentive and caring. Then the coarse settles in and that's the face that stays for the rest of the time you know them."

As far as she knows, marriage is a battle, "You have to find some way of storing up your kindness in an armored case. Otherwise your man will leak you dry and you'll find you have none left – not even enough for your children."

I don't remember my father.