The Girl Who Can

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 anything 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 grow-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 of danger is a sad business. And you know, such things are not encouraged to express my thoughts too often? Or talking about everyday. But if any female child decides

Like all this business to do with my legs. I have always come into this world with legs, then they might as well wanted to tell them not to worry. I mean Nana and me legs.”

mother. That it did not have to be an issue for my two. "What kind of legs?" And always at that point, I favourite people to fight over. But I didn’t want either wed from her voice that my mother was weeping to be told not to repeat that or it to be considered so unwise. Nana never heard such inside weeping. Not that anyone would laugh at me until they cried. After all would have stopped Nana even if she had heard it. They were my legs... When I think back on it now, that always surprised me. Because, about almost every two, Nana and my mother must have been discussing something else apart from my legs, Nana is such a good legs from the day I was born. What I am sure of is that grown-up. In any case, what do I know about good grown-up when I came out of the land of sweet, soft silence inups and bad grown-ups? How could Nana be a good the world of noise and comprehension, the first topic grown-up when she carried on so about my legs? All I want to say is that I really liked Nana except for that.

That discussion was repeated very regularly. Nana: “As I keep saying, if any woman decides to

Nana: “Ah, ah, you know, Kaya, I thank my God come into this world with all of her two legs, then she that your very first child is female. But Kaya, I am not sure she select legs that have meat on them: with good sure about her legs. Hm... hm... hm...” and calves. Because you are sure such legs would support solid hips. And a woman must have solid hips to be able

Maami: “Mother, why are you always complaining about Adjoa’s legs?" If you ask me...”

“Oh, Mother.” That’s how my mother would answer. Nana: “They are too thin. And I am not asking you! Very, very quietly. And the discussion would end... Or Nana has many voices. There is a special one she would move on to something else.

Sometimes, Nana would pull in something about my uses to shut everyone up.

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

“But Adjoa has legs,” Nana would insist; “except that... and admit that after all, God’s children are many...” they are too thin. And also too long for a woman. Kaya: How, “After one’s only daughter had insisted on listen. Once in a while, but only once in such a long while, marrying a man like that, you still have to thank your somebody decides — nature, a child’s spirit mother, and God that the biggest problem you got later was (having) accident happens, and somebody gets born without arms or legs, or both sets of limbs. And then let me touch wood — a woman, and too thin to be of any use.”

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The way she always added that bit about my father and back. But to me, we live in our village, under her breath, she probably thought I didn’t hear, and walking those kilometres didn’t matter. School is nice. 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 will 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 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 means. They always complain about how long it is to walk it.
with a strange look on her face, but still pretending like she was not looking. All this week, she has been washing and ironing my uniform for me. That is a big surprise. Although some legs don’t have much meat on them, to carry my school uniform herself. That is a big surprise. And 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 to repeat such words. Or else, they would have cried. Because I was afraid of saying that sort of thing aloud. Because someone would have told me never, never to repeat such words. Or else, they would have cried.

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. But NEVER to repeat such words. Or else, they would have cried. Because someone would have told me never, never to repeat such words. Or else, they would have cried.

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 were 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
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