

*The following is an excerpt from 'Jagua Nana', by Cyprian Ekwensi, 1961*

Jagua had just had a cold bath, and, in the manner of African women, she sat on a low stool with a mirror propped between her bare knees, gazing at her wet hair. Only one cloth – a flowered cotton print – concealed her nakedness, and she had wound it over her breasts and under her armpits. Her arms and shoulders were bare, and she sat with the cloth bunched between her thighs so that the mirror bit into the skin between her knees.

She raised her arm and ran the comb through the wiry kinks, and her breasts swelled into a sensuous arc and her eyes tensed with the pain as the kinks straightened. From the skin on her long arms and beautiful shoulders the drops of speckled water slid down chasing one another.

She saw Freddie pass by her door just then, saw him hesitate when he caught a glimpse of the dark naked hair under her armpits. Then he hurried past into his own room on the floor below, calling as he went:

'Jagwa!. ... Jagwa Nana!...'

She knew he was teasing. They called her Jagua because of her good looks and stunning fashions. They said she was Ja-gwa, after the famous British prestige car.

'I'm comin' – jus' now!...Call me when you ready!'

She could sense the irritation in his voice. As always when she did not like where they were going she delayed her toilet, and Freddie must know by now that she disliked intellectual groups, especially the British Council groups which she thought false and stiff. On the other hand, Freddie could never do without them. He said they were a link with Britain from which stemmed so much tradition.

Like Freddie she was an Ibo from Eastern Nigeria, but when she spoke to him she always used pidgin English, because living in Lagos City they did not want too many embarrassing reminders of clan or custom. They and many others were practically strangers in a town where all came to make fast money by faster means, and greedily to seek positions that yielded even more money.

She heard the clatter of Freddie's shoes as he hurried down the steps to his own room on the floor below. She waited for him to come up, and when he would not come she went on combing her hair. By an odd tilt of the mirror she saw, suddenly revealed, the crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes and the tired dark rings beneath.

'I done old,' she sighed. 'Sometimes I tink say Freddie he run from me because I done old. God 'ave mercy!' she sighed again.

The sigh was a prayer to God to stay back the years and a challenge to herself to employ all the coquettish arts to help Him. She did not often remember that if her son had lived he would today be roughly as old as her lover. Freddie was hardly more than a boy, with his whole ambitious life before him. He was a teacher at the Nigerian National College who badly wanted to travel overseas to complete his law studies. He had applied for a Government Scholarship, but did not pin his faith on being selected. She knew Freddie deserved a good girl to marry him, raise his children and 'shadow' him in all his ambitions. But Jagua was too much in love with him to make a reasonable exit. And she wanted Freddie as her husband because only a young man would still be strong enough to work and earn when she would be on the decline. Men would not be wanting her in six years' time, when – even

now – girls of eighteen could be had. At forty-five, she had her figure and her tact to guide her.

She knew that, seen under the dim lights of her favourite night spot, the *Tropicana* – from a distance – her face looked beautiful. In any light she was proud of her body, which could model for any painter or sculptor. When she walked down a street, male eyes followed the wiggle of her hips which came with studied unconsciousness. Sometimes she was ashamed of her too passionate love-making, but Freddie did not seem so embarrassed now as he used to be at first. When she painted her face and lifted her breasts and exposed what must be concealed and concealed what must be exposed, she could out-class any girl who did not know what to do with her God-given female talent.

Freddie came into the room when she was dressed. He stood at the door and looked at her exposed shoulders and neck (they were magnificent, Jagua knew), at the transparent material of the blouse through which her pink brassiere could be seen – provocatively – and much more besides.

‘You no like my dress?’ she teased, knowing his prejudices against ‘going out naked’ as he called it. ‘You vex wit’ me?’ She had already noticed the redness in his eyes.

‘Jagwa, how many times I will tell you not to shame me? You never will satisfy till you go naked in de street!’

She smiled. ‘I know das wat you goin’ to say. But speak true, dis be naked?’ she pouted, holding the flimsy edge of her skirt and twirling round and round. ‘Dis be naked?’ She reached for a powder-puff and began to powder her face. ‘You don’ know de fashion, Freddie.’

‘You know de fashion, das why dem call you Jag-wa!’ He was talking sarcastically. ‘But we goin’ to a lecture, not dance. We goin’ to a lecture in de British Council.’ Freddie shut his eyes tight the way he always did when irritated.

‘Ah know wha’s wrong wit’ you, Freddie, man. You too jealous! You never like de men to look at you woman body. Don’ worry! All dose men in de British Council, dem got no bodies, dem only got brain and soul. Dem will not want to sleep your woman!’ The tears had welled up now and she sat down and began wiping them and sobbing aloud. She sat like a log, obstinate, this live bright thing that had been aglow only one moment ago.

Freddie came and held her hands and wiped away her tears and she felt soothed.

‘Make you trust me, Freddie. I not goin’ to run away with any man. Look roun’ and see. All de girls dress like dis nowadays. Is de fashion. We live in Africa where de sun dey shine every time; even sun use to shine when de rain fall. So we mus’ show our skin and let de sun-shine kiss our body. Is nothin’ bad in de sun kissin’ you woman body, Freddie. When you go to col’ country, like England...’

She saw that Freddie was not listening. He was looking through a window at the setting sun beyond the big banana leaves and palm fronds. The yellowness lit in silhouette the tall trees and corrugated roofs. ‘When ah go to Englan’, eh?’ he sneered. ‘You jus’ wan’ to laugh me. Poor teacher like me? Where I will fin’ de money? Unless Government give me scholarship –’

‘Nothin’ is impossible, Freddie! You mus’ have hope. I know how you wan’ to go study in England. By de help of God, you mus’ go. You better pass many who done go and come. You be clever boy, and your brain open. You young, too. You know what you doin’. You serious with you work. Yes! Government kin give you

scholarship. If dem don' give you', den we mus' try pull togedder to sen' you.'

'I jus' tryin' by myself, das all. If God help me –'

'God mus' surely help you.' She gave him a knowing look. 'As long as I love you, Freddie,' she whispered.

She wanted Freddie because of his youth. He was good looking and she knew the girls loved him but that did not prevent him being ambitious. Suppose he went to England, returned a lawyer, drove a big car, and then shunned her? No! He was too genuine a man to do that. He was not like the others, the 'Lagos' boys, the 'fast' ones.

'When you go, Freddie, promise me one ting. You no go stay dere too-long; or you forget we here! Person like me won't be small gal every day. I growin' old, I want me own man...'

'Don' worry, Jagua. Let me go firs'. Den when I return you kin see for youself. Ah never gone yet. Why you begin worry how I goin' to return?'

'Is true,' Jagua sighed. 'But sometimes I use to fear. You men! Woman will put all her trust in you. Den you go and disappoint her.' She began powdering away the tear-stains. 'But ah jus' tellin' you in case...' She looked appealingly at him, a twinkle in her eyes. When she looked away, she was talking half to herself. 'When you come back now with you title, den you will begin to chase de small gals with standin' breast. You won' see me den, only now when you strugglin'. Dat time, Jagua go be too ol' for you.'

'Too ol'? Nonsense!' Freddie said easily. 'Jagwa no go be too ol'.'

She was glad. She finished in silence, her painting and powdering, and when she was finally ready they stepped out into the sun, their heads raised proudly.

As soon as they entered the public lecture room a mild sensation swept through the audience. The speaker had already begun his lecture, but it seemed to Jagua that all eyes turned in their direction, and this was what she always liked. She knew Freddie did not care for this tribute to her beauty and fashion sense. One day he would know how much she was 'raising' him by being so dashing. With satisfaction she saw the whispering lips, shielded, the heads lowered behind the programmes.

A guide darted forward to take them to their seats. Even before they found places, Freddie pinched her and whispered: 'Dis man – he kin lecture wonderful.'

'So you say about everythin' in de British Council,' she whispered back. 'Wonderful!'

She looked at the lecture platform, noting the tarnished hairs piled up above each ear and around the high bald skull.

The lecturer's suit was rumpled, saggy at elbows and knees, yet had a kind of careless elegance. Perhaps this one would be different from the others, but to Jagua all lecturers were the same: boring.

She took her seat and peered hard at the programme Freddie was offering her.