

THE HAUSA TRADER

Alice sat in her parents' blue room, perched on an upholstered chair next to the wall where her portrait hung next to her sister's. She was there because of the rain storm. From where she sat, she could see a tempest of coconut palm and guava trees through both sets of louvered windows. The smell coming in was like a grass basket closed a long time and now opened, and she thought of the dark place under her tongue. Watching her mother at the dressing table, she listened to the racket on the tin roof. The thing was that you wanted to be in the room with someone and share the sound; best was a parent. But her mother wasn't acting right.

She was making her face up as if it was not raining at all and she was going out to a special dinner or even a dance. Alice had only the faintest idea of a dance. Sleeping Beauty may have gone to a dance once she woke up, after the prince kissed her. Cinderella went to a dance but then she lost her shoe. Alice's parents did not dance. They were missionaries. But still her mother sat on a little bench in front of a mirror, making herself up, and she was wearing a special flowered dress that showed the pink skin below her throat and the dress had a big skirt that sounded like a sweep of leaves when she walked. No one else was in the house. Alice's father was at work at the hospital and her older sister, Margaret, was at her friend's house and there wasn't that much time. After the rain, they would come home and the magic with her mother would be lost. Usually in a storm, they would read. Alice had not started first grade but she loved showing how many words she knew. If the storm was really scary, her mother would collect the button tin and spread its jewels on the large bed in the blue room, on the quilt from America, and she would tell stories about the dresses the buttons had come from long ago in a world Alice had never seen, across the ocean.

Her mother had gotten to the rouge. She was applying it with two fingers out of a little black pot called Merle Norman. Her face was scrunched up on one side so that the other side was stiff and long. Her short wavy hair was combed to one side where it was neatly pinned.

Alice heard someone knock on the front door but her mother didn't move and then she thought she was mistaken, that a coconut had fallen or a branch tapped the roof. She hoped so because she didn't want anyone else. Her mother was painting the other cheek, her eyebrows high as if she had just spied the most beautiful man. Alice hardly ever asked her mother for anything; she expected her to know what she wanted. Right now, she wanted her mother to stop looking in the mirror and look at *her*. She put a finger under her tongue and felt the soft ridge in the middle of that dark space. There was something her mother sometimes said to her father, "May I have a word with you?"

The knock came again and her mother turned fast as a cat, her cheeks bright red.

"Who could that be in this downpour? Did we latch the screen door? Maybe it's your father. Go see." She held the rouge pot and lid as if they explained how she knew who was at the door and why she couldn't go herself.

Alice was halfway across the room. She had already shifted her loyalty. It was her Daddy she wanted. He would hold her in a chair in the living room and tease her. In a story he would tell, it would rain forever and she could swim like a fish to the neighbor's house. Crossing the living room, she came to the front door with only the screen because the big wooden door was propped open all day long and closed only at night before bedtime. Her eyes went straight to the metal hook but it wasn't latched. She looked up, smiling, to see her father. Only it wasn't her father. It was a Nigerian. He was tall and wore a white cloth crown and a robe that might have been white but looked grey from being soaked through. His long fingers were dark and glistened. She took one step back and as she did, he seemed to bend a little in the middle and bring his hands together almost like a prayer.

“Alice?” Her mother said. “John?”

Even with the rain, Alice heard the sharp sound of the little bench scooting back across the concrete floor. She heard her mother’s heels on the floor and then her hand was on her back.

“Oh,” her mother said.

“Please, mah,” the man said. “The rain has caught me. I take refuge on this porch.”

Alice saw the large pack on the floor of the covered porch. The man was one of those Hausa traders who came by to set up shop. On a day when it wasn’t raining, they would come during rest time, after lunch. She wouldn’t even know they were there until her parents got up from their nap and she was free to go play and when she ran out the front door she would nearly trip on the carvings and leather work and nothing a girl would want. Alice did not know what Hausa meant except that the men sold African art and spent a long time on the price. Her mother would come outside and look carefully at a carved elephant or antelope and then she and the trader would go back and forth.

“What is your *last* price?” her mother would say.

Sometimes the man would look like his feelings were hurt. Once a Hausa trader had packed everything up and when Alice’s mother said finally she would pay what he wanted, he did not come back. He just kept walking down the path away from their house.

But the rain made everything different. Her mother was reaching to push the door open. Her hair seemed to lift, as if a little wind had chosen her alone.

“Come in,” she said. “It’s too wet.” Alice took another step back. Her mother had never invited a Hausa trader inside.

“No. Thank you, *merci*. I only want to notify my whereabouts. Because of the rain.” He raised his hands and drew them down and Alice watched the white cloth go up and come down, like a large bird. “My wares now ruin if I continue that way.” He pointed toward the town, beyond the mission compound.

Alice’s mother let go of the door and it bounced gently against the frame before settling. She wondered if her mother would latch it now but she did not.

Her Merle Norman cheeks were still very pink and she had not drawn on her lipstick so she looked out of balance. Alice wanted to tell her to go finish putting on her face, which was what her mother called sitting in front of her dressing table with the little pots and lipsticks and dabbing on color. But her mother didn't seem to know what to do. The man had turned around and gone to his bag. Out of it he pulled another robe. Facing away from them, he leaned forward, pulled off the wet one and replaced it. As he did, Alice saw his pants like pajama bottoms and she thought they should not be watching. But her mother kept looking. She had a hand to her mouth as if something might escape, a butterfly or a note of music or maybe that word she was always asking her father about. *May I have a word with you?*

The man seemed to have forgotten about them. He bunched up his clean gown, pressed the wad of cloth between his knees and now he was squatting on a mat. Then his knees met the floor and he bent over, putting his forehead on the ground and then he went up and down. Alice thought he was praying now for certain but in the wrong way, the way her parents had come to Africa to correct. Yet her mother did not tell him to stop. Alice started to itch around her waist band, where the gathering was tight on her skin. She itched a lot in her clothes and it always made her sister angry how she pulled up her dress to get to the right spots. Her mother was looking everywhere except at her. Now Alice's knee itched and she lifted her leg to scratch it. When she did, she almost fell over.

"Alice, watch what you're doing," her mother said, half whispering. "You're going to knock yourself out on the floor."

If the man heard, he didn't change anything. Alice was sure that her chance was lost. She slapped her shoes down hard, walking back into her parents' room. This time, she climbed all the way into the chair and pushed her rounded back into the upholstery. She would not budge until her mother came to see about her. She kept scratching her knee and brought it to a bright pink. Maybe she had been bitten by an ant. She studied the injury. In the middle of the pink was a small white spot. Her mother would be sorry when she came back and saw it.

After awhile, Alice heard sounds from the kitchen. At least her mother wasn't standing at the door watching the Hausa trader any more. Unless the cook had come and he was making the noise and her mother *was* still at the door with her face half made. The thought made her stomach light and funny as when her father drove the car too quickly over a hill. Her stomach was another dark place.

"He wouldn't come," she said aloud, meaning the cook. Her own solid voice made her feel better and she imagined how Solomon would come only after the rain. When he got here he would put on his white apron and talk about how he nearly got struck by lightning and he would move about with his knees bent preparing dinner as if even now lightning might enter the kitchen and strike him dead. She had heard him say more than once, "This lightning strike, you be dead one time." She thought you would probably be dead all the time but she didn't say so.

Whatever her mother was doing, it would have to be over soon and she would remember her. Alice waited and twisted her hair, trying to get the strand to reach across her cheek and into her mouth so she could suck it the way Margaret sucked ends of her hair. But as much as she pulled, she could not get the hair to reach. She looked at the bite again. She hoped it wasn't going away. Then her mother would not see it and feel bad. She scratched again to keep the color bright. "Down, down," she said softly, trying to think of the word her mother might want with her father.

The rain was letting up. As soon as she stood to go looking for her mother, she felt disappointed in herself. It should have been the other way around. At least she would not go out to the living room because that would put her near the front door. Instead, she went into the bathroom, which led to the room she shared with Margaret and then into the breakfast room and toward the kitchen. But the kitchen was dark. So she turned and half skipped back through the breakfast room toward the living room, entering from a different direction. She would pretend to be playing and not hurt at all.

“May I have a word with you,” she would say to her mother. But there were no lights here either, only the long shadows of furniture. Alice suddenly remembered how her mother had looked, standing at the door with her pale lips.

“Mommy?” she said quietly because she was afraid the man would hear her. There was only the guest room left but she had to pass close to the front door to get to it. Halfway across the living room she heard them on the front porch. She went to the screen door and pressed her face against it. How had she not heard her mother open the screen? There she was sitting with the man in the robe, he on his mat and she on a wooden chair. They were drinking out of the china tea cups from South Carolina. Alice did not understand South Carolina any more than she knew Hausa except that it had to do with who her parents were before she was born which was why she didn’t care to know South Carolina. It took her parents away from her, like this man was taking her mother, like her mother’s Merle Norman and the dress like a rake of leaves had taken her. Alice punched the door open with her forehead and stood just that way, with her feet planted and her body at an angle.

“Alice. Come out here and shut the door.”

“Something bit me.” She wasn’t looking up and she wasn’t closing the door. Her mother would have to come get her.

“Alice. Come out and close the door. What’s wrong?” Alice heard the fine sound of the china cup and saucer being set down on the floor of the porch.

“Something bit me.” Her mother’s arm was around her waist, picking her up. Oh lovely lovely. They were going inside. Her mother was back to normal. She was going to wash Alice’s knee and kiss it and put on a Band-Aid.

But no. She was carrying her back to the chair on the porch. “Here, sit with us.” Alice hung her head so her hair made a curtain around her face. She wasn’t going to look at them.

“What’s wrong? Show me the bite.”

Alice didn’t move her head. She did hold her leg straight out and point at it with her finger. *See*, she wanted to say. *See the terrible hurt. See how I have cried. You left me.* That was the main thing. She snuck a look at the man. She hoped he saw how her mother preferred her, how this was their house and not his and her mother was only being nice, only being a nice missionary. *My mother would not have a word with you*, she wanted to say.

But he was looking out over the yard. Her eyes followed and she saw the bull cow right in the middle of their path, way too close. It was standing in the mist of the after-rain, its horns wide as tree branches and it was grey, like the man’s wet costume when she first saw him at the door. But the animal had dark black hooves, small and perfect as cups.

“Oh,” her mother said again and Alice knew she had seen it too.

The Hausa trader lifted his arm and held his hand palm-forward toward the animal as if he were telling it to stop. The bull only moved its head side to side. Alice had seen all kinds of wide-horned cattle on the road. Her family would roll up the windows in the car and plow slowly through the throng of humped and horned beasts. Alice’s mother said the boy cows had the largest horns. The lady cows’ horns were smaller. This was when Alice was sorting dogs as boys and cats as girls and she was surprised to learn that boy and girl animals could look alike except for certain features.

The bull was chewing and now it seemed to study the guava tree she liked to climb. Alice could see the wad of furry flesh that hung from its neck like an empty sack.

“Mr. Abdullah, is that your bull?” her mother said.

“No, mah,” he said.

Alice looked hard at the Hausa trader. He had a name and her mother had learned it from drinking tea with him. The place in her mouth and the dark tea and the man’s hands and her stomach all came to mind at once. It seemed a long time ago that she had thought of the button tin or reading a book. She looked at her mother whose face appeared more normal outside, as if she had somehow been colored better out here. Then she looked back

and forth between the two and all at once she felt something—an invisible-thread—connecting the man and her mother. Maybe it *was* the word and they had already had it.

She felt a shift in her mother's lap, as if she had decided something.

"Mr. Abdullah, my husband will be home soon. That bull is on the path. You must move it."

Alice remembered the time the monitor lizard came in their yard and climbed a tree and one of her missionary aunts got her rifle and shot it. She did not want the bull to be shot but she did not want it to run into her father. The horns were the problem. That was why they rolled up the windows. This bull's horns were colored black and white like watercolors swirled on a plate.

"Alice you go inside." Her mother scooped Alice out of her lap so that she was forced to stand.

She looked at the Hausa trader. "No. You come," she said. The man was squatting now like a leap frog. "Softly, softly," he said, meaning *don't move, don't open the door*, Alice guessed because he reached his arm out against her mother's skirts like a little gate she must not cross and they both stopped dead straight like the smart players did in "Mother, May I" when a less smart player forgot to say "please." And then her mother smiled in a way Alice had not seen, her lips half open like a flower, a natural open pink, like something had welled up inside her and had to come out, a happiness that had nothing to do with her, Alice.

The Hausa trader leaned toward the bull as if he might push it down the path and back on the compound road by his stare, but with his left hand he was opening his bag again. Alice forgot about everything else. She could tell by the man's face when he found what he wanted, a big white square of cloth. Into the yard he started, his robe waving and in his bare feet and the cloth in one hand.

The bull turned its great horned head toward them. Alice thought she heard the man say something. The bull's ears perked up. The Hausa trader was close to the animal when he stopped and the bull started to walk toward

him like a shy, friendly goat, until finally its horns were almost surrounding the man in a hug. Then it suddenly skipped back and stood a little at an angle and Alice could see one of its large black eyes looking at her.

The Hausa trader waited and then he talked low and soft and the bull came back and he put the white handkerchief on its long nose and rubbed it. The bull waved his head up like he wanted more or wanted the man to touch other places, like a dog or cat would do if you kept on scratching the same place over and over. The man rubbed on the top of the bull's head and around his horns and even on its neck, and the bull tossed his head, like he was enjoying himself, but the man didn't laugh. She only heard his voice and saw the care of rubbing, like Solomon, who would dry the big skillet in the kitchen over and over until it shone, all the while talking low, saying something she didn't understand.

She finally thought to look up at her mother who was standing again with her hand to her mouth almost like she might yawn but she was fully awake, her eye brows lifted and her mouth tilted and Alice thought again of the word. The man must be giving it to the bull and her mother wanted to hear it or maybe hear it again.

"What?" she said, and pulled her mother's skirt.

"What do you mean?"

"What's he doing?" That wasn't what she meant. What she meant was, *Why are you looking like that?*

"He's taking care of the bull," her mother said. *I know that*, she wanted to say. *Why are you with them and not with me?*

She moved her tongue in her mouth, searching every dip and cranny.

Finally, the man moved to the animal's side and out of the way of its horns, still talking, and the big black eye blinked. Alice saw that the Hausa trader had made little knots at each corner of the big handkerchief and laid it across the bull's head like a cap. After he talked some more to the bull, he put one hand on its nose and an arm on its hump and made it turn around. When he started to move, the bull moved beside him.. The man and the bull walked away down the road.

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The Hausa trader did not return for his pack until after dark when the bugs were pinging off the porch light, after Solomon had left and after her parents' anniversary. She hadn't known about the anniversary, the reason her mother was dressing up. It was why Margaret was spending the night over with a friend. Only because of the storm and her father's delay and the cook's delay had Alice been included. She would have been put to bed unknowing. Now vigilant, sitting on a leather stool near the front door and scratching her bite, she was waiting.

She had tried to convey to Daddy what had happened, how she and Mommy were in the room and there was a knock at the door. He seemed only a little surprised about the tea party with South Carolina china. "I didn't know they drank English tea," was what he said. "He wanted three cubes of sugar," her mother had said, her voice high, as if she was trying something new, like taking her shoes off to run in the grass. "What do you know?" her father said in one of those sentences he had that sounded like a question but wasn't. What it meant was: "Now we know." "The man talked to the bull," she finally said, hoping for more from her father. He made one of those big funny faces that Alice usually liked but on this evening, she felt he wasn't smart enough for the story she was telling.

She thought but didn't say, *Mother had a word with the Hausa trader*. That sentence was like an itch inside her stomach, a dark little knot she couldn't get to.

The man hardly had time to knock before Alice saw him. Her father came to the door and opened it, and a spit of moths flew in. The Hausa trader bent slightly as if the door were low and stepped silently into the room, holding both hands out to Alice's father and when her father held out one hand, the Hausa trader covered it with his two. The man greeted them in African before he told her father in English how he had found the bull's owner and returned it and then stayed for soup, which was really, Alice knew, balls of cassava dipped into a stew so peppery hot it would nearly take your head off.

“I have only come to retrieve my pack,” he said.

Alice thought her father should do something before the man left. Her mother was sitting away across the room and hadn’t come close to the Hausa trader even though she had been very close to him earlier. Tonight she had only nodded and said “good evening” and not with her mouth in that open flower smile.

“I want to buy something,” Alice said, as she stared at her mother.

“What would you like?” her father said.

Alice could think only of the carved birds she had seen some traders display; they looked like the cow’s horns, long and grey-white and sleek.

“Birds,” she said. “The long birds.”

“Do you have any of the carved birds?” Alice’s father said.

“Of course,” the man said and he passed out the door. More moths came in and Alice felt good about that at least. It always worried her mother when the moths came in.

When he re-entered, the Hausa trader held birds, a facing pair. Then he put them to his head and bent over, acting for a moment like the bull, like he would charge her. Alice saw they really were bulls’ horns only they had been cut off and now they were carved to look like birds. The birds’ eyes were black too.

“It’s not *him*, she said, almost screeching.

“What do you mean?” her father said.

“The bull cow.”

“Of course not.”

The Hausa trader and her father laughed and Alice felt badly played. She crunched inward like a turtle, heaving her back up and pulling her chin down but she couldn’t get in far enough to disappear.

“Come,” the man said. She peered through her bangs. He was half bent and now he held the birds in one hand so that he could signal her to come, his fingers fluttering. But she stood where she was, locking her knees back. Her chest felt prickly and worn.

“How much?” her father said, waving aside a large, lazy moth.

“It doesn’t matter,” the trader said. He stood straight up and his robe waved near the floor. “Let her have them.” She drew her head up just a little, just in time to see him throw the long sleeves of the gown up over his shoulders, exposing his long arms, the birds still shining in his hand. She was surprised when he spoke again, directly to her.

“These come from heaven,” he said. “Not the bull. If you like, I can take it back.”

He meant “them” not “it,” Alice knew.

She thought of the dark hooves and the bull’s dark eye and the itch inside and the white cloth.

May I have a word with you? These come from heaven.

She raised her arms and let them fall with violent, swift precision. “I like it,” she said, using the Hausa trader’s manner of speech. And she skated her bare feet across the cool cement to take them.

“Ah,” the Hausa trader said.

Her father pulled out paper money and Alice knew the birds did not cost nearly that much. But the man slipped the bills into his white robe. She wondered if there was a pocket hidden in there somewhere.

After her bath and after her mother dabbed pink ointment where Alice had worked the bite into a bright red flower, she was let to fall asleep in her parents’ bedroom. She placed the two birds on the pillow next to hers and covered them up to their necks with the white sheet so that only the tips of the horns, the birds’ long beaks, were visible. Then she lay on her back, her hands on her stomach where the dark and glistening word waited.