



The
CIVILIZED
WORLD

A NOVEL IN STORIES

SUSI WYSS



Monday Born



Adjoa had been going to Madame Janice's every week for the last three months, but she still couldn't put her finger on why her stomach clenched and her shoulders stiffened every time her twin brother, Kojo, drove her to the white woman's well-kept house. Madame Janice was a perfectly pleasant American lady who seemed to appreciate Adjoa's massages. Other than the African masks and statues displayed prominently in the living room, other than the rather rude night watchman, there was really nothing about Madame Janice or her home that could account for Adjoa's anxiety.

Rolling her shoulders in an effort to loosen them, Adjoa guessed her unease had more to do with the drive itself, particularly since it was nighttime and the old car that Kojo often borrowed from a friend made loud clanging noises every time he shifted into a new gear. Abidjan was not the kind of city where two Ghanaians ought to be meandering about in the dark in a clanging car. Kojo knew this as well as

she did—she could tell by his silent concentration, by the way his eyes narrowed into thin slits as he picked the streets he drove on, avoiding the ones that were rumored to have police checkpoints.

Adjoa was often able to read her twin's thoughts, and she knew, watching him now, that he was thinking about last week's drive when they'd been pulled over by an Ivoirian policeman. He'd asked for Kojo's papers, examining them for so long that Adjoa began to wonder if he could read. He claimed there was a fine for broken mufflers, a heavy one he could overlook for the reasonable sum of 1500 CFA francs—the mere cost of two cold beers. It took fifteen minutes for Kojo to negotiate him down to 500, and the policeman had leered at Adjoa as he took the money. "*Beaucoup de graisse, pas comme les gôts Ivoiriennes,*" he'd muttered appreciatively. Lots of fat, not like the Ivoirian girls.

Please God don't let us run across one of them tonight, Adjoa prayed, as the car made its noisy way down the street. She leaned her head against the headrest and gazed through her open window at the half-constructed concrete mansions looming in the darkness—colossal, abandoned structures in huge lots of overgrown grass. When had it become like this? Twelve years ago, when they'd come to Abidjan to find work, Ivoirians had welcomed foreigners, especially to work as *domestiques* and day laborers. With her beauty-school degree, she found jobs at various salons, working her way up to hairdresser at the Hôtel Ivoire. Meanwhile, her brother found a string of construction jobs in a city that seemed to

expand and grow like the belly of a pregnant woman. The problems seemed to start when President Bédié publicly complained that foreigners were taking jobs from Ivoirians, blaming them for the country's worsening economy. How conveniently he'd overlooked that his own ethnic group, the Baoulé, were Akan people who'd migrated long ago from what was now Ghana.

Adjoa let loose a sigh and leaned her head closer to the window to catch a warm breeze. If only they had enough money saved up to go home. It didn't take an expert to see things were just going to get worse. The bubble of hope following General Guéi's coup d'état last Christmas Eve had already burst. Basic prices were going up, and the rent for their one-room cinder-block house had nearly doubled—their landlord's attempt to either gouge them or get rid of them. Even with all of this, they might have managed if construction hadn't come to a virtual halt and her brother no longer found work.

"Sometimes I wish we could just go home," Kojo said. Adjoa looked at his profile. He had recently taken to wearing his cap backward—a look she'd told him she didn't like. Still, beneath the cap was the same Kojo, the twin who regularly started discussions that joined seamlessly with her trains of thought.

"Soon," she promised. Only a week ago, they'd calculated it would take another six months—if there were no surprises—to save the additional 200,000 CFA they needed to open a beauty salon upon their return to Accra. Over the

years, they'd mapped out all the details. Adjoa would be in charge of the beauty treatments, hiring and overseeing staff for routine services like manicures and braiding hair, while providing the more complicated ones herself. Kojo would use his construction skills to transform a rental space and keep it in good working order. He referred to it as an investment, clearly enthralled by the prospect of being his own boss, but Adjoa thought of it differently. She envisioned being known in her community—why not in all of Accra?—for running the best, friendliest, and most reliable salon. Women would come to her exhausted from tending to children, households, and jobs, and they would be treated like queens just long enough to leave refreshed and reenergized. She'd not only be helping other women, she'd also finally be recognized for it.

“You call six months soon? No, Adjoa, we have to find other ways to get money.” Kojo turned the car into Riviera III, the neighborhood where Madame Janice lived. The residential street was dark and quiet, with an almost eerie absence of people. “For instance,” he continued, “why not ask Madame Janice to pay more for your massages?”

Adjoa shook her head. “I don't know if that's a good idea. She already pays ten thousand for a single hour. That's more than I get paid for a whole day's work at the hotel.”

Kojo slowed the car as he turned onto Madame Janice's street. “In my eyes,” he said, “it's better to return home with our pockets half full than being shipped back in coffins, all our savings spent on our funerals.”

Adjoa turned to give her twin a sharp look, even though

his eyes were still on the road. "Kojo," she said, "where's your good sense? You know better than to say things like that."

"Twelve years in a place like this is enough to chip away at anyone's good sense," he muttered, as he pulled the car to a halt in front of Madame Janice's villa.

"Just remember where we're from, Kojo," Adjoa said. "Remember the hands that fed you." She shouldn't need to remind him that their honest and hardworking family—no matter how poor they might be considered by others—was rich in common sense. Their roots were the one thing that had kept them grounded this far.

Instead of answering her, Kojo leaned back on the headrest and sighed. Adjoa pulled down the visor and glanced at her reflection in the lighted mirror: a round, makeup-less face, her straightened hair pulled back into a bun. She patted down a few hairs that had come loose in the wind. A God-fearing woman, her brother always called her.

"Will you wait for me here," she asked, "or should I take the *woro woro* home?"

"I'll wait," Kojo said, reaching beneath his legs to pull a small transistor radio from beneath the front seat.

Adjoa raised herself out of the car and shut the door. She carefully brushed at the folds of her dark blue skirt and tugged at the back of her blouse to loosen it where the sweat had glued it to her back. Madame's villa was hidden behind a high cement wall, painted gray and embedded with broken glass on the top to discourage thieves. All along the empty street, similar walls with glass or iron spikes enclosed the

other homes. Stray branches of bougainvillea planted on the inside of Madame's garden had escaped and were splayed out like snakes, weighed down by the thick blossoms barely visible in the dark.

When Adjoa rang the doorbell, the security guard, Maurice, called out from the other side of the metal gate, "*Qui est là?*"

"*C'est moi,*" she said. "Adjoa."

"*C'est qui, 'Adjoa'?*"

She sighed. As if she hadn't been coming here every Wednesday for a good three months. "*La masseuse.*"

She heard Madame Janice open the sliding door of the living room and call out to the guard to let Adjoa in. As Maurice finally opened the front gate, he took a few steps backward, his arms stretched out as if to protect Madame's red Mercedes-Benz behind him. Adjoa ignored him and walked toward her client.

"Good evening," Adjoa said, clamping her mouth shut before the word *madame* could escape. Janice had told her more than once not to call her that, after which Adjoa stopped calling her anything. *Janice* sounded much too familiar.

"Hi, Adjoa. Come on in," Madame Janice said, waving her into the air-conditioned house and quickly sliding the door shut against the mosquitoes and the sticky, humid night. She wore jeans and a T-shirt, her straight brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, and Adjoa wondered—not for the first

time—how old she might be. Her best guess was that she was in her mid-thirties, about the same age as Adjoa.

“You have no idea how badly I need you this week,” Janice said. “My neck is in knots, complete knots.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Adjoa.

“I’m sure I’ll be putty once you’re finished with me. Would you like a glass of water?”

Adjoa shook her head. “No, thank you. I’m ready when you are.”

“Okay,” Janice answered, turning down the hall toward her bedroom. “I’ll call you as soon as I’m ready.”

Swathed by the delicious air-conditioned air, Adjoa looked down at the overstuffed sofa and wondered yet again whether she should take the liberty of sitting down. She decided—as she always did—to remain standing.

In three months, all Adjoa had learned about Janice was that she’d lived in Africa for thirteen years, she’d come to the Ivory Coast to work for an American organization, and she lived alone. She tried to glean clues about her client by looking around the living room, but there were no personal photographs, no clutter to reveal whether she had any hobbies or special interests. The living room was a sparsely furnished, wide-open space with a light-gray tiled floor, bright-white walls, and a sweeping archway leading to the dining room. One door led to the kitchen, another led to the hallway toward the bedrooms. Adjoa wasn’t sure how many bedrooms there were, but in the past she’d counted

five closed doors when she walked down the hallway to Madame Janice's bedroom.

It was a large house to live alone in, she thought, even for a white person. If she herself lived in a place like this, she would fill it up with family; she didn't have children of her own yet, but there were plenty of them in her family back home. Adjoa particularly liked the living room—this was what she wanted her beauty salon to look like: bright, wide open, and clean. Not small and cramped and dirty, like the neighborhood salons where she'd first worked, towels gray with use and balls of hair gathering in the corners.

Adjoa looked at the shelves against the wall, filled with carved African statues. As usual, she eyed them suspiciously. Some of the objects were obviously made for tourists, but why risk having any of them out in the open? Though Adjoa was no more superstitious than anyone else she knew, it was clear that exposing sacred objects was dangerous—an invitation for bad spirits to enter the house. She'd hinted at this last month, but Madame Janice had missed it entirely, going on instead about how she enjoyed being surrounded by souvenirs from all the African countries where she'd lived over the last thirteen years.

"You must be eager to return home after such a long time," Adjoa had said, struck by the fact that Janice had been away from her homeland even longer than she and Kojo had.

But Janice had merely shrugged her shoulders. "I'm used to moving around a lot," she said. "When I was a kid, my

family moved to a new town every year or two. Besides, the States don't feel like home anymore; it's just a place to visit."

Recalling Janice's words as she waited for her, Adjoa felt sad. Madame Janice had choices—she could live anywhere she wanted, yet she didn't seem to belong anywhere. Adjoa, on the other hand, who knew exactly where her home was, couldn't be there until she had the means to set up a business to provide for herself and her family. How unfair the world sometimes seemed. She scanned Janice's thirteen-year accumulation of souvenirs, finally settling on a matching pair of male and female statues, about twenty centimeters high, with bulging eyes, arms akimbo, and headdresses colored with blue powder. Madame Janice had pointed them out to Adjoa once, referring to them by a name she couldn't recall, and explained that the figures, which represented twins, were carved by the Yoruba in Nigeria, where twins were even more revered than in Ghana. Apparently, when a twin died young, the Yoruba made a statue of the dead twin to house his or her soul, so that the dead twin wouldn't come back to harm the living one.

Why were there two figures? Adjoa wondered. Could it mean that both twins had died? No, she reproached herself, this was not a time for bleak thoughts. She pulled her eyes away from the statues and rested them on an enormous blank TV screen instead. She was relieved when she heard Madame Janice's voice calling her and hurried down the hallway without looking back.

In the bedroom, Adjoa found Janice lying on her back on the bed, dressed in panties with a towel spread underneath her and a bottle of lotion placed on the nightstand. As if readying herself for prayer, Adjoa lowered herself onto her knees at the side of the bed. She poured a pink pool of lotion on her hands, rubbed them together briskly to warm the lotion, and then began to massage the woman's neck and upper chest, feeling the small, pronounced bones beneath the slack skin. She used soft motions, afraid that rubbing the skin too hard, with so little flesh underneath, would leave bruises. As she massaged a shoulder, a sigh swept out of Janice's lungs, like a hushed gust of wind during the small rainy season. After rubbing each arm, Adjoa finished with the hand, the webbing between the thumb and forefinger, and gave each finger a light tug.

Adjoa thought of asking Janice about the twin statues but worried that her employer might wonder why she was looking so closely at things that didn't belong to her. While Janice didn't hesitate to ask Adjoa questions about her, Adjoa didn't feel it was proper to reciprocate. She squirted another dollop of lotion onto her hands and began massaging Janice's stomach and legs. Sometimes, though, she wished she could be as direct as her client. The first day they'd met, Janice had immediately asked her about her name.

"I have two names," Adjoa had explained. "Ataa Adjoa. *Ataa* means female twin, and *Adjoa* means a girl born on a

Monday. I don't use the name *Ataa* anymore because it confuses people to call my brother and me by similar names; he's called *Ata*, for male twin." She pronounced *Ata* with a short *a* and *Ataa* with a stretched *aa*, even though she knew that Janice's American ear probably couldn't hear the difference. She didn't bother to explain that Kojo had dropped *Ata* around the same time for the same reason.

"Does being born on a Monday have any special meaning in your culture?" Janice asked.

"It's just our tradition to name children after the day of the week on which they're born, though many people think a person's qualities can be predicted by their name. Monday-borns are said to be quiet."

Janice had smiled and said, "That certainly seems true in your case."

Adjoa finished massaging Janice's feet. She was breathing deeply, as if she were sleeping. Tapping her on the shoulder lightly, Adjoa whispered, "It's time to turn over." With her eyes still closed, Janice turned onto her stomach. This time Adjoa started from the bottom up, the backs of the legs, the buttocks, back, and then neck. Modesty had prevented her from telling Janice the other traits typical of Monday-borns—that they were believed to be hardworking, disciplined, and loyal. Nor did she mention that despite their reputation for being quiet, Monday-borns were not to be taken for granted because they were also strong-willed.

Adjoa felt tight clumps of muscle in Janice's neck and spent at least ten minutes trying to release them. Then she

closed the bottle of lotion, tapped her again on the shoulder, and said, "I'll be waiting in the living room."

"This time you have to ask for a raise," Kojo said, his eyes scanning the road ahead of them.

"I know, Kojo." It had been a long week, starting with Kojo going out without his identity card. He'd had the bad luck of taking a bus that was pulled over at a makeshift checkpoint and, with no money to pay off the police, he'd spent several hours in jail. For days afterward he sulked at home, not even bothering to look for work. On top of this, during their weekly phone call home at the nearby *télécentre*, their eldest brother, Kobby, informed them that their mother had been checked into the hospital after what appeared to be a stroke, and they needed money for her care. Adjoa had of course gone immediately to the Western Union office, trying hard not to think of the possibility that she might not see her mother again. Instead, she went over the numbers in her head, counting up their remaining savings, calculating how many more months it would take to save the money they still needed. She already knew that the most they could borrow from the bank in Accra was half the cedi equivalent of the total 2 million CFA they needed. So far, they had saved 800,000 of the remaining million—until last weekend, of course. That had set them back 50,000. Still, with just 250,000 to go, they were so close—couldn't Kojo see that?

"Ask her for fifteen thousand," Kojo said.

“I’m not sure. That’s more than anyone I know pays, and I don’t want to lose her as a client.”

“That woman is plenty rich,” he said. “That huge house and no man, no children? Someone like that can throw money away and there’s always more. A woman like that has no worries.”

Without looking at her brother, Adjoa knew what he was thinking. Their neighbor’s boss was selling his old luxury sedan, and Kojo had gone to see it this weekend. It had been pointless; she’d said so to him the same night. It made no sense that he would still be contemplating that car, but she knew with complete certainty, the way she always knew when she could read his mind, that he was picturing himself right now, driving it. For a moment Adjoa wished their money troubles would just go away. What would it be like to live in a villa like Madame’s and not have family worries or money worries? Then she wondered: How did Kojo know Madame Janice lived alone? She couldn’t recall telling him.

“Maybe I could ask for twelve thousand,” she said.

“Fifteen,” Kojo insisted, as he pulled the car over in front of Janice’s house. He turned off the ignition and looked at Adjoa, his eyebrows raised in an expression that she knew only too well. How many times had he used it as a boy, to coax her into sharing a handful of groundnuts or her half of an orange after he’d already eaten his? Even then, she had never refused him.

“Look,” Kojo said. “We need another two hundred fifty

thousand CFA. If you get the raise and we save everything you get from her, we'll have enough in seventeen weeks. That's four months, Adjoa, and that's all I can take of this place."

Though his numbers matched the ones Adjoa had been calculating in her head, she was unsure what to make of the tone of his voice.

"What do you mean, that's all you can take?"

"Just that. I refuse to stay here longer than four months, and I'm not leaving without enough money to start the business. I don't care anymore what it's going to take."

Adjoa's heartbeat quickened; Kojo had never talked like this before. "What are you saying, brother?"

"I'm saying this city has easy and fast ways to make money," he said. "I'm saying there are people like your madame who are so rich they wouldn't even notice if some of their things should disappear."

Adjoa stared at her brother. "That's not you talking," she said. "I don't know who it is, but it's not my twin."

"Open your eyes, Adjoa. We're living in a city where nobody gives a damn if we live or die. The only people who can take care of us are us."

Adjoa knew that Kojo was as worried as she was about their mother, that he was still angry about his run-in with the police. He didn't mean what he was saying. "You're just upset," she said. "I know it's hard for you when there's not much work to be found, Kojo. Please don't worry. I'll ask for the raise."

She lifted herself out of her seat and shut the door. Leaning into the open window, she added, "We're so close, Kojo. We just need to hang on a few more months."

Kojo shrugged his shoulders and slumped down in his seat, their conversation clearly unfinished. But Adjoa didn't know what else to say, so she walked to the front gate and rang the doorbell. Before Maurice could ask who it was, she called out, "*C'est Adjoa, la masseuse.*"

He opened the gate a tiny notch, and she saw his dark eyes peering out at her, like a lizard's staring at a fly that is about to become his lunch. When Adjoa asked him if Madame was there, he answered yes but gave no indication of opening the gate.

What are you waiting for? Adjoa thought. Let me in. She heard Janice's voice in the background. "*Maurice, c'est Adjoa?*"

Maurice kept the entry shut, his lizard eyes fixed on Adjoa as he tilted his head to the side to shout over his shoulder, "*Oui, madame.*"

Only when Madame Janice told him to let her inside did he finally open the gate, turning his back to Adjoa as if she were no longer of any interest to him. Janice stood beyond the threshold, wearing a thin pale-blue robe embroidered with bright flowers. In the dim light, the fabric shimmered like smooth, flowing water, as if to remind Adjoa that she would never own something as elegant or as expensive as this.

When Adjoa left Janice's house an hour later, Maurice was not in his usual place seated on a straw mat in the carport. At the sound of his voice on the other side of the wall, she opened the front gate herself. Outside, Maurice was leaning into the driver's window of her brother's car, the two men talking in low voices. Adjoa marched to the passenger side and climbed into her seat.

"I'm back, Kojo. Let's go." She looked past her brother at the night watchman. "*Bonne nuit, Maurice,*" she said, her voice sounding shrill to her ears.

Kojo and Maurice nodded at each other wordlessly, and Kojo started the car and pulled out onto the street.

"What were the two of you talking about?" she asked him.

"Nothing. Man talk."

"Man talk?"

"You know," he said. "Man talk. Sports and such. How did it go?"

"Fine, Kojo. She agreed to the raise."

He seemed to mull this over, his head and shoulders hunched, his hands gripping the steering wheel as he navigated the car across a speed bump—*gendarme couché* or reclining policeman, the Ivoirians called them. Adjoa watched him for several minutes, trying to translate his body language.

"Kojo," she finally asked, "what are you thinking about?" She realized as the words came from her mouth that she had never had to ask her twin brother this question before.

“Nothing,” he said, without looking over. “Nothing you need to worry about.”

But Adjoa kept her eyes locked on Kojo. Except for the backward cap on his head, he appeared no different from the boy who had come with her to Abidjan twelve years ago, the brother who had always tried to protect her, the twin who shared her every thought. And yet she couldn't help but wonder: Who is this person next to me? Where is the brother I used to know as well as I know myself?

She shook her head and took a deep breath. If they could just make it through the next four months and get home, certainly they would be all right and Kojo would be his old self again. Then she peered out into the darkness of the city—a place that would always remain dark in her mind—and she wasn't sure of anything anymore.