

## WATER MAID

by Victor Damilola Garuba

I grew up liking water so much that Mother feared I was a mermaid. She called it *mami-wota*. I would use hours splashing and trashing in the bubble bath till the bathroom floor flooded with water. For a child who was only nine, my mother wondered why I should like water so much. She feared that it was unnatural. I always heard her tell my father with serious concern in her voice that I was a mami-wota, but Father only always just smiled, until one Saturday morning, when Father seemed to have had enough of the topic.

‘Stop this arrant nonsense, Grace! Our child does not have to be like the children of your friends to be considered normal.’

Father’s outburst pulled me away from the television, and brought me to their bedroom door.

‘A child should behave like a child, but not our own beloved Victoria. She spends hours in the bathroom when other kids want to have as little of it as is unavoidable!’

Mother’s voice burned with anger. Anger I felt was strange and unnecessary. I didn’t think there was anything wrong with liking water.

And she just told a lie too. I never talked to myself. I only always hummed one song or another. I liked singing. I was a member of a barbershop quartet in school and I was a treble on the adult choir of St. Mary Magdalene.

‘She keeps to herself,’ Mother fired on with great alarm. ‘You need to see some of the magazines and tomes in her possession.’

‘Stop being a drama queen, Grace. There is nothing extraordinary about all these characteristics that you have enumerated. If you would stop being paranoid, every other thing will fall into their place in no turn.’

I liked Father because he spoke big English. I thought he spoke even bigger English than our headmaster, Mister Carpenter, whom we heard graduated from London. I also liked father because he was very handsome. His hair was dark as the coffee he drank every morning with his bland breakfast—typically those sugarless wheat bread-slices or those unseasoned macaroni. His moustache—I loved his moustache—was curly and polish-black with a gel-wet sheen, and flecked with fine threads of gold and grey.

‘And yes,’ Mother’s voice cut into my thought like a butcher-knife into a slab of beef. ‘She admires men, at her age. Can you imagine that? She gets carried away telling how handsome this teacher or that teacher is. We must watch her!’

The air calcified into a wrap of fingers around my neck. I feared that finally this would touch father to look into my case more closely.

‘Listen, Grace, what you need to do with Iya...’

‘And there goes another problem,’ Mother said, cutting him short. ‘Iya? Why should you continue to call her Iya? We gave her very beautiful names. Fine names—Victoria, Mary Anne, Bougainvillea, Cherry. You could call her by any of her Yoruba names as well. Beautiful Yoruba names— Ifedolapo, Demilade or even Agbeke. Why call her an old woman?’

‘Iya is just a fond name, Grace.’

There was silence. Then Father laughed and said, ‘Why are you looking like you just saw your own doppelganger?’

‘You think this is funny? You refer to your own daughter as an old woman. Who does that in the twenty-first century?’

‘I didn’t refer to Iya as an old woman.’

‘But does Iya not mean “old woman” or have you forgotten that I am a Yoruba woman?’

‘Grace,’ Father’s voice was as soft as the down of a dove, ‘My daughter is not an old woman.

Of course, she is not! You know that I call her Iya because of the very same reasons that you are knocking yourself over the head with. Iya is a precocious child, not an abnormal child.

Her teachers are proud of her. Her headmaster thinks she is a gifted child. We should be proud of her too, of the fact that she is miles ahead of her peers. Look at it, Grace! She is only nine, but she is already a treble on the adult choir of Saint Mary Magdalene. She is only nine, but can rattle off all the Shakespearian titles without looking at a list. She is wise, well-read, and extremely creative. Remember the poem she wrote, the very one that won the First Lady Poetry Prize? You worry about her love for water, but don’t you think that if you looked at it more with a maternal eye, you would see Iya winning Olympics gold in swimming in the future?’

‘It is a waste of time talking to you!’ she hissed. ‘It is the one with an ailment that seeks the medicine-man.’

‘What ailment suffers you, Grace?’ Father wondered aloud.

‘Why ask? It is not like you care. Does your boss not hold the view that trying to understand women is an exercise in futility?’

‘My view about women is at variance with my employer’s.’

‘I have got a malady to attend to, Baba Victoria. Your big English will not cure my headache.’

Footsteps were coming toward the door from the inside. So, I scuttled away in the direction of my room as noiselessly and as quickly as I could manage.

Dinner was my favourite—beans cooked with a lot of palm oil to be accompanied into the stomach by a bowl of mashed cornmeal but I couldn’t enjoy it as I felt Mother’s eyes all over me throughout dinner. The eyes shook me like a policeman’s hands, and turned out my appetite as one turned out a pocket.

At twilight, I plugged the bathtub sinkhole and opened the tap and left it running. Next, I went to the bed and picked up my swimming earplugs. When I returned to the bathtub, it was half-full. I closed the tap and slid into the water like a fish, shutting my eyes almost immediately. The water was soothingly and deliciously cool as always like iced water on a parched throat. I didn’t think I had slept for long when my right arm was grabbed violently. And I didn’t think that that was exactly what woke me up. It was my mother’s hysteria that snatched me from sleep. I had slept in the half-full bathtub for hours. How had I done that and felt so comfortable enough to have even overslept? I had shocked even myself. Was I truly mami-wota? No, I didn’t think I was. Our Yoruba Language teacher had told us that the dreams of a mami-wota in human form were always about water and water-creatures. But I hardly dreamt. And even whenever I managed to dream, I always dreamt about people, especially about my father taking Mother and me out to sip savoury strawberry or eat Banana Caramel Crunch and eight-inch Midnight Delight at Cold Stone Creamery. Sometimes, I dreamt about being out somewhere playing with my school friends. Sometimes it would be at

the swing-desks or at the merry-go-round or we would be avoiding the infectious corn-cob at the pie chart game, or dancing upon the hopscotch or roaming the Snakes and Ladders board as a game piece token. These games always ended with me taking my leave of everyone to go away to ease myself. And while I peed in my dream, I wetted my bed in reality.

‘Get up!’

Now that was another voice. A masculine one, encased in concrete. It was not Father’s voice. The strangeness of it belted me out of my shock. A man was standing beside my mother, a tall, bushy-haired, and heavily-bearded man in a virginal-white toque and soutane. My eyes stuck to his hefty wooden crucifix.

‘Get up!’

The voice reported again like a tyre burst. My eyes went to his dark face, noting the yellowish, superficially jaundiced eyes, and the nostrils overgrown with grey hair. His lips had been licked dried by the Harmattan outside and his skin was bone-dry, and looked coarse like cowhide.

‘Are you deaf?’ Mother was like an actor overdoing her part. Her hysteria was certainly real, but seemed synthetic. ‘Prophet, that is the girl. My *own* girl. A mami-wota.’

‘Yes, I know!’ the prophet thundered. He sounded offended. ‘I am not a fake prophet. I know a mami-wota when I see one. I don’t need you to tell me. You forget I have a synagogue on the beach. I know these people very well.’

‘*Toh*, forgive me, prophet,’ Mother said, half-kneeling.

When I recovered from my catalepsy, I said:

‘Mother, can you help me draw the curtains. I need to cover myself.’

I wouldn't be able to reach the towel slung over the shower curtain rail without the prophet seeing my nakedness.

My words seemed to bewilder them.

'Will you get out of that bathtub before I slap nonsense out of your head?' Mother squalled.

I couldn't believe my *own* mother was asking me to get out of the bathtub naked in front of a strange man. Even my father had not seen my nakedness since I lost my innocence.

'Prophet, can you imagine. How can a human child...a *human* child sleep overnight in a bathtub half full with water?'

'Mmm,' was all the prophet uttered.

'Can you imagine? And she even overslept!'

'She must be a fish in human clothing...em...pardon...in human skin.'

They stared at me. I stared back.

'Prophet,' Mother demolished the silence, 'she is your business now. I will go and make the beans and chicken potage you asked for. You said you like it with a lot of pepper and onions, not so, Prophet? And I will add some dried fish too and some *ponmo*. But you must hurry and be done before my husband comes back from work.'

'I am going to tell on you, mum.'

My voice was afflicted more by my helplessness than by my anger. I felt so afraid of the whole situation, of all that could possibly go wrong with it. My own mother was abandoning me, naked, to a strange man.

'I will tell on you, Mother!'

The tears peppered my eyes.

‘I will tell on you!’

She neither turned nor replied me. Her flip-flops slapped the floor loudly, each a loud spiteful slap across my face. She walked with an uncharacteristic jauntiness out through the bedroom door and slammed it shut after her with a shuddering, defiant bang. The key turned in the keyhole with an emphatic click. She had locked the door from outside and gone away with the key. I was so shocked that I must have looked like a really hilarious joke because the prophet doubled up with peals of laughter like a jackal marking territory. He pointed a finger at me as he laughed hysterically as if he thought someone needed to know the fountain of his mirth.

‘My dad will kill you!’ I howled at him.

He stopped laughing and readjusted his toque even though I didn’t think he needed to. The cap was too big for his small head and it kept sinking to the bridge of his nose. I thought that if he had any sense, he would remove the toque altogether.

My eyes went briefly to the clock on the wall over the bedroom window. Only a miserable ten minutes had elapsed. Why was time slouching like a slug? How I wished it could run up to four-thirty in a flash. How I wished Father could come in now and rescue me from this impending doom.

‘You are a beautiful girl, are you not?’ he said, laying out a deranged smile on his face. ‘You are fairer than an overripe mango, and you mama tells me that your brain is sharper than a razor-blade. My calling tells me that you are a very powerful creature from the Pacific Ocean.’

His face was suddenly solemn. His eyes had a faraway look as if they had taken their leave of Earth.

‘You are a powerful princess in the marine world. You are a saltwater damsel. You are the very daughter of...’ he turned hard judgmental eyes on me. I shrank. The eyes were dark and menacing, the muzzles of a musket. They were the very eyes of a psychotic holding a butcher-knife aloft. Molten yellow, instead of red, but very unsettling all the same.

‘You are water. Water! I am fire. Fire! But I am not ordinary fire. So, beware!’

I breathed quickly. This man’s eyes were yellow and scary. There was nothing human about them. They were evil...demonic...they reflected terror. They amplified my heartbeats.

‘I am no ordinary fire. I am unquenchable fire. I am hellfire.’

Suddenly, there was a leather belt in his hands. I sprang onto my feet, my cocoa-dark naked body drizzling with water. I had a lot of phobias, but none was anywhere as dreadful to me as a whipping or its prospect. I feared it even more than I feared the thought of being bitten by a madman or a rabid mongrel. Anything but a whipping. Throw me into hell, into the darkest room, hold me by the ankles and dangle me over ravenous crocodiles, do whatever you liked with me, but do not swish a scourge. The swish alone had the capacity to give me convulsion.

I didn’t fail to see his Adam’s apple slide up and back to its original place under his skin. The lust in his eyes, which had now become undisguised, added more teeth to the bite of the Harmattan. The shivers started from my feet, sending forks of chills, like spits, through my bowels, eventually culminating in tremulous tines that knocked my teeth.

‘I am Fire that fears no water. Fire that consumes water!’



Spittle darted out of his mouth like bats emerging from caves at dusk, as his voice rose dramatically, maniacally.

‘Please, don’t beat me, I beg you in the name of the Almighty!’

‘I must beat you. Forty five strokes to whip out that stubborn mami-wota spirit that lives like a first-class monarch inside you.’

I swallowed hard.

‘I will whip smooth your gill slits.’

Each of the grim sentences ended with his plaque-coated teeth clenched.

‘I will chop off your fins. I will whip your tail back into your rectum. I will fillet you and butter your bones with human flesh. And very soon, your mother, the queen of saltwater fishes, mermen and mermaids would hear of how my whipping has eroded your fish scales and fish senses.’

‘Please...’ I pressed my eyes shut and felt the warm tears crawl down my cheeks.

‘Oh, you can’t play on my sympathy, you little mermaid. I must torment and flog you with words and my divine rod. I can even smell you. You smell like...like...’

He sniffed the air around him. I thought that under normal circumstances, I could have laughed because his snuffling act reminded me of a he-goat exhibiting the Flehmen reaction.

‘You smell like sardine. Yes, like sardine. I like sardines. I am going to hit and eat you raw.

Raw the way I eat vegetable salad. You are scared, aren’t you?’

Lascivious winks flashed in his smile like the shutter of a camera.

I shook my head vigorously. The smile vanished from his face in an instant.

‘You are not scared of me?’

Now, his voice was a shocked falsetto.

I was. Terrified. Scared seemed too ordinary to describe my fear.

He flung the belt away from him as though it were a snake or some dangerous long stuff he had mistakenly grabbed.

‘I will teach you how to be human. Enough of being a mermaid. You had nine years to make up your mind but you didn’t. Not like you couldn’t. But you wanted to torment a helpless woman.’

I shook my head, sobbing.

‘I will make you human. I will make you a woman.’

He raised the soutane over his head and got out of it altogether. His body was long and slick with sweat and his very dark skin was chequered with eczema.

‘I am going to do unimaginable things with you, my young mermaid. I will rape that evil water spirit out of you. You will sing halleluiah as your Song of Orgasm.’

‘Mummy!’ I began to scream. ‘Mummy! He is going to rape me. He wants to rape me!’

He was right in front of me in the next nanosecond, his hand over my mouth. I struggled to peel the hand off but soon realized that my attempt was the same as trying to rouse the Dead with an alarm clock. It was futile.

‘Shut up, young mermaid!’

He was breathing hard. Really hard.

‘I can kill you right now. I mean this very minute. I can squish you like a sugar ant.’

I knew he could. He looked really murderous like a maniac from a really scary slasher movie. Why! Why had my mother forsaken me? What sort of a mother would lock her only child up in the same room with a man even if he were a eunuch? All for what? For liking water so much.

I shut my eyes and then my nose because presently the prophet's face was within inches of mine and I had perceived stale beer on his breath.

'I am nine, please,' I cried, hopefully loud enough to awaken his humanity, to restore Mother's limp motherhood. I didn't open my eyes. I could still feel the closeness of his face. I could feel the metronomic flush of his scorching breath on my briny face.

'The younger, the sweeter.'

I had become weary with helplessness. I understood that apart from Father, the only other person that could save me from rape was me. I knew there was no reasonableness in trying to struggle with this prophet. It would amount to the struggle of a host of houseflies trying to move a piece of rock with mere buzzes. The prophet was a man; I was only a nine year old girl, frail of build and hopelessly trapped in my room. Even though I didn't know how to squirm free from the sticky grip of this situation, I knew that it would be lame to try and shout my way out of it. The only thing to do was to either expect a miracle or to stay calm and not annoy the prophet with my screams. Perhaps, if I didn't scream, the prophet might just leave me alone or just administer a smack or two on the nape of my neck or on my buttocks.

I felt his arms around me and his hands clasp just over my buttocks like the buckle of a belt. He pressed me to him and I could feel his masculine concreteness. His body was warm and uncomfortable like a soggy blanket in a hot, windless night. Then, he lifted me out of the

bathtub. I was barely conscious of my transition from the bathtub to the bed. I opened my eyes as I felt the softness of my mattress against my back. I looked up at the prophet. He looked down back at me. He seemed gentle now, almost like a father standing briefly over his daughter after tucking her in for the night.

‘You need a pillow?’ he asked. His voice was gentle. His eyes were kind.

I shook my head and said, “Please, don’t rape me. I am only nine.”

‘Shut up!’

The voice had turned to burning steel again. He dropped on his knees in bed and ran his hands over my thighs. I shut my eyes and painfully expected the worst. But nothing happened, except the kneading-work of the coarse palms on my laps. The hands seemed just interested in my thighs. But just as I hoped they were interested in only those, I felt them advance dangerously towards my crotch.

‘Please,’ I sobbed. ‘Please.’

The hands stopped, remained some seconds on my laps and the next second, I didn’t feel them anymore. When I opened my eyes, I saw the prophet crouching at the door, certainly looking out through the keyhole. I sat up. He straightened and turned to me.

He looked terrified. Then I heard Father’s voice from outside the room, ‘Give me the key, Grace!’

I became mad with desperation.

‘Daddy!’ I screamed.

‘Iya!’ he shouted back like a mother goat at the shrill bleat of its kid.

‘Daddy!’

I rushed for the door but the prophet grabbed me and whirled me around trying to cover my mouth. Insane with desperation, I sank my teeth into his tough palm and he dropped me immediately. As I reached the door, the key turned the second time and the door opened. I was in father's arms the next second, soaking the shoulder of his Oxford shirt with my tears.

Father shut the door on the prophet and used the key. "I am calling the police. And you, Grace, you had better have something sensible to tell the police when they come around."

As he took me to his room, he tried whispering consoling words in my ear but I was not to be consoled.

'What is bad about liking water, father?'

'Nothing, my child. Nothing bad about liking a good life.'

I didn't understand him but I was consoled, finally.