

Most of the people who came to the conference were oddly dressed. Chini had taken the trouble to be superbly groomed. Her hair was gathered in a little pig-tail at the back and she floated the extra yards of delicate print over her arm. For some reason her scrupulousness seemed to be a burden now. She felt out of place until glancing across the table she caught sight of a dazzling young woman who also appeared to be taking notes. She wore a pale blue transparent nylon material, lighter than the wind and thrice as clinging. Her face was made up in a manner Max Factor would have approved, even for an African woman. Chini learnt later that this woman was a reporter from Radio Nigeria.

"I am a Secretary-Typist", Chini said, answering François's question. She smiled. "One of eighteen Secretaries."

"You have always spoken English?"

"Yes."

"You write?"

"No. But I read what they write. I was sent here to report. No I don't write. I read: mainly love stories."

His face flushed. She felt she had said something out of place, and tried to rectify it. "The first love story I ever really enjoyed was *When Love Whispers*."

"I see! . . . I've never heard of it."

"A long time ago. I was in the convent then." She remembered the story clearly, and promptly began to tell him about it. But somewhere in the middle she realised that the tone of this conference was set too high for glib talk, and she kept quiet so suddenly that an emptiness descended on them in the large hall, though everyone seemed to be babbling away.

At this point the bell rang and they resumed their seats.

CHINI STILL WORKS in Lagos. They will tell you about her—those who know, and sigh and shake their heads. You do not need to look too closely to see why she was the flash-point of that international controversy. But she is very cool now, very calm, very collected. She is so efficient that sometimes her boss calls her to his inner office and says, "Look, Chi . . . you are working too hard. Take some rest."

And she smiles, that mysterious smile of hers and says: "Am I? . . . I like to work hard for my country."

When she talks in this manner her boss hastily stubs his cigarette and frowns in silence. It seems she has touched something very deep.

"May I go now?"

A slow smile grows on her employer's face and he talks without paying any attention to her.

"We have all had misfortunes, you know. You must not live with your own all your life. François is dead, through no fault of yours. It's true you loved him . . . But that was unfortunate."

Already she is crying. She is unable to stand up any more and she looks round and slumps into a seat. Her employer is talking to her now as a friend; as a man who knows her worth and realises that her efficiency is bound up with her personal happiness.

"Can't you find some other young man? Look, Chi. You do not go out nearly enough. You—oh, what's the use?"

He was exasperated. This man who could sway multitudes with his soft persuasive voice was exasperated before her, before Chi—his own typist.

When he had talked and talked she knew that he was talking from the other side of the wall. Her feminine stubbornness was standing between her and him and she could not see him—or even hear him.

# A few nights and days

— Chapter one

MBELLA  
SONNE  
DIPOKO

"DOUMBE, why don't you want to meet my parents?" Thérèse asked. We were in bed.

She was nineteen. She liked to carry her hair long over her shoulders and back. She was a geography student. She was slender, but broad-hipped. She didn't like her hips. She would have liked them to be narrow; and she was big at her backside—heavy there really; and that too she didn't like at all. From the start I was very fond of her. She had such an attractive face; simple eyes and rounded lips.

"Your parents?" I asked.

"Yes. Why don't you want to meet them?"

Her father had a firm in Africa, in the Ivory Coast.

"One of these days."

"But when?"

"I don't know . . . Give me a bit . . ."

"Non!" she protested.

"Allons!"

"When will you meet them? At least my mother?"

"I've told you, one of these days."

"But when?"

"I'll tell you after . . ."

"You always say that."

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

I breathed deeply—in, then out.

"Listen . . ."

"Why are you in such a hurry? It won't run away."

"You too are in a hurry. Your parents won't run away."

"But Doumbe, I can't understand you."

"Come on. You'll understand me after."

"Yes! I'm no longer naive."

"But Thérèse!"

"When will you meet *maman*?"

I didn't reply. After a minute or two of silence, I sighed:

"Umm."

"Umm what?" she asked. "You won't reply?"

"Next week, all right?"

MBELLA SONNE DIPOKO, author of this first novel, *A Few Nights and Days*, to be published by Longmans in July 1966, is a Camerounian writer and poet now living in Paris who has the distinction of writing in both French and English. His poems have been published in *The New African*, *Transition*, and *Montparnasse Review*. *A Few Nights and Days* is the story of an African student in Paris whose casual affair with a French girl leads him into deeper emotional involvement with her which is blocked only by her father. Failure to get parental approval leads to tragedy when the girl finally commits suicide. Ironically the African student gets off the hook that way.

This pre-publication extract from an important Camerounian first novel sets a scene which reverses the roles of the French and African lovers in Cyprian Ekwensi's story (p 51)

"Sûr?"

"Umm."

"Sûr, sûr?"

"Yes."

Her feelings for me were a mixture of love and gratefulness; mine were tinged with a profound sense of responsibility. I was the first man to touch her and talk to her of desire. When I had said she was pretty she said I was lying. If she were pretty why didn't the boys talk to her? I told her that there was no hurry in those things. She replied that some girls got married at fifteen. Many girls began going out with boys at sixteen, even earlier. But she had been alone. Alone. She hadn't even girl friends until nine months ago when her mother took on Bibi, a Swedish girl who did house-keeping for them in exchange for board and lodging and a few francs.

Thérèse liked Bibi very much. It was through Bibi that I met Thérèse. I had gone to a dance and had asked a girl to dance with me. As we danced she said her name was Bibi; and I told her my name. I had then dropped a hint to the effect that I wanted to become acquainted. But she said she had a French boy friend so she couldn't be more than ordinary friends with me. I said that was all right with me.

Then one day I saw her on the Boulevard Saint Michel with another girl—Thérèse. I talked to Bibi and she introduced Thérèse to me. We went into a café and talked and joked and laughed. Bibi went to the telephone box. That was when I told Thérèse that she shouldn't be surprised; but I thought I liked her. I meant it. I would love to see her, alone, I said, sometime. How about her meeting me in that same café the following day? At three in the afternoon?

She said she didn't know whether or not she would be able to make it.

Bibi returned from the telephone box.

I told her that I thought her friend was charming. I really meant it.

Bibi put her hand maternally on Thérèse's shoulder, and tilted her head sideways to look into Thérèse's face.

Thérèse was shy.

The next day she turned up for the date in that same café. That was how it began.

Now it wasn't only meeting Thérèse. I had to meet her parents as well, at least her mother, as she herself had just said.

I knew what that meant. I wasn't really against it; but I didn't want to be rushed into anything, or rather rushed into it, since I knew what meeting her parents would mean; what it could lead to. I liked Thérèse very much and her profound sense of solitude made me feel very much attached to her. I thought she had even more need for me than she seemed to realize. I had taught her to hope, taught her to

esteem herself a little more and she didn't hide the fact that she was grateful to me for it.

I had also taught her to dance and now she simply adored it. I also talked to her of my ancestors, the little I knew about them, and Thérèse listened. She was very broad-minded, Thérèse, very broad-minded indeed. I talked to her of the Africa of my childhood and she simply liked it. I told her the story of Mboke and Ewudu. She loved it; she said it was like a novel. She liked to hear me talk of Africa.

We also talked about Greece and Rome. But we weren't history students, so we only talked about generalities. I had a critical attitude. Sometimes I would taunt her about the militarism of Sparta; would talk about the endless wars which were fought in the European past, wars which were the ancestors of the more recent wars of our time. But not once did she hit back and say African tribes also fought each other, that Africans fought wars against each other.

I don't know why she wasn't critical of Africa. Perhaps she had come to see Africa as something virginal, something perfect and she didn't want to tamper with that image. Or perhaps she didn't want to offend me. She was very polite with me.

I talked to her about African art and we read quite a bit on it. She even began to say perhaps she should have done ethnography or ethnology instead of geography. She said she would have loved to study a region of Africa. I once mentioned it to an African friend of mine, a science student. He was a funny chap. He said of course; didn't I know? Love was the best of ambassadors. I was really putting Africa across. I didn't like that very much because it seemed to me he said it with a touch of irony, and I am rather sensitive.

Thérèse would have told me many things; I would have learnt a lot from her if only she had a little more self-confidence. And when that self-confidence began to come, we were so involved with each other that the world didn't just seem interesting enough to talk about. We discussed ourselves, our problems. But while the old relationship lasted I talked to her of Africa and she listened with much interest. Being a geography student she would have talked to me about the regions of Europe; about the rivers, for example. But I didn't even encourage her. I didn't care for any river but the Mungo River, in Cameroon, and about that I talked. The seasons — the dry season and the rainy season. The canoe-men and their women. My childhood by that river. River of desire. River of love — songs sung by the canoe-men and their women. Welcoming river.

But nineteen years was rather too young. I was twenty-three, hard in my own way, sometimes reckless and often I thought of life as a tough adventure which called for as little sentimentality as possible. I didn't subscribe to ordinary morals and I didn't care. I lived. I had crossed oceans and deserts, burst through horizons. And all that needed audacity. Life wasn't a simple thing, nor was love: complications always developed. But to Thérèse life was hope, a refuge.

Now I was looking into her eyes and she gazed at my excitement, at first smiling, then with something like a helpless sadness. I saw love in her eyes with all the old fears and demands of reassurance. But her face showed the familiar willingness, the aroused desire and I lowered my face to hers, forgetting all that life held of distances, conscious only of nearness, warmth, desire. Her body seemed to weaken; then it became taut, throbbing with the force of her receptive tenderness. Nearness, warmth and desire with no thoughts of distances!

But later when we were once more calm and reasonable I tried to withdraw the promise I had made only a few minutes ago.

"Thérèse," I said, "don't you think this question of meeting your mother is rather delicate?"

"*Ca y est!*" she said. "You have begun stalling. How is it delicate?"

"Well —"

"You're not going to tell me you're afraid."

"Shut up. Me? Afraid? What of?"

"*Alors*, why don't you want to meet her? You said a while ago that you'd meet her next week. Now you want to change."

"Does she know about us?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I had to tell her."

"You didn't have to."

"Well I have done so. She knows."

"I thought you said she was very Catholic?"

"Yes and so?"

In the past she wouldn't have been so snappy.

"I was wondering how someone as Catholic as you say she is would take the news. Did you tell her that we do this?" I pointed at her thighs. . . "She knows?"

"Of course!"

"That is something. How did you begin? I wouldn't know how to talk about it to my mother if I were a girl. Come on, tell me. How did you present it?"

"I told her I knew a boy. She wanted to know if he was nice."

"But I am nice, my dear!"

"It's not true, wicked you."

"Is that what you told her?"

"No. I said the boy was nice. Then she said I should be careful. She said I shouldn't go to your place. I laughed. You can't imagine how it made me laugh. She wanted to know why I was laughing. But I wouldn't tell her. She in-

sisted. So I told her. I said her advice had come too late. *Alors là!* It was total panic. Her face red, she asked me if by that I meant you had known me. I said it was done."

"What did she say?"

"She wept."

"You shouldn't have told her."

"But she wanted to know. I wasn't going to go into the details. It was she who asked for them."

"And she said she wanted to see me?"

"Not immediately. She went to her room to weep. Luckily papa wasn't at home. When she later left her room she came and knocked on the door of mine. I let her in determined to tell her off should it be necessary. She sat on my bed. Then she asked me if I was expecting a child. I couldn't help laughing. I don't know why. She wanted to know why I was laughing, if by that too I meant her anxiety had come a bit late. I said no. I wasn't laughing because of that. But was I pregnant? I said no. She thanked God. . . It's after all normal, all that, I understand her, but I have my life. It's mine, my life. I think she has understood that now."

"So it wasn't she who asked you to introduce me?"

"No. It's me. Does it really bother you very much? I thought it would be nice for you to meet them."

"Does your father know?"

"My father!"

"Yes."

"But no!"

I climbed down from the bed and went into the bathroom, splashed some water on me, wiped myself with a towel and returned to the room in a dressing gown.

It was a large room. A double bed. A table at which I worked and a chair. One large leather chair. A sideboard. A bookshelf and an enormous wardrobe with a misty mirror fitted

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against its door.

The dressing gown I was wearing was slightly over-size. It was a birthday present from Thérèse. I hadn't a dressing gown and she said I had to have one. Her father had dressing gowns. A man must always have a dressing gown, she said. I told her that I wasn't her father, that in Africa people used loincloths. She said it didn't matter. So when my birthday came, in February, she bought the dressing gown for me. I kissed her, sincerely, twice, on the cheek even though kissing wasn't a habit of mine. I told her it wasn't done back home. She said that was curious. She was happy that I liked the present. A good girl with a good heart, that Thérèse. She wasn't mean, and I liked it that she wasn't.

Personally, I spent money without thinking of the next day. I expected others to be like me. Someone once said it was because there was something of an artist in me. Another person said it was because I was born in February, towards the end. I don't know much about horoscopes. But people said it was fun.

One night, at the drug store in the Champs Elysées I saw two women looking through a bundle of pamphlets on the subject. They laughed, reading through the pamphlets. They weren't middle-aged women. They were older than that; those high society women who wanted to remain young forever because of the next fashion shows. They were lightly perfumed and their faces were carefully made-up. The effect wasn't bad at all. Perhaps they had spent up to forty years learning how to put their faces in order. They held their heads together, reading one of the books which purported to talk about the present and the future in prophetic terms. I was looking through the paperbacks which lined the shelves, mostly novels. I liked to touch books. As I raised my head and looked in the direction of the women, they laughed and nudged each other. One of them selected a second horoscope pamphlet, since they already had one which made them laugh. It was in the hands of the taller woman.

"*Ca nous amusera*," the other woman laughed, and winked at her friend . . . But life is a tragic thing. To attain the age when one

can turn only to things like horoscopes for amusement!

When I talked to Thérèse about the two women, she said she wouldn't want to live to that age. Forty would be enough for her, she said. "*Grand maximum*." That was the way she put it. That was over a month ago. I knew she hadn't changed her mind. It was strange how morose she could be and then how elated she could suddenly become the following day. Thérèse! I knew love was a burden to her. But it was an agreeable burden. She was very delicate. Sometimes I wondered whether she realised to what extent love was an adventure. To her it seemed to be a refuge against the bitterness of the world; to me it wasn't a destination but a stop exposed to winds, to thunders, a stop exposed to storms, a stop among other stops between the first day and the last day in the life of every man and woman. I wished Thérèse could realize that we were only friends.

"Are you getting up or not?" I asked.

She passed her fingers through her hair and pouted.

"I am tired," she said, as if moaning. "I'll stay for a while."

She drew the bed-clothes to her chest and tucked their edges under her armpits. Her hands weren't under the bed-clothes; so, with one of them, she tapped the edge of the bed, meaning I should sit down, there!

"Come and sit down, here, here," she said, now only caressing the edge of the bed with her fingers, tapping away, lightly, with one finger, then with another.

"I'm coming," I said and went to the window.

I drew the curtains apart.

Daylight rushed into the room with the freshness of mid-May. The sun was on the wall of the building opposite my window . . . No. The sun was only on the upper storey of the building. To my right, where a little street cut at right angles with the street under my window, the red-brick wall of a tall building was fully sun-lit.

Behind the building the sky was a blotchy blue. The sky leaned over Paris. Looking at it, I felt alone, profoundly alone. I turned round

and went and sat down on the edge of the bed. Thérèse took my hand in hers. Then she held my fingers to her lips and bit them, lightly.

It didn't hurt at all. It tickled, and it was faintly pleasurable. Her teeth were on my fingers, or rather on my finger-nails, but I felt the effect right down in me, a tickling which was rough enough to make me laugh but which also had a vague intensity that went deeper than the depth of laughter.

Then I felt the sad—no, the melancholy feeling of love. That was why I was feeling alone. But it was only a mood. If I had waited, it would have passed as it was bound to pass, and I wouldn't have committed myself as I now did.

Thérèse suddenly let go my fingers. She tucked the bedclothes farther under her armpits as if in preparation to go to sleep. She had believed, profoundly, she had convinced herself of the oneness of the world.

"I'll meet your mother next week," I said. "Wednesday? Will that suit you?"

"I think so," she said and took my hand in hers and pulled me to her. My feeling of loneliness increased. I bent over her. She pulled me closer and raising her lips from the pillow, she kissed me on the lips, quickly, then her head fell back on the pillow.

We went into the details. The time; five in the afternoon. The place: a café in an area in which I had once lived before moving into my present room.

Before Thérèse left my place that afternoon she reminded me that Laurent, Bibi's boy friend, and I, had promised to take them to a dance that evening. It was a Wednesday.

I said I had forgotten. She said I forgot everything. I laughed, having recovered from my feeling of loneliness. She smiled. Then she reminded me—or thought she was reminding me—that the rendezvous was at Laurent's place, at nine that evening. She and Bibi would join us there.

I hadn't forgotten. Only I liked to pull her leg. Thérèse was nineteen and very nice. She had a pretty face, but her broad hips and large buttocks embarrassed her. They made her miserable.

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