

The Palm Oil Stain

Nadia Maddy

Nadia Maddy is the daughter of the Sierra Leonean playwright, Yulisa Amadu Maddy. She lives in London teaching Sociology and Health and Social Care 'A' Levels. *The Palm Oil Stain* is her first novel.

For my son, Akir who told me to remove all the unnecessary adverbs and continues to be my strength and inspiration.

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Dedicated to the memory of:

Patrick Peter Brimah Kebbie (RIP) who was brutally killed on 25th
December 1994 during the conflict.

Samuella Richards (RIP) (1970-2009). A friend who showed me how
special Sierra Leone could be.

Despite conflicting accounts of the circumstances of the death of
Patrick P. B. Kebbie, to this day no official inquiry into his death has
been initiated.

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Chapter 1

Shalimar carried the makeshift cardboard dustpan to the outside bin, ignoring the chickens flapping around her feet.

‘No scraps for you!’ she said with a smile, as the birds squawked and pecked around her.

Shalimar replaced the cover and looked up at the clear sky: ‘Argh; another blistering day,’ she said wearily. A bead of sweat trickled from her hairline, tracing a line down her cheek. She mopped her brow and stared up the dirt road that stretched out into the distance before her. As she shielded her eyes from the hot sun, she noticed the bent-over figure of old Mama KaiKai - the village gossip - walking slowly towards her. She lumbered past Shalimar, leaning heavily on her cane, and stopped by the cement steps of ‘Long Life’ - the local bar where Shalimar worked. Shalimar respectfully addressed the old lady.

‘Good Afternoon, Mama KaiKai.’

‘Bia na, kahui ye na?’

‘Did you stop by to have a drink?’ Shalimar asked.

‘No of course not,’ the old woman said abruptly, ‘do I look like I can afford to drink here?’

As the old woman sneered, her single protruding white tooth became even more apparent against her bare black gums. She mumbled to herself, chewing the sides of her mouth. Her eyes narrowed as she snarled again.

‘I drink my palm wine at home. I stopped by to ask you about your father’s health and that sister of yours, the wild one *tee yae nah?*’

‘Papa is fine, mah.’

The old lady cocked her head to one side, peering at Shalimar who had not responded to the enquiry after her sister. Mama KaiKai, unimpressed with both the attitude and the answer, scrutinised her for challenging the order of respect.

The two women eyed each other. Neither wanted to give ground, and so an awkward silence descended. A rolling ball of red dust appeared in the distance, announcing that a vehicle was coming their way. Shalimar noticed it first, and averted her gaze. A horrendous rattling, like nuts and bolts in an old paint tin emanated from its midst, as the engine complained of its exertions. The white Land Rover slowed as it neared them, and pulled up outside Long Life; the red dust it carried with it settling onto the cement building like a coat of fresh paint.

The bar's most frequent and affluent customer, Barrow, had arrived unexpectedly early with an entourage. His driver hooted at Shalimar in recognition as Barrow climbed out accompanied by two more white men.

'Excuse me, Madam,' Barrow said politely, moving past Mama KaiKai and ushering his guests into the bar, and out of the sun.

The old woman eyed the two men suspiciously; she recognised one of the men as a palm wine lover who sometimes caused mayhem in the small village with his irresponsible behaviour. She pursed her lips, sucking in as much air as she could, and then spat on the cement steps next to him. Shalimar stood speechless, shocked at the old woman's rudeness. The man stopped for a moment, first looking down at his feet, and then raising his gaze to study the old woman. A large scruffy beard hid the man's face. His clothes were unkempt, and because he wore 'Jesus sandals' that white men loved to wear so much, Shalimar noticed he had filthy toenails. She shuddered to herself and looked away. Shalimar regained her composure and snapped at Mama KaiKai,

'I've got work to do, Ma. If you pass by the house, I am sure you can find out what Baidu is up to!'

Without waiting for a response she stormed back into Long Life, where she noticed the bar supervisor - Salia - had already poured drinks for the new arrivals. He sensed her mood.

'Don't get upset with that stupid old woman; she is just bored and wants to be noticed. She does it to amuse herself.'

'Some people just live for bad news happening to others,' Shalimar sighed.

Salia shook his head. 'She will always be like that. She is miserable and you are not. Don't let her pass it on to you.'

Shalimar smiled faintly as Salia's fingers warmed the crease between her shoulder blades with soft, soothing strokes. Salia knew how to appease her no matter what the problem. She writhed like a cat under his expert touch, moving her head from side to side when he gently squeezed the nape of her neck.

'Ok, my mood is improved, Salia.' She said with a smile. 'You remember we have customers?'

Shalimar reached for the green bottle of Gin hovering in its own special corner, just for Barrow. Barrow and his crew sat next to the gaping shutters overlooking the open road, the only people in the bar. Ice cubes clinking in the now-empty bourbon glasses celebrated the arrival of the Gin bottle to their table. Barrow joked about the incident outside with Mama KaiKai when Shalimar served them. He told her he

knew a few people that needed to be put in their place and, that maybe he should hire her, if her fee was not too unreasonable. Shalimar smirked at the thought of Barrow turning up for a business meeting with Mama KaiKai menacing at his side.

Barrow was an overweight white Nigerian in his 50's, Shalimar guessed. His permanently blotchy red skin and crooked yellow teeth always managed to hold the gaze of others. His rusty-coloured hair stuck to his scalp as though it had been glued on in a hurry, and dark patches of sweat covered his safari outfit. Barrow's overly thick Nigerian accent stunned Shalimar at times, leaving her to speculate whether it was at all exaggerated. He had been coming here for several months now, the Long Life Bar seemingly ideal for his needs, as he always dropped in with different unsavoury-looking characters, forever trying to impress them with the amount of drinks he bought.

Today looked like being one of those occasions, so it was no real surprise when Barrow got up from his table and headed towards Shalimar and Salia behind the bar. 'Probably checking if we have any more fancy spirits,' Shalimar mused to herself as Barrow approached them.

'I need a favour, good people. My friends are sick and it looks like they are getting worse.'

'No problem, they can sleep it off in one of the corners, it's a lot cooler further inside.' Shalimar replied, assuming the men were drunk.

'No, it's more than that. They have fever. I have to find Dr Banda and bring him here. I need them to stay here overnight until I come back.'

Salia nodded, 'I will keep them in the stock room. Shalimar, take them to the back while I talk to Mr Barrow.'

Salia's instruction caught her by surprise; why was he ordering her to take them to the stock room? Why not let them lay on the benches, here in the bar? Somewhere she could keep an eye on them – and more importantly – the stock! Salia beckoned to Barrow to join him outside, and the two men left the bar leaving Shalimar alone with the strangers.

Light showered into the stock room through the small window, gleaming on crates of beer that filled the shelves. The younger, clean-shaven man coughed violently as she helped him inside. He lay down on the wooden table, instantly curling into a ball, swearing in another language whenever he could catch his breath. The bearded, older man, shivered as Shalimar looked around for a sheet, knowing already that there were none.

Shalimar left the room to get some water. She could hear Barrow's voice getting louder as the conversation outside turned into argument. 'Salia must be demanding money for the inconvenience,' she thought. She carried the glasses full of water back to the sick men. The bearded palm wine lover was now seated. He looked up and nodded graciously as he took the glass from the tray and sipped slowly. The younger man seemed in worse shape than his friend, and struggled to drink. As Shalimar helped him raise the glass to his lips, she noticed there were spots of blood on his white shirt.

'*Nor to malaria dis.*' She said to no one in particular.

This was bad. White men brought money to the village, but never any good luck. The palm wine lover's only friends here were those involved in the process of fermenting the drink as well as themselves. He would appear in the village for a few days to sit with the local men, drinking and singing all night. A couple of times, when Shalimar had risen early in the morning to collect water, she had spotted him sprawled out half naked in the fields sleeping unashamedly. Such scandalous behaviour was unacceptable, especially around young children. He deserved to be robbed but no one ever bothered him. Shalimar believed this to be one of the reasons he returned to Blama. He could do whatever he pleased; left alone to wheel and deal, or whatever it was he did with any lawless rogue in and around the area. Shalimar walked out of the room informing Salia she was going home for lunch and would bring back medicine for the men.

'Why?' Salia asked, genuinely curious.

'Do you want them to die on us? They are white men and cannot handle our diseases. If they die, nobody will drink here again.'

Salia thought for a moment and laughed.

'That is very true! Tell Mama to make it properly and not poison them. I need to keep my job.'

Shalimar set off home, slipping and sliding in the mud that covered the roadside. This was the only remaining evidence of the sudden burst of torrential rain that had pounded the earth that morning, before the sun had burned through the clouds. The water had poured itself into the large misshapen pot holes that scarred the roads, leaving an assault course of muddy pools for Shalimar to negotiate. She kept to the side of the road, stopping whenever a car drove past so she would not get splashed. Most of the red earth had dried up, but the puddles remained, large and threatening. The midday sun warmed the back of her neck and arms as she quickly made her way home from Long Life. Despite the good intentions of getting medicine for the sick men, Shalimar also

wanted to get home in time to help her Mama finish cooking the cassava leaves. The very thought of sweet palm oil poured over ground greens had her salivating as she hurried along.

Shalimar took the quick route through Blama Massaquoi, keeping to the narrow paths that separated the huge rice paddies that were full of people doing the backbreaking work of planting and seeding. The small town was home to the Mende and lay in the middle of the Southern District of Sierra Leone. The town was quiet as she hurried through; most of the elderly folk were sat outside gossiping, and the women were bent over large steaming pots, preparing lunch for the men in the fields. All greeted Shalimar as she passed through their domain.

‘Shalimar, Bia na? Bi sieh.’ An old woman said when she saw her.

‘Ah wua na, ah woo sieh,’ Shalimar replied waving. ‘I think the men are making their way back for lunch.’

‘Oh, thank you. Say hello to your family.’

‘I will do. Goodbye.’

Shalimar finally reached her home, and headed straight for the coolness of her bedroom to take refuge from the sun. She found her sister folding her clothes. Baindu was tall and naked from the waist up. Her dark complexion and slim figure allowed her to appear magnificently regal. Cropped curly hair complemented her perfect aquiline features and heart-shaped lips. Baindu’s beauty was the talk of the town; the local men constantly eyed her stately figure and perfect round bottom when she walked through the streets. Baindu picked up a packet of cigarettes from the floor and lit up.

‘Ali has asked me to go with him to Koindu...today.’

This piece of news alarmed Shalimar. She straightened up and shook her head at her sister.

‘Bi li loougor wa Baindu! He is an RUF Rebel, anything can happen. He is with dangerous soldiers.’

Baindu’s expression remained neutral, not reacting to Shalimar’s words. She stood up and wriggled her long fingers in Shalimar’s face. A pure gold diamond encrusted ring fixed snugly on her wedding finger.

‘We are engaged and getting married. You see...this is real. When they win the war, Ali and I will build a house for all of us to live in. We will have drivers and servants too, just like the Minister’s children.’

Shalimar stared at the mineral wealth on her sister’s finger before touching it cautiously as though it would fall apart. It felt cold and hard against her sister’s warm skin. Baindu slipped her feet into her flip-flops and shook her head.

‘I’m a woman of action, Shalimar; you know this. Our life will be even better soon. The Rebels have taken all the villages to the west and will be here soon.’

She patted down her curly cropped Afro, smiling into the mirror at her sister’s horrified reflection. Baindu had made her decision yet again without consulting anyone.

‘Ali is going to make sure nothing happens to Mama and Papa. When you come back from work tonight I won’t be here. Don’t tell Mama what I told you. She thinks I am going to Bo with friends.’

Shalimar stood up, looking petite and curvaceous next to her sister. Despite being four years older than Baindu she was often mistaken for the younger sister. At twenty-two years of age, Baindu asserted herself more than most in the village, career-wise. Unfortunately her immaturity shone through brightest when it came to men. Once again, Baindu was playing with fire; her impulsive behaviour drove Shalimar insane. She tried to stem the panic in her voice as she spoke.

‘*Kone lay* Baindu, Mama will cry for days if she finds out the truth, and Papa is not well. Why would you be so selfish? You know I have to work. Why would you do this to Mama?’

Baindu knelt down, lifting up a corner of the mattress at the head of the bed, and pulled out a wad of notes. She stood up and shook the money in Shalimar’s face.

‘300,000 Leones, Shalimar. No man you ever meet will be able to give you this. I just did. I am going to change our lives. We can buy the medicine that Papa needs so he can get better. I am doing this for all of us.’

Shalimar stared at the money scattered on the bed. She could already imagine her parent’s reaction to the money, and Baindu’s outrageous behaviour. Mama would take the cane to Baindu as though she were a ten-year-old girl if she ever found out what her intentions were. Worse still, Baindu gave no thought to how her liaison with RUF Rebels could affect Papa. Shalimar’s temples tightened with agitation. She grabbed the money from the bed and stuffed it back under the mattress; annoyed that Baindu would take this amount of money from an RUF soldier. She turned to reason with her sister, but Baindu had left the room. Mama’s voice trailed through the shutters calling Shalimar’s name. The food was ready and she did not like to be kept waiting.

The flawless cassava leaves had Shalimar savouring every morsel as she dipped her hand into the enamel bowl to scrape up the yellow stained rice. Mama listened to the story of the sick white men and suggested they enlist the help of the local boys playing football across

the road. Shalimar interrupted their game by promising a few Leones for their troubles. Mama instructed the local boys to gather the herbal leaves from the forest. They listened intently to Mama's descriptions of shape, size and colour of plants and shrubs she needed. Once out of sight Mama aired her frustrations about the Long Life bar.

'Has Salia found an assistant yet?'

'No, mah. Not yet.'

'I will have a word with him tonight. Enough is enough. You are just supposed to be helping him out. I did not raise you to be a bar woman.'

Shalimar ate in silence as she listened to her mother. It seemed acceptable enough for Baidu to have unsavoury boyfriends, but not for her to help out in the local bar and bring money home. Shalimar turned as she heard a shuffling from behind, and smiled as Papa joined her and Mama to sit under the shade of the guava tree.

'Did you sleep well? Bi gaahu yea-na?' Mama asked as Papa slowly shifted his weight onto his hands, easing himself into his chair.

'I always sleep well. Kayii ngeiwo ma.'

'You want to eat now?'

'Later, later...' Papa mumbled, waving a hand dismissively, and then wiping his brow with a cotton cloth.

Mama nodded at no one in particular. Her eyes darted over the tall grass in front of them as though searching for a lost chicken in the bushes. She continued her earlier conversation with Shalimar.

'You are just doing them a favour, Shalimar. You are not going to work there next month.'

'Baidu started this Mama. She told Mr Foday that I was available.'

Shalimar felt the need to remind Mama that this had never been her idea. Her parents had the habit of forgetting details when it didn't suit them to remember; especially when they were Baidu's.

Mama mumbled something under her breath. A waft of cool air met their faces; there was silence as they savoured its generosity. Shalimar looked over at her Papa with a heavy heart. He was not very active these days. He complained of chest pains and always appeared short of breath. Baidu had taken him to see the doctor in Bandawo, but the medical fees proved to be too much even for her salary as a Supervisor at the local Coca Cola factory. The doctor advised them that he should stay at home and rest until they could raise funds to pay for his consultation, as well as medicine.

'Shalimar, you have to tell Salia to escort you home from now on,' Mama insisted

‘Why, Ma?’

‘Don’t you know that the Rebels are everywhere? What is wrong with you?’ Mama snapped; clearly irritated by Shalimar’s casual attitude.

‘Tell Salia he must escort you home today. Otherwise he will have to find somebody else from tomorrow. You hear all these stories about these Rebels waiting in the bushes jumping on women and even girls as young as twelve and raping them. It is not safe, although God has protected us all up to now.’

‘Thank the Lord we are still alive,’ Papa spoke aloud to himself.

‘Yes Mama,’ Shalimar asserted.

The boys reappeared with a heap of leaves and shrubs. Shalimar helped Mama prepare the herbs in the huge brewing pot, which was then placed on the fire to infuse the healing properties. Stirring and tasting, trying to get it just right took what felt like hours. Finally, Mama said it was ready, and so Shalimar poured the thick brown liquid from the pot into two coke bottles. She searched around and found an old sheet, grabbed it, and along with the medicine she hurried back to Long Life to see how the patients were doing.

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The two men remained in the same position as she had left them. As she entered the stockroom, she found Salia taking money from the pocket of the younger man on the table, who was now deathly pale with sunken eyes. His body jerked when he coughed as if being prodded with electric shocks. The rasping sound of air fighting to exit his body made Shalimar wince. Salia gleefully waved the notes above his head in triumph.

‘We will share this when they have gone with their doctor. They must pay for using the back room.’

She ignored his childish behaviour.

‘I do not want their money. A hani weka gbi, they are sick men.’

‘Don’t feel sorry for them. There is plenty where this came from. They will not miss it. It’s diamond money.’

Shalimar did not answer; instead she poured the first bottle of thick brown liquid into a glass and pushed it to the lips of the big and sturdy young man on the table.

‘If you don’t change your mind in the next ten minutes it will be too late,’ Salia said leaving the room still waving the notes around as though he were selling them on a market stall.

Shalimar ignored him. She did not feel that sorry for the men, but she did not want their deaths to be on her conscience either. She thought that the bearded man should have been dead long ago. He often hung around the village with the local alcoholics; unwashed and stinking. But he never preyed on the village women like other foreigners - he would just drink, sing and swear all night with the local men, and then spend all day sleeping off his excesses under the nearest guava tree. There were many stories about how many diamonds he had acquired and how many men he had killed. It seemed strange that such a man, with rumoured wealth and power would live his life this way.

The palm wine lover remained silent as Shalimar covered him with the clean faded sheet. He gulped down the herbal medicine with ease and handed her the second empty bottle. That was when she noticed his savage emerald eyes. She stepped back, stunned that she had not spotted this before. Green eyes were the very source of evil and witchcraft. She was alone in the room with two complete strangers and there were no witnesses. Demons changed shape to disguise themselves, but they could not hide their eyes. It slowly dawned on her that this green eyed monster could be sucking the life out of the other man to receive and strengthen his own energy. Once he had finished with his friend, he would turn on her, suck out her energy and claim her spirit. She would be under his spell forever, soulless and without a home. Shalimar rushed out of the room, her heart pounding.

Salia finished cleaning up and stood outside waiting for her.

‘I am closing for the evening. We cannot do business with sick people at the back. Barrow has compensated us well for our loss tonight.’

Shalimar nodded, enjoying the prospect of a paid night off.

‘Barrow has gone to get the doctor. They should be gone by tomorrow.’

‘That will be a relief, Salia. I don’t like them being here.’

‘Forget about them. Would you like some roast beef?’ Salia asked with a glint in his eye. He nudged her playfully.

Shalimar smiled. ‘I’m not that hungry, but I’ll eat some roast beef with you.’

‘Roast beef and *poyo*? That will set us up for the night. *Mek we sleep well!*’

He laughed aloud and slapped her on the back playfully. The muscles in her shoulders slackened as she felt the tension leave her slowly. It was second nature for Salia to relax women in his presence, and Shalimar knew his reputation as the local lady’s man was well

justified. His big brown eyes and sparkling white teeth warmed the hearts of many of the women in Blama.

They walked casually home together along the main road, greeting a few villagers on the way. The distant howling of dogs broke through the receding purple gaze of the evening, threatening to fuse with the skyline as sundown approached. It was a wise decision to close the bar early. This was their night to relax without the bother of putting up with the usual drunken louts in Long Life.

Mr and Mrs Foday had built the bar because of the diamond mines in the region. It was a good location as it was less than twenty minutes from town, and just set back from the main road that linked the mine to the highway. There was a constant flow of traffic passing one way or the other, with people either heading to the mine to buy a small plot or - if they had struck it lucky - heading off with their new-found wealth. Either way, Long Life was the only bar in a twenty mile radius, so business was always pretty good. The diamonds brought an influx of Lebanese, Indian, Nigerian and Chinese, all hoping to get a piece of the pie. Shalimar was used to the foreigners and their somewhat bizarre requests and occasional generous behaviour.

As they approached more of the familiar houses, a lone figure emerged from the darkness moving fast towards them. The figure became recognizable as it got closer.

‘Mama?’ Shalimar called out a little unsure.

Mama’s pace did not change when she came into focus. Salia greeted her but she walked right past him grabbing Shalimar roughly. She shook her as though she was shaking dust out of a bed sheet.

‘You knew your sister was going to leave with those RUF boys! You knew it, and you did nothing to stop her! What kind of a sister are you? What is wrong with you? Are you sleeping? You knew this, and did not think to tell me!’ Mama shouted; beside herself with anger, her eyes filled with fire and hate.

Shalimar tried to pull away from her mother who grappled clumsily to re-seize her. The veins in Mama’s neck jutted out against her skinny frame as she tried to reclaim her grip on Shalimar. This was the most shameful thing, for a parent to have to lay a hand on you when you were a grown woman.

Salia moved swiftly in between the women in an attempt to calm Mama down. Mama continued to roar, pointing accusingly at Shalimar.

‘You better find your sister and bring her home. Do you hear me? She left because you allowed her to! You better bring your sister home if you know what is good for you!’

A mixture of shock and shame rose inside Shalimar. She put her hand to her burning cheeks. A small crowd of people appeared from nowhere gathering around them. Salia held Mama firmly by the shoulders in a futile attempt to calm her down. He turned to Shalimar.

‘Go home. Go home now! I will sort this out. Let me talk to your mother.’

Mama slapped Salia’s hands away as she tried to get at Shalimar.

‘You let Baindu go. It is your fault!’

There were discontented mutters from the crowd when Baindu’s name was mentioned.

‘But Mama, I have nothing to do with Baindu leaving...’

‘What kind of sister are you? Why would you allow her to leave? Why did you not tell us?’

Salia bellowed, ‘Shalimar, Go home now!’

Shalimar stepped away; suddenly aware of the growing crowd behind her. Her face grew hotter. Blinded with shame she ran to her house and did not see Papa who grabbed her arm as she ran past him.

‘Have you seen your mother? Bi bi nje loi lo?’

‘Yes Papa, she is down there with Salia.’ She said pointing in the direction she had come.

Papa gazed at her with sad weary eyes; patting her on the back in response.

‘I see.’ He said knowingly. ‘Don’t worry; you know how your mother is. Go to your room. We will talk in a minute.’

‘Yes Papa.’

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The lantern cast long shadows around the room. Mosquitoes buzzed and bumped haphazardly around the light. Shalimar wished the mosquitoes would just die and the floor would open up and swallow her. Baindu always created problems. Mama spent a lot of time beating Baindu as a child. She stressed that Baindu’s behaviour had to be nipped in the bud immediately otherwise it would get out of hand. Shalimar spent a lot of time consoling her younger sister with hugs and coconut cakes. Baindu would cry a little then run off to play forgetting anything had ever happened. Minutes later the resonance of a slap on naked flesh and Baindu’s shrill cry could be heard once again. Shalimar would shake her head and carry on with her household chores in disbelief. Now that they were adults, nothing had changed. To Shalimar, it seemed like she always received the blame for not taking

care of and protecting her sister, when in her own mind that was what she had always done.

Shalimar's finger trailed around her stomach, as she lay curled up on the bed. She often did this when upset. She traced the outline of the dark birthmark that covered her stomach area. The birthmark moulded itself around her belly, stretching and changing shape whenever she examined it. Baindu said it resembled the shape of a beautiful butterfly, whose wings moved as Shalimar flexed and moved her stomach. To Shalimar it was a disfigurement that detracted from her beauty, and the polar opposite of the smouldering dark chocolate complexion that covered Baindu's lean, curvaceous frame.

The sound of her name interrupted her thoughts. Salia appeared at the door, smiling that friendly smile of his.

'Shalimar – may I come in?'

Shalimar lay there without responding.

'Well I assume that's not a no,' he said, entering the room and sitting on the edge of the bed next to her. He patted her awkwardly on the back as she lay there motionless.

'Your mother has calmed down. She is just upset that Baindu left the way she did.'

Shalimar could not respond to her friend's consoling words, the shame too much to bear. Salia grinned as he pinched her cheek.

'Come early to work in the morning. We will have a drink together. Forget about this, it will all blow over. Your sister will be back tomorrow. Then you make sure you give *her* a good slap.'

The corners of Shalimar's mouth turned slightly. She turned to Salia just as Papa's worn out figure appeared in the doorway. Salia noticed too, and stood up and excused himself almost immediately.

The mattress sunk as Papa's large frame sat down. His fingers brushed against her neat cornrows affectionately. He sighed.

'Baindu left with an RUF man in a fancy car. We know he is RUF because they have no respect for anyone. They are a different breed. They are all taking *brown brown*, these disgusting creatures. Baindu showed no respect today; she ignored your mother and jumped into that animal's car. Your mother loves you, Shalimar, but she has no one else to take it out on. You know this don't you? She is just beside herself with worry.'

Papa always took her side against Mama's constant accusations. He had cradled her with soft comforting songs and folktales into many a starry night after Mama had broken the cane on her back and there was

nothing left to beat her with. Papa had always been the appeaser. Shalimar always managed to find her voice when he was around.

‘Baindu is a grown woman Papa; I cannot stop her from doing what she wants to do.’

‘We all know this. Your mother just needs somebody to blame. I have sent her to bed. Don’t worry anymore. She will be fine in the morning.’

Papa leaned over to kiss Shalimar’s forehead, muttering something inaudible under his breath, he stood up and shuffled out of the room.

Chapter 2

The humidity made it hard to breathe outside the house. So far, not even the occasional gust of wind had graced the village with its presence through the entire day, and the mud block hut had provided the only relief from the torturous heat. Although cooler inside, Shalimar still slept naked with no covers.

When she awoke, she lay there a moment, looking down at her burnt caramel complexion. Her skin had always been fairly patchy, and she inspected her arms in dismay, hoping her skin troubles would disappear like dust, once she had her shower.

Born out of wedlock, Shalimar was always going to be different from the other local children. She stood out as half Fulani. The Fulanis were nomads who resembled the Berbers of the desert, and they hailed from Guinea, the neighbouring country to the North.

As a young girl, Mama had worked as a cook for a wealthy family in the capital; Freetown. She had begun an affair with the man of the house, and soon fell pregnant. The master of the house chose the name *Shalimar* before she was born; his instincts told him it would be a girl. He came across the name on a business expedition in a foreign land and so she was given a name that represented neither his tribe nor her mother's. The wife found out about the pregnancy, and when she caught her husband alone with the cook, she soon put two and two together, and Mama was thrown out of the house as a result. With nowhere to go she returned to live with her family, and soon after married Papa only to have another daughter, Baidu.

The other children called her 'Dirty Mulatto' during the dry season when the sun was unkind to her skin, and her tone was more patchy than usual. Shalimar was used to the teasing and never cried. When it was particularly bad, Mama scrubbed her neck raw, accusing Shalimar of shaming her to the other villagers - afraid when they saw Shalimar they would see her skin as some form of neglect.

Mama interrupted Shalimar's thoughts by popping her head through the door. Shalimar placed her arms back by her sides and watched her mother force the rest of her body through, as the door heaved forward slightly. Mama was in her seventies now, although nobody in the family knew her exact age. She was the colour of charcoal with even wrinkles defining both age and wisdom. She stood small and frail, wearing only a lapa tied tightly around her tiny waist. Everyone was feeling the heat.

'Shalimar you want to eat now? Before you go?'

‘I will have just a little, Mama. I’m not very hungry.’

As usual Mama behaved as though nothing had happened the night before. This is how it was, and would always be. Shalimar dared to ask about the money Baindu had left behind.

‘Did you put the money in a safe place Mama?’

Mama ignored her daughter’s questions. ‘It’s white okra today.’

‘I’ll dish out the rice in a minute, Mama. Mama, did you put the money away?’

Mama snapped. ‘Yes I did, *leff me!*’

‘You put it somewhere safe?’

Shalimar knew she was walking a fine line, but pushed on anyway.

‘Safe?’

‘I dug a hole under my stool by the guava tree.’

‘You hid the money outside? Mama!’

Irritated, Mama clapped her hands over her daughter’s head in dismissal and raised her voice.

‘Who will look there? Eh?’

Shalimar leant backwards to grab the bath towel laid out at the foot of the mattress. She knew better than to acknowledge her mother’s frustration. She stood up and wrapped the blue towel around her chest. Mama interrupted this by cupping her daughter’s left breast.

‘They are drooping. You need to wear a brassier to sleep from now on.’

Mama’s hand lifted Shalimar’s left breast with the intention of having it point to the ceiling.

‘Too much breasts. Your sister’s breasts are still pointing straight; they are round like oranges. You have watermelon breasts. A brassier will stop your back from hurting.’

Shalimar turned her back to tie the worn blue bath towel around her waist, and walked out of the room to have her shower. When her mother compared her to Baindu she shut her ears. Words like bullets to the chest could not penetrate if you protected yourself and did not listen. On days like this she was glad to seek refuge at Long Life.

The washing area was positioned at the back of the house and surrounded by bamboo leaves to prevent the occasional passer-by from looking in. Shalimar covered the roof of the square area with her towel; a signal to others that it was in use. A large green bucket filled with water stood in the corner. A small plastic multicoloured bowl floated aimlessly inside the bucket. Shalimar filled the small bowl with water, crouched down and poured it over her naked body.

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There were not many opportunities for work around Blama, except to help out in the rice fields. The money that Long Life brought in for the family allowed for small luxuries such as shoes, perfumed soap and - most important - Papa's medicine. Salia only required Shalimar during the busy periods from Thursday to Saturday, and this was perfect as it left plenty of time for Shalimar to help out at home. Her parents couldn't cope with the rice fields and their frailty was beginning to show. Shalimar treasured the time away from her family and the freedom it gave her. She enjoyed the strangers and frequent drunks that showed up with stories to tell and the generous tips that sometimes accompanied them. This Friday night was no exception as she counted her tips in the empty bar towards closing time. The busy bar was hotter than usual tonight, with the accumulated body heat of the many patrons. The big white fans that hung off the high ceiling spun round so fast that the wooden beams creaked and shook with their force. Throughout the evening, Shalimar had taken every opportunity to linger beneath them, as she served her customers. Anything to feel the vigour of the artificial wind blasting through her blue cotton dress. Baidu's supervisor role at the Coca Cola factory made it possible to occasionally buy decent second hand clothes, which Shalimar only wore to work. The cotton dress, though plain, showed off her hourglass figure. The tips counted and shared, Salia disappeared into the back room to tidy up the stock whilst Shalimar wiped the tables.

The unmistakable sound of a magazine being loaded into a gun caused her to swing around. Two men in casual clothes, both sporting red bandanas stood at the door, each brandishing an AK47. One pointed his weapon straight at her; he laughed when he saw her freeze then lowered the gun and walked to the corner of the room. Shalimar's heart sunk. She held onto the back of the wooden chair, her legs suddenly weak. A large round black figure in full military uniform stepped into the bar following behind the first soldier, and walked over to the table overlooking the dusty road. Barrow emerged from behind him, wearing the same safari suit with added patches of sweat. He looked around the bar. His eyes fell on Shalimar and he grinned.

'Shalimar, where is Salia?'

Shalimar was rooted to the spot, unable to respond. Salia emerged from the back room, the ubiquitous smile disappearing immediately from his face. His eyes searched the room in total panic, but he visibly relaxed when he saw Shalimar.

‘Mr Barrow, Sah. Bi gahu yeana?’

Barrow sat with the military man and signalled for two of the usual to Salia. More undesirables filed into the bar, filling up the tables.

‘Shalimar, why are you still standing over there? Come here,’ Barrow demanded.

She heard Barrow beckon her, but invisible nails kept her feet pinned to the wooden floor with fear.

‘Come on woman...over here!’ Barrow said again; this time a lot less friendly than the first time.

Barrow’s aggressive tone startled her back into reality. She walked across the room, every step feeling like her last. A light slap on her bottom surprised her.

‘What are you doing?’ Shalimar exclaimed.

‘This is my faithful girl...’ Barrow said to the men at his table. Ignoring her protestation, his hand trailed up to her arm and squeezed it gently. ‘She is a good girl...’

The military man ogled Shalimar, who deliberately kept her gaze to the floor. A mixture of stale and fresh sweat seeped from his pores. The longer she stood there the worse the odour seemed to become. Shalimar’s throat tightened. He was so black, the whites’ of his eyes shone in contrast. The military uniform hugged him so tightly, the buttons looked ready to explode from his stomach.

‘Go get me two bottles of gin,’

Barrow’s tight grip on her arm turned into a short shove. Shalimar was glad to get away.

‘You know my favourite drink. And don’t forget the tonic,’ Barrow called after her. ‘Stay in the bar area...eh...don’t go to the back.’

The entrance doors opened loudly and Mrs Foday, the boss’s wife appeared wearing a magnificent green country cloth gown. The lapa that encircled her waist made the waistband clearly visible regardless of the large mass of her body, and her wide arms carried the sleeves over her gown effortlessly. She moved slowly and spoke loudly, unaware of the events unfolding in the bar. Shalimar stood wide-eyed as Mrs Foday approached the bar. How could she be so oblivious to the tension in the room? To Shalimar, it was thick enough to be visible, and heavy enough to reach out and grab. Mrs Foday walked straight up to the bar, calling Salia’s name several times. The beer-bellied military man stood up automatically from his chair when she entered the room, and followed silently behind her. Mrs Foday chewed gum with her mouth open; she smiled at Shalimar and placed her Florida key ring holding several keys loudly on the counter. Chewing gum appeared to be her

mark of importance as she continued to chew loudly, looking straight into Shalimar's eyes.

'Where is Salia?'

The military man now stood directly behind her. Mrs Foday squinted and sniffed before turning around to see the military man grinning at her.

'Hello Madam, how are you?'

Shalimar couldn't see Mrs Foday's reaction but heard the stern reply.

'It's Mrs Foday.'

The military man smiled.

'Mrs Foday, I see. Where is Mr Foday?'

Mrs Foday hesitated. 'He has gone to see his brother in Bo.'

The military man nodded, still smiling. Shalimar noticed two more white men entering the saloon and a very tipsy Barrow greeting them. She felt a surge of relief inside. Perhaps there would be no trouble tonight as there were so many foreigners. The military man took Mrs Foday's hand gently,

'I would like to discuss business with you...about this bar'

Mrs Foday looked taken aback. 'Business?'

The military man nodded. 'Yes Madam. Business. This is a good strategic place to make money; let's go somewhere quiet and discuss it. I have a proposition for you.'

Mrs Foday put her black handbag next to her keys and pushed them to the corner of the counter.

'Shalimar keep my bag for me now... I will be back soon.'

The military man pointed to the narrow hallway behind Shalimar that led to the back office. Shalimar nodded and pulled the bag from the top of the counter and placed it underneath as Mrs Foday and the military man walked to a back room. At this point Salia reappeared, and continued serving drinks to the remaining men in the bar. Shalimar left him to it, and remained seated on one of the stools behind the counter, wondering if the RUF Rebels were finally in town. She hoped and prayed they were just passing through and that her parents were okay.

There had been stories, terrible stories of unspeakable atrocities taking place in villages in the District. So far Blama had been insignificant and lucky. The RUF were said to be merciless killers and now they were here, perhaps to destroy the village and take the land. Salia came back from serving Barrow and told her to get a grip. Their survival depended on it. Barrow was definitely with the RUF and the fat military man.

‘Shalimar, you have to look busy. Act normal and don’t attract attention.’

Salia pushed the dirty glasses into her hand and pointed to the sink.

‘Rambo is here.’ He continued in a low voice staring straight ahead into the dirty sink water. ‘He is the ugly one.’

‘The one that smells?’ Shalimar whispered.

‘Yes,’ Salia answered.

Shalimar looked at her friend more closely, and realised his calm demeanour barely masked his fear. The sides of his mouth quivered as he swallowed and coughed, and as he passed Shalimar another glass she saw how his hand shook.

‘What are we going to do?’

‘We just carry on as normal. Hopefully they will leave without any trouble. Mrs Foday is here and Chameleon is here so maybe they will leave soon.’

‘Who is Chameleon?’

‘The crazy white man who loves the palm wine.’

Salia shook his head and heaved a long sigh.

‘His eyes change colour and shape. They say he used to be a woman-demon. She lived in the bush and changed her appearance because of the war. They disturbed her land, so she changed into a white man to fight the Rebels.’

Shalimar caught her breath and tried to block out the brilliant green eyes that had tugged fear into the hollow of her stomach. She dared to search the room for the demon white man.

‘Don’t raise your head Shalimar!’ Salia hissed, making her jump. ‘Don’t draw attention to yourself and don’t look any of them in the eye. Just start praying.’

Salia moved around the bar wiping glasses that didn’t need to be wiped. He looked occupied, grinning at the group of men every time he glanced up. Shalimar left the dirty glasses in the sink and went around collecting empty beer bottles from the tables, deliberately keeping her gaze on the floor. She could hear the white men talking to the Rebels about land and money, and as she cleared the table next to Barrow she noticed he was counting out a thick wad of banknotes. A RUF soldier grabbed her arm as he spotted her looking at the money, and then laughed at her inability to look him in the eye. He seemed to take pleasure in her fear. She shrugged away from his grasp and carried on collecting the empty glasses and beer bottles

‘Bring an ashtray!’ An order shouted from across the room. Shalimar nodded, and returned to the counter.

At this point, Commander Rambo emerged from the back room, but without Mrs Foday. He sauntered across the barroom floor and joined Barrow and the Chameleon at their table. Shalimar picked up the ashtray and took it to the table. Rambo's deep voice rose above the others as Shalimar approached. He grabbed her arm, pulling her down to face him. The smell of Mrs Foday's perfume did not mask the gut-wrenching stench that seemed to surround him. A mixture of urine, sweat and blood encircled him. His enormous pink tongue appeared like a toads, only to lick the right side of her face. Shalimar yelped in disgust and pulled back. His response was simply to pull her roughly back to him.

'You're interrupting my conversation,' The accent was unmistakably South African.

Out of the corner of her eye, Shalimar saw the palm wine lover staring at Rambo with an undisguised look of disgust on his face.

Commander Rambo sucked his teeth, then yanked Shalimar so hard that she fell onto him. He immediately put his arms around her and squeezed as she struggled to get away from his grasp.

'I can't do business with you doing that shit.' The palm wine lover suddenly spat at them.

Shalimar felt like she would suffocate as Rambo crushed her with his thick arms. Her chest caved in when she tried to breathe. The more she struggled, the stronger his grip, the worse it became for her. A loud bang sounded in her ears, the ceiling above them rumbled, and pieces of wood fell to the floor. The strong grip around her suddenly slackened. Shalimar pulled herself away falling to the floor as she did so.

'I'll shoot one of your monkeys if you disturb my concentration again.' The palm wine lover sneered as he sat back in his chair. Barrow helped Shalimar off the floor.

'You're causing problems here, Shalimar. The men need to concentrate on business.'

'Gbay huay, I'm sorry.' Shalimar choked.

Rambo shrugged his shoulders and chuckled.

'No problem. I can take her away with me tonight. You finish your transaction.'

'She stays here,' was the calm reply. 'Non-negotiable.'

Shalimar blinked back the tears. The palm wine lover was not slurring or spitting. He was without fear; his voice calm, authoritative and clear. Knocking back his drink, his frosty grey green eyes touched on her momentarily as he slammed the empty glass on the table.

‘She is with me now.’

Barrow laughed aloud. The all-too-familiar sound of gunfire suddenly filled the air outside the bar. A burning sensation filled the pit of Shalimar’s stomach. She put her hand to where the pain was emerging from and trembled. The two white men were doing business with the RUF rebels. Commander Rambo’s large frame pushed his chair back as he stood up.

‘My boys are here... time to go. *Muaa lima.*’

A colossal sound of chairs scraping against the wooden floor filled the room, and the rebel soldier’s filed slowly out of the bar. Against a backdrop of multiple engines starting up and revving loudly, Shalimar allowed herself to exhale deeply.

Barrow remained in the bar, calmly finishing his beer. Evenings such as these were obviously not uncommon to him. He raised a hand, gesturing the two workers over to him.

‘Salia, you and Shalimar stay in here tonight. It is not safe to leave. Close all the windows and lock the doors.’ He turned to Shalimar. ‘If you try to leave, he will not hesitate to kill you.’

He pointed to the South African palm wine lover who was just leaving the bar with a loaded pistol in his hand. ‘We will be back tomorrow. Keep safe huh...’

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Shalimar did not move from the spot as Salia ran to bolt the door behind Barrow. He picked up the long piece of metal resting against the wall, and then slotted it into the makeshift groove behind the doors. As he moved to the shutters, the gunfire drew closer. He secured them quickly before pulling Shalimar towards the back, behind the counter. He killed the power. All the lights in the bar went out, and as they stood still for a second to allow their eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness, all they could hear was the gentle whoop-whoop of the fans as they slowed. No gunfire; no revving vehicles. Everyone had left. Shalimar followed him to the stock room to retrieve the torch. Salia slipped in front of her, arms flailing in the air.

‘Oh dear, Salia. You are so clumsy,’ she teased.

‘Lord have mercy! Lord have mercy!’ He scrambled to get up as quickly as he had fallen but with each effort, he slipped again.

‘What is it? What do you see?’

‘Lord have Mercy!’

‘Salia what is it? You are scaring me!’

Salia finally gathered himself and stood up slowly, pausing to gain some sort of composure. Without responding to Shalimar, he tiptoed to the middle of the room chanting a prayer; his outline silhouetted by the moonlight that shone through the window. Shalimar stayed put, too scared to break the deathly silence between them.

‘Shalimar.’ He said softly. ‘Return to the bar immediately.’

‘What’s wrong? Why...’

‘I said go now!’ Salia shouted, in a way he had never done before. Startled, Shalimar obeyed, leaving the room quickly. A few minutes later Salia rejoined her in the bar. Salia pointed the flashlight onto himself revealing the blood that now drenched his shirt and trousers. Shalimar covered her mouth in shock.

‘Mrs Foday is dead?’

Salia nodded, slumping down next to her, turning the flashlight off. They were both numb with exhaustion and fear. Mrs Foday had been murdered in cold blood and they were trapped at the edge of town in the bar. Shalimar moved closer, laying her head on Salia’s shoulder. There was nothing left to do but wait and pray that nobody would try to get inside or alternatively burn the building down. Gunfire suddenly erupted outside, followed by several explosions.

‘Oh my God! How close is that, Salia?’

‘It is Blama, I think.’

‘But that is so close. My parents...’ Shalimar struggled to get the words out, as tears formed in her eyes and began to trickle down her cheeks. Salia put his arm around her as she sobbed softly.

‘Salia,’ she finally said through the tears, ‘if the Rebels are not around maybe... *Mua-li lo.*’

Salia shook his head. ‘They are around. Just because you can’t hear them doesn’t mean they are not here.’

‘But I have to check on Papa and Mama, what if the Rebels have gone to Blama?’

‘If they went to Blama, someone would have managed to escape and come to tell us.’

Shalimar stood up urgently and looked around.

‘I have to go and check on my parents.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Shalimar. We should wait for another couple of hours at least.’

‘I can’t wait,’ she said, and shrugged Salia’s arm from her shoulder.

‘What are you doing?’ Salia hissed as Shalimar headed for the back room.

The moon still shone through the window shedding a little light for her to see. Although she couldn't make out the body, the room felt eerily cold compared to the bar area, prompting goose bumps to spread briskly over her arms. She blocked out her uneasiness by focusing on the window whilst edging slowly towards it. Shalimar slowly lifted the handle, pushed the window outwards, and warily peered out into the blackness. The air was still, the smell of wet grass even now apparent after the early evening rain.

'This is why your mother wanted to slap you last night. You don't listen.' Salia breathed heavily beside her, as he too surveyed the outside. Shalimar turned to him.

'I have to know. I can't sit here all night worrying if my parents are all right.'

She clambered onto the crates of soft drinks and lifted herself up to climb out of the window.

'Wait!' Salia hissed, grabbing her dress with such force he ripped the bottom.

'What? What is it?'

'Shhhh be quiet!' The urgency in his voice heightened. 'There... Look over there.'

He pointed to the right of the building where the grass rose slightly higher. Shalimar peered with difficulty in the dark, unable to make out anything.

'I don't see anything,' she whispered.

Salia did not answer; his eyes remained transfixed. Shalimar turned back to observe the darkness before her. A few seconds passed before she saw a subtle movement. At first it came across as the shape of a dog or cat, but Shalimar gradually realised there were two people lying on the ground. Shalimar lowered herself back onto the floor.

'Do you see what I am saying? Those are Rebels just waiting to kill anyone they come across,' Salia reprimanded her.

'You think they are guarding this place?' Shalimar asked. Salia nodded. She had not stopped to think that the Rebels would want to enjoy themselves in a bar full of free alcohol before they destroyed it. They would definitely be back in the morning for their spoils.

'We have to stay here Shalimar. We have no choice.'