

Noire précieuse
[The Fire Woman]
Asya Djoulaït

Sample translated by Hannah Rácz-Embleton & Charlotte Coombe

*To honour the sacrifices you made, my dear parents.
And to my precious brothers,
Malik
and Sofiane.*

PART ONE

SHAME

"I grew up in your shadow; the sweetness of your hands bandaged my eyes."

Léopold Sédar Senghor

Céleste always thought that her mother smelled of ash. As she did every night before bed, Oumou planted the usually reassuring kiss on her daughter's forehead. She lavished her with words to give her confidence:

'Hey you, dèh! I can't see you screwing up your life, eh. You're going to be someone, I'm telling you! My precious Black girl...'

Ever since she was born, Céleste had been surrounded by a halo of love and light. She had taken shape in the warmth of a mother known to the entire neighbourhood as "the fire woman". But that evening, her kiss was tainted, her words stale.

A few days before, Céleste had asked the question that wrenched her from her childhood, at ten years old. She was well aware that her mother was in charge of most of the tchatcholi shops in the tenth and eighteenth arrondissements of Paris. White light trickled out from her shops, seeped through the windows and splashed onto the street. Passersby found themselves swathed in that

dazzling glow. Stylish and showy: that's what made Oumou's shops stand out from the others. There, you could find all the beauty products that were popular with Black people—especially tchatcholi. Céleste, who spent her weekends playing at the back of *Femmes ébène*, the shop on rue du Château-d'Eau, asked her mother what it was. She often heard customers asking for 'the most effective tchatcholi'. Her mother briefly explained:

'It's a kind of beauty cream to make you look kpata.'

Naturally, on hearing this, Céleste made her way over to one of the shelves, reached out and clasped her little hand around a red plastic object. She pulled it towards her. It looked like the apple from the Garden of Eden, she thought. She unscrewed the lid and plunged her entire hand into the pot, when Oumou rushed over, snatched it from her and pushed her daughter away in one angry movement. There was a crazed, helpless look in her eye. She quickly composed herself. But the child had caught that flicker. In a threatening tone, Oumou told her it was not a cream for little girls.

'I just wanted to look pretty,' stammered Céleste, trying to explain herself. She didn't want to make her mother cross, but still had the glint in her eye of someone who would soon find out the truth.

Then she went to the backroom and took a book out of a drawer, as if nothing had just been broken between her and her mother. But Oumou knew how curious she was, the girl she had carried inside her womb. She knew the seed had been sown.

In the backroom, Céleste turned on the computer on the desk. The rules were strict: it was only to be used for listening to and learning the songs in the Chemin Neuf Community repertoire. She opened the folder named 'God is Love' and clicked on the title 'Lift up our hands'. She started singing to herself, *'Lift up our hands / let's sing to the Lord! / He is with us / Our King and Saviour!'* A customer came into the shop, and Céleste waited patiently for the conversation to get going before she opened a cardboard box and grabbed one of the many creams sold in her mother's shops. She stopped singing to herself and in a low voice read the label on the packaging: 'Caro Light depigmentation containing hydroquinone. Lightening cream. All skin types.' She mumbled the word again: 'depigmentation'. She closed her eyes and went over everything she had read at school and in church, but try as she might, no answer came.

She opened the browser, typed the term into the search engine and pressed Enter. Images popped up, mainly red, of swollen faces, arms and legs. Gory words appeared all over the screen: 'acne, infections, septicaemia, complications, skin cancer, kidney failure.' She didn't know what these

words meant. The cursor trembled. She clicked one of the links at random and began to read. ‘Skin depigmentation began in the United States in the 1960s within the Black community. The bleaching effects of hydroquinone were first discovered among workers at denim and rubber factories. The product was used as a fading agent for jeans and an antioxidant for rubber. Black workers had no protective equipment, and over time, they noticed the effect this toxic product was having on their skin. The product went on to be used to bleach the skin, a phenomenon which spread to the African continent.’ Céleste had been holding her breath. The air seemed scarce, the backroom of her childhood suddenly contaminated.

That evening, when Céleste and Oumou stepped through the door of their apartment, nothing was the same. Everything was shrouded in shame. The young girl took refuge in her bedroom and, lying on her back on the bed, arms outstretched, she sang her psalms to herself like someone writing a shopping list. Oumou prepared dinner while she talked to her sister, Marie-Laure, who lived in Côte-d’Ivoire. Céleste’s flat voice could not drown out her mother’s lively arrangement of consonants as she discussed the family’s issues, money transfers, upcoming marriages, divorces and the CFA franc.

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Céleste snapped out of her daze. Her mother was calling her for dinner. With heavy limbs, she was making her way to the bathroom when her eyes landed on a photo. She removed it from the frame of the mirror in the corridor and examined it closely. She had passed the image a hundred times, but had never really looked at it. She could see her mother in a yellow dress, arms wrapped around her. It was a precious moment: Céleste’s first-ever trip to Cote d’Ivoire. Jean-Baptiste Diagou had just been elected Mayor of Cocody, a prosperous residential commune in the north of Abidjan where the wealthiest classes of Ivorian society, diplomats and expats rubbed shoulders. Oumou had wanted to take a photo with her daughter at the start of the Cocody neighbourhood, where she had just bought a wooden house in the middle of a huge garden, kept green and lush by the heavy rains.

‘See all that? That’s for you. That’s our place.’

“All that” referred to a single-storey building with three bedrooms, two bathrooms, an open plan kitchen and living room, and a garden as big as a forest in the eyes of the little girl. Grinning from ear to ear, Oumou made fun of the 29m2 Parisian studio flat where she lived with her daughter.

‘Tchié! It’s not like the Paris shoebox here, eh? There you have to squeeze in like this, then you open the fridge and there’s someone in there, then you pick up a cup and there’s someone else under it. Here you can move around without bumping into the walls. What do you think of it, Céleste?’

‘It’s so kpata.’

‘Don’t forget to thank Christ in your prayers tonight, dèh!’

Bursting with gratitude, Céleste flung her arms round her mother. That was the moment when an “uncle”, one of her countless “tontons du pays”, had taken the picture. Céleste’s gaze lingered on the finish of the photo, the shiny film that magnified her mother’s skin: oiled, coppery and ashen, like the remnants of a volcanic disaster. Without realising, she said ‘the fire woman’ out loud. She clapped her hands over her mouth to catch the words—suppress their meaning, swallow the omen. She examined the back of her hands, squinting her eyes to enter the almost blue folds of her black, immaculate skin. Céleste looked so dark next to her mother. She tucked the photo back into the mirror’s frame and went into the bathroom. She scrubbed her hands fervently under the hot tap, but the black would not go.

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Céleste forced her food down half-heartedly.

‘You’re the one that asked for braised banana with peanuts, yes or no?’

‘Yes, but I’m not hungry anymore...’

‘What do you mean, you’re not hungry anymore? You’ll eat up, and chapchap! What’s wrong, kessia?’

‘Nothing’s wrong...’

‘Nothing?’

‘Maman, why can’t I tchatcho like you?’

‘Eh Lord, you’re trouble! Yé already told you why-ô!’

But her daughter’s straightforward question, her face so completely innocent, so pure, tugged on Oumou’s heartstrings. She dropped her Ivorian way of speaking and body language. When the conversation went beyond everyday exchanges, she spoke in a laid-on French, polishing the ‘r’ rather than rolling it the Ivorian way. As if adding weight to one letter made what she said less suspect. She

reached for words that would not arouse suspicion, knowing full well that they could not explain something so complex.

‘Okay. A big girl like you can understand this. Listen to me carefully. At school, your white friends like to go in the sun to get a tan, is that true or not?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, Black people, what we want is light skin. So to make our skin shine, we use tchatcholi, or tchoko. It’s a lightening product. That’s all.’

Céleste was only half listening. The ‘we’ her mother kept using made her fear the worst. She dared to ask the question that could change everything:

‘Do you use tchatcholi, maman?’

‘Never, dêh! Ah, well, yé use cream to give me a pretty complexion, so it’s nice and even. Yé dit, that’s all I have to say.’

Her tone of voice was confident, but something sounded false. Céleste had never heard her mother lie. The very thought of it, coupled with her mother’s face, was an unnatural association that stirred the blood in her veins. She shrank back in her chair. The idea that her mother could lie took root nonetheless.

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Céleste dropped the subject. She was a sensitive soul who could be thrown by the slightest sign of coldness. Instead of demanding to know the truth, she kept quiet. But she was left with the sense of an unresolved problem that festered in her. The next day, on her way home from school, Céleste decided to look elsewhere for answers beyond her mother’s words. As usual, she greeted all the shopkeepers along rue du Château-d’Eau, who liked how polite and serious she was. Because she wasn’t exactly considered blessed when it came to looks, they felt a certain kind of sympathy for her. She stopped in the doorway of one of the wig shops run by a friend of her mother’s.

‘Hello, auntie. Are you busy?’

‘Hi sweetheart! Come on in! It’s pretty quiet at the moment. How’s maman?’

‘Fine, thanks, I-’

‘How’s school going?’

‘Good, thanks, but-’

‘How old are you now?’

‘Ten, but, auntie, I wanted to ask you-’

‘Haan! Ten already? Masha’Allah! We’ll be marrying you off soon, eh? Kr kr kr!’

‘Why does everyone call maman the fire woman? Is it the tcha...’

It was as if Céleste’s words had sliced right through the chuckling. Her auntie’s radiant face fell; the laughter trickled away.

‘Tchié. Maman uses cream to give her a pretty complexion. It’s nothing to do with tchatcholi, dèh!’

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She went into another shop that sold the same kinds of creams as the ones in her mother’s shops. Céleste didn’t know the shop assistant. He was probably the manager’s son; he looked around twenty.

‘Hello. I’d like a pot of tchoko, please.’

‘Yikes, what for? Do you want to ruin your skin?’

‘No, I want a pretty complexion.’

‘But tchoko will burn your skin, little lady. Seriously, it’s no good for you. Are you trying to look like the fire woman?’

His mocking, conspiratorial tone flayed Céleste. She had never heard her mother bad-mouthed like that before. Rattled, she asked, ‘What’s wrong with the fire woman?’

‘Well, we all have to put food on the table, but selling your ancestors to look like the whites, là-ô... Tchatcholi burnt her skin so badly it looks like flames!’

Céleste felt her eyes fill with tears.

‘How do you know?’

‘It must’ve done! Anyone who uses tchoko gets marks all over their body—especially on their hands. The products have loads of chemicals in them that make your skin go weird. It even smells strong! But women can’t go round acting like house negroes when they mistreat their own flesh like that, là-ô! They’re all like, *I look after my skin so I can have a pretty complexion, but yé would never use tchatcholi, blab blab blab...* Any gomie who says that, she’s the kind of girl who comes in looking for tchatcholi from the States—the most expensive and effective—to try and look like Beyoncé, and her skin goes so light, you’d think she was born that way! But it doesn’t last. Then her skin’s spoiled, like fallen fruit. It’s really bad for your health. You should be proud of your beautiful colour!’

‘But if it’s beautiful then why do you sell those creams?’

‘No, the thing is...-’

‘Maman says you shouldn’t trust people who start sentences with “the thing is”.’

‘Tchié, she’s right! Okay. Let me tell you this: there are men who like light skin. So women want light skin, so that men will like them.’

‘So it’s because of men...?’

‘No! No one’s forcing those women to do such stupid stuff!’

‘Yes, but if they don’t do it, they won’t find a husband.’

‘You’re exhausting, ô! Anyway, yé can’t give you the tchatcholi, so drop it.’

‘What about you? Have you had black girlfriends?’

He showed her the background on his phone.

‘See? My girlfriend is black.’

‘No, but she’s light black. I meant dark black, like me.’

‘Dêh! You talk too much. Light skin, dark skin, the beauty’s all in the behind, if you know what I mean, *kr kr kr!* I can definitely sell you something for that. You want some bobaraba botcho cream?’

Céleste left the shop assistant to his dreams of big botchos. She left the shop and took the longest way home, lined with beauty salons and hairdressers. A path to black female beauty. She knew how to weave through the seemingly chaotic hustle and bustle at the metro station exits, teeming with people selling grilled corn and counterfeit goods, and touting must-have manicures and haircuts. Céleste was usually amused by the endlessly inventive techniques for accosting passers-by. But that day, she didn’t find the lively spectacle entertaining. All she could see were the crude, dismal strings being pulled by people hiding in the shadows, and it scared her.

She made her way along the boulevard de Strasbourg and the shops she knew so well: *Sunshine*, *Afro26*, *Patricia Reynier*, *Afro King*, *Emmy-Joy*, *Kim Beauty*, *Élégance Beauty*, *Rose Belle*. It made sense, she thought, to sell beauty to help women find a husband. Céleste remembered a conversation that her mother had quickly shut down when she had declared that she never wanted to get married.

‘I’m never ever going to leave you.’

‘You’re just a baby. But just you wait and see, one day those mômôrs will be buzzing around you like bees on sugar! Christ said that you shall leave your father and your mother to become one flesh with your husband, ô.’

‘But you live without a man... So it’s possible.’

‘Well, yé needed a man to make you, didn’t I?’

‘Yes, but I’d rather just stay with you.’

‘Don’t say that, ô! Know what we say back home? “Un gomie, c’est la blémou, elle est mouhin, zouhin”—women are peace, gentleness, tenderness. So don’t you go wasting your sensuality by staying with your mother, eh! What kind of life does a single woman have, ô? We are women without a man because your father left, but the reason you’re here on Earth is to give birth, eh! A beautiful woman is a woman with a baby on her back. Yé tell you.

Oumou commanded silence, arms slicing through the air, her tone sharp, eyes narrowed.

The memory of this conversation only added to the uneasiness that gripped Céleste for several minutes.

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All evening, Céleste sulked in her room. She knew that at nine o’clock, her mother would come in to say goodnight. She prayed while she waited, hands pressed together, tense. As she always did before bed, Oumou planted the usually reassuring kiss on her daughter’s forehead. With her mother’s skin so close, again Céleste breathed in the familiar smell that permeated her childhood. She had always thought it was a ladylike smell, since she couldn’t think of a time when she had smelled it anywhere else. But that evening, it seemed more like congealed matter. It was as if the scent carried traces of rotting carcass, struck matches and old leather. That evening, she thought her mother smelled of ash. When Oumou drew her face away from her daughter’s, the acrid veil evaporated into the air. ‘Going to be someone’, ‘My precious black girl’. Her words of comfort sounded hollow. Trembling, Céleste gathered up what little courage she had left to study her mother’s hands as they tucked her in. They moved like a lie being formed, a coffin being sealed shut. The hands brought Céleste out of her childhood. They were wood fire, churned up by lava, marked by flames, streaked with grey and shame.