



# Maame



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# Chapter One

In African culture—Wait, no, I don't want to be presumptuous or in any way nationalistic enough to assume certain Ghanaian customs run true in other African countries. I might in fact just be speaking of what passes as practice in *my* family, but regardless of who the mores belong to, I was raised to keep family matters private. So if my dad has his own bedroom or my mum goes abroad for inexplicable lengths of time, it's common knowledge within our household that we keep that business, and all matters like it, to ourselves. "They just won't understand, you know? We're Ghanaian, so we do things differently."

Growing up, school dynamics, books, and shows on TV told me that best friends tell each other everything. It was almost the sole requirement, but I had to bend this rule, knowing the pieces of information I withheld meant I could never truly qualify as anyone's best friend, not when no one really *knew* me.

Even now, none of my friends—helpfully, I don't have many—know that every weekday I start the morning the same way. I wake up five minutes before my alarm and wait for it to go off at 6:00 A.M. I blink away any sticky traces of the night and tread silently downstairs, past my dad's bedroom—now relocated to the ground floor—and into the kitchen. I close the door to restrict traveling noise and pour myself a bowl of cornflakes, eating a spoonful at a time as I move around the kitchen.

It's a small, functional area with a gas stove (in desperate need of cleaning, but I assign that task to tomorrow evening), an oven with a missing grill door, a tall fridge, a smaller freezer filled with various unidentified let-me-not-waste-this food pieces (sorting through assigned to Saturday afternoon) and a washing machine that dances out from under the countertop when it's on, but when empty is just light enough to push back with the weight of my body. Said countertops are a white-speckled dark gray with a dull sheen I think is meant to trick you into believing it's marble.

I take a container of lunch from the batch I made on Sunday for myself, then cook pasta for Dad's lunch and leave it covered in the microwave. The rice I make for his dinner goes on a shelf in the cold oven. I cut up oranges for both our snacks—*Should I save the strawberries for tomorrow?* I tap my nails on the kitchen counter, considering the expiry date. *Nah, go for it*—and leave Dad's in a covered bowl, packing mine into another container.

None of my friends know it's when I'm out of the shower that I hear Dad's carer, Dawoud, come in. Today he's on the phone, likely to his wife in Yemen where he's from—he told me about her once. She's supposedly very beautiful.

Dawoud is a bit of a giant, well over six feet and only a little round in the middle, with gray hair on his head and several strands escaping from his ears. A smoker in his sixties, he has a loud but hoarse voice. My dad's fifty-seven, has never smoked, and stopped drinking years ago. Age is a terrifyingly inconsistent beast.

I cream my skin and pull out my Tuesday dress, navy, short-sleeved, loose-fitting, and below my knees, because no one in the office wears jeans. I tune in to a prayer channel Mum likes to randomly quiz me on, whilst pulling on black tights and inserting two gold studs that were passed down to me into my ears. I set a reminder to call Dr. Appong, my dad's GP for the last three years, at lunch for Dad's swollen feet, and look through my emails to find that we don't qualify for a council tax reduction.

Downstairs, Dawoud is in the kitchen making toast, and tomorrow will be porridge because the two meals alternate on weekdays. I walk into the living room and tell Dad, "I'll make you pancakes on Saturday."

"Oh, goody," he says smiling, but he won't remember the pancakes until I feed them to him on Saturday morning. That's how his Parkinson's works. He can remember constant, repetitive things, like mine and Dawoud's presence,

but short-term details won't sit in his brain for very long. They literally go through one ear, settle long enough for him to reply, then go out the other. Some days his medication will assist, but other days I think the meds are too busy tackling his swollen joints or his shaking hands, his high-blood pressure or his difficulty speaking, to lend a hand.

I have a picture of my parents taken in September 1984 and in it Dad is tall and handsome with an Afro and a silver chunky bracelet he still wears to this day. Whenever I look at that photo, I think of my last day at college, eight years ago. My year were having a party thrown in a bar, our equivalent of a prom, I guess. I didn't end up going even though I was asked. By Connor . . . no, Charlie, the quiet guy in my maths class that I had no idea even liked me. I did say yes; I bought a dress, but then I had to cancel on the day. *Poor Charlie*. An hour before I texted him to say I couldn't make it, my dad received his diagnosis: Parkinson's disease.

We'd all been quick to blame the aging process for his "clumsiness" or short-term memory. I mean, we've all put our keys down and then declared them missing two minutes later, so who were we to judge? But then one evening, Dad got lost.

I was back from school and the only one at home when he called the landline.

"Madeleine? Maddie," he said. "I think . . . I don't know where I am."

It wasn't what he said that made me grip the phone tighter; we live in London: easy to get lost, but easy to find your way back. No, it was the fear in Dad's voice that got to me. Over the course of my life, Dad had shown himself to be many things, but *afraid* was never one of them.

I made him pass the phone to a nearby woman, who explained that he was only ten minutes down the road.

"Are you sure?" I asked her.

"We're definitely on Spar Lane," she said. "I live here."

I knew then Dad hadn't simply fallen asleep on the bus or mistaken an unfamiliar street for a shortcut, but that he genuinely didn't know how to find his way home using the route he'd been taking for six years.

I jogged to Spar Lane and there he stood, in front of the gate of someone's house, looking left and right, left and right. *Trying*. I reached him and jokingly threw my hands in the air. "You walk down here every day!"

He nodded but didn't smile, and as we walked home, the frown stuck

between his brows deepened until we passed where he bought newspapers on Sundays and his shoulders sank with relief.

I now mark that day as The Beginning.

**Google:** Is Parkinson's disease genetic?

Scientific studies have shown that genetic factors can play a part in developing Parkinson's disease as a result of faulty genes.

Most cases of Parkinson's aren't hereditary, however a medical study recently revealed that patients suffering from early-onset Parkinson's disease are more likely to have inherited it.

Parkinson's disease can be triggered through a complex combination of genetic susceptibility and exposure to environmental factors such as toxins and trauma.

Genetics cause up to 15% of all Parkinson's.

Hereditary Parkinson's continues to be rare. The majority of Parkinson's cases are "idiopathic." Idiopathic means there is no known cause.

I suppose now is as good a time as any to let you know that I have an older brother, James. He lives in Putney, so it's just Dad and me here in Croydon. My mum spends most of her time in Ghana, running a hostel that my grandfather left to her and my uncle when he died. She'll come back home for a year, then return to Ghana for a year, rinse and repeat. It wasn't always a year-long thing, she used to only go for a couple of months at a time, but excuses would sprout up like inconspicuous mushrooms: "It's so expensive and long a flight, it doesn't make economic sense to stay here for such a short time" or "British weather doesn't agree with my arthritis" or "My brother is no good; he's not business-minded like me."

A year after Grandad passed, I overheard talk of upheaving us all to Accra, but Mum said no. "My degree from Ghana helped me not one bit here and Maddie is an A-plus student. That cannot go to waste. She will do better than us if here, and so you, their father, must stay." Thus her yo-yo traveling began.

My brother James pretty much left when Mum did. She was the iron fist of the household and Dad didn't know what to do with us when she was

gone, so he did very little. James also didn't know what to do with himself, so he spent most evenings and weekends at various friends' houses. I barely saw him. He went to a different school from me and then straight to somebody else's house; he had decided early on that his friends were his family.

Mum hated that; she'd shout on the landline, punctuated by the automated voice reminding us how much we had left on our blue calling card. "Stay home, James! Stop eating at other people's houses when your father has put food in the fridge. Their parents will think you have no mother!"

James, at fifteen, would shout back, "I don't!"

I'd lie to friends and tell them Mum was only gone for a month or two, three tops, because I knew they wouldn't get it. They'd ask, "What about you?" But I was fine. I was raised to be independent, to wash my own clothes, to shop for food and cook my own meals, to do my homework on time, to iron my uniform and assemble my school lunch. I didn't need to be looked after. I was proud to be so trusted—I didn't know any better.

Then they'd ask, "What about your dad?" And he was fine too because my parents aren't the same as yours and their marriage isn't conventional. They do things their own way. I thought back then that it worked. I ignored James when he said it didn't.



Dad's sitting in his armchair by the window facing the TV. He always looks thinner in the mornings, his loose cheeks a little heavier (the medication ate a lot of his fat in the early stages), but doesn't everything look different in the morning compared to how it did the night before? He's still handsome in my eyes; we keep his hair, hardly any of which is gray, cut short, and his face looks brighter after its morning wash.

If I had more time, I'd sit with him for a bit. I like our living room in the mornings. The floors can get quite cold as they're light wood (easier for spotting and cleaning up any mess), but I've timed the heaters to come on when Dad's helped out of bed. The walls are painted a peach-orange and we've got mismatched shawls and blankets covering the cracks in our tan faux-leather furniture. Whenever Mum returns from Ghana, she gets the sofa coverings to match the armchair's coverings, but I forget to wash and dry the sets at the same time.

"I'm leaving now, Dad," I say, loud enough for him to hear. "See you in the evening, okay?"

His eyes don't focus on me, and they're not quite set on the TV either, but when he hears the word "okay," his eyes widen and he replies, "Okay," and smiles again.

I turn to leave and throw "Love you" over my shoulder.

My hand is on the door handle when I hear him shakily say, "I love you, too."

I turn back to him and the words "You do?" are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Dad frowns like he doesn't understand my question; his eyes are trying to find mine whilst he struggles to turn his neck. Then Dawoud bursts into the room with breakfast.

I step out of his way. "Bye, Dawoud."

"Bye, Madeleine-y!" he calls after me.

I'm replaying Dad's words inside my head whilst looking for my keys. I know my dad loves me . . . it's just been a while since he's said the actual words. A very long while.

Outside the house, I notice that a fox has gotten into the neighbor's bin and has ripped through the bag, trailing food and rubbish across the pavement. This is what David Attenborough was warning us about when we decided to encroach further on their habitat. But we didn't listen.

"Been there," I say in solidarity.

I'll write next door a note explaining the trick is to put a few loose bricks on the wheelie bins at night, and post it through their letter box after work. They only moved in a few weeks ago and I don't know them yet, so I won't sign it.

I try to see what I can decipher about my new neighbors by their garbage. I see that they don't make an effort to recycle, so sadly they themselves are trash. It's a shame, because one of them was playing music last night, which I could hear through our thin walls, and their taste in nineties R & B is pretty good.

The 250 bus is rounding the corner when I get to the bus stop, and it's already filled with schoolchildren getting off in three stops. Per usual, I stand and watch fifteen more shove their way on in front of me, jamming the closing doors. I take a picture of a girl's backpack caught between the doors and send it to Nia.

Maddie

Were we ever this annoying?

Nia

Lol, yeah. Driver of the 156 used to hate us  
Remember that day he saw all of us waiting and  
just shook his head and drove off?  
Not our fault we were loud. We were hyper from  
those neon fruit drinks and fizzy strawberry laces

I smile at Nia's quick response, because it's 1:00 A.M. where she is. She's always been a night owl, and I picture her with her ombre locs piled on top of her head, listening to music on her bed with the back of her legs flat against the wall.

I look up at the bus and the girls squashed tight at the front, giggling together. I had a lot of friends at school, all through to college, even, but when they moved out of London for university and I stayed put to look after Dad, we drifted apart. I realized then that our friendships were not based on loyalty or love but convenience and proximity. I went from a close group of seven to one. Nia.

Nia's been my best friend for almost ten years now, but she's currently doing a business degree in Utah. She took a few gap years to work when we all went to university and so she's only now in her final year. She'll be back home in the summer—hopefully, for good.

I wait four minutes for the next bus and arrive at Thornton Heath station nine minutes before my train. I stand two feet to the left of the third bench so I'll be one of the first to board. On the way home, I'll stand on the right side of the live departure boards at Waterloo station, waiting for the 17:53 train. Monday to Friday, always the same.

My train arrives and it's busy as always with no seats available, but I rarely hunt for one. I look for an empty corner, settle in with my bag between my legs, fold my book in half and read.

When we arrive at Balham, it gets really full and I do what has fast become a habit of mine. I peer over my page and people watch. Playing my favorite game, I mentally ask: Who here loves their job? Could it be the blond woman in the brightly patterned summer dress? Who here hates their job but can disguise that feeling for the required amount of time? The man in a navy suit



with short braids and massive headphones? Who couldn't care less, so long as they're paid? The suited and booted city slicker, sighing impatiently when the train stops at a red light, standing far too close to the woman in front?

Whilst we're over ground at Clapham Junction, I take my phone out and turn my data on.

### **Google:** Jobs with the happiest employees

Number one on the list is . . . teaching.

That's got to be a lie. Considering I was a student not too long ago, I'm qualified to say, with a respectable level of certainty, that they're some of the worst treated people out there.

1. Nursing
2. Charity sector
3. Events management

On a list of jobs that have the unhappiest employees:

1. Customer service
2. Hospitality
3. Administration

When Waterloo station approaches, I brace myself for another day at a job Google itself has deemed deserving of a bronze medal in the race to unhappiness.

There's always a rush to get off the train; no one wants to be last, but surely it can't have anything to do with an irrepressible desire to get to work that eleven seconds earlier.

As soon as I'm separated from the mass of people, a message from Mum comes through. Just seeing her name flash reminds me of last night's phone call.



“Maddie, can you transfer me some more money, please?”

“Hello, Mum. How are you?”

She laughs and it tinkles effervescently. “Hello, darling. I am blessed. Now, I’ve found someone with better conversion rates than last time, so let me give you the address. Do you have pen and paper?”

“I don’t have any spare cash this month.”

“Why? Have you been recklessly spending?”

“No.”

Pause. “What’s wrong, Maame? You don’t sound right. Tell your mother.”

Mum alternates between calling me one of three things: my name and all its variations included, a term of endearment, or Maame. “Maame” has many meanings in Twi, but in my case, it means “woman.” I’ve been called Maame ever since I can remember and I loved being referred to as a woman when I was still a girl. I loved being viewed as a grown-up before I’d even gotten my period. But now I—

“Maddie?” And I can hear the impatience coating the edge of her syllables like ever-present shadows.

“I’m not feeling very well.” The sun stays out late now, so I’ve shut the curtains in my room. I’m sat in a corner of my bed with my knees to my chest and I think about how to best describe how low I’ve felt without being able to list any defining reasons for it. When I feel my time to explain is running out, I say, “I’m just sad and, I think, anxious.”

“About what?”

“Just everything I’m doing at home and at work. I feel heavy and hopeless and tired and like I’m not really living—”

Mum sighs. “Maddie, please.” She stretches each word to emphasize the weariness behind her begging. “You like to complain about this too much. You’re not doing a lot, really, are you? You should see how the children here live. Don’t you relax when you come home from work and on the weekends? It’s because you don’t ever go out.”

My eyes begin to water.

“I have said you need to go outside more because you’ll never find a husband sitting at home,” she continues. “Your father doesn’t need company during all the sun’s hours. That’s why you’re sad all the time—you have no fun.”

I almost tell her that fun doesn’t equate to happiness; at the very least, it lends you happiness and I want to know how to keep it. I’ve googled “How to be happy”; I’ve taken walks in the park and written long gratitude lists;

I'm consuming more fruits and vegetables and going to bed early; I've given out compliments and practiced mindful breathing. I *have* tried to fix myself.

"I think maybe I should go to the GP and—"

"No. We don't rely on the GP for things like that," Mum says. "They'll just give you drugs; they work on some kind of commission with it."

"I highly doubt that's true."

"I know more than you do about how the world is working, Maddie," she says. "They'll give you drugs for ailments that do not exist and then you will get sicker. It's not necessary. With God, there is no illness He cannot cure, that's why we rely on Him for all things."

I quietly ask, "Then why doesn't He give you money?"

"He blesses me through you, my daughter," she says with finality.

I hug myself a little tighter.

"Have you been praying and reading your Bible?" Mum asks. "You know you always get like this when you stop, when you give the devil a chance. Have you been tuning in to that prayer channel I told you about—the five A.M. one?"

After we hang up, I start making dinner for Dad. Tears pour until I can taste salt. "Something is genuinely wrong with you," I whisper, cutting peppers. "You're so messed up. Chemically imbalanced, maybe—you should google that. You can't be sad for no reason; it's not a human's natural state. In life, you're meant to be happy or content, only experiencing *moments* of sadness, so if sadness is your natural state, what does that say about you?" I put the knife down and slap my palm against my forehead. "Just fucking stop it." Surely, if I hit my head hard enough, I can fix my brain.

I wipe my eyes and keep cutting the peppers.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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