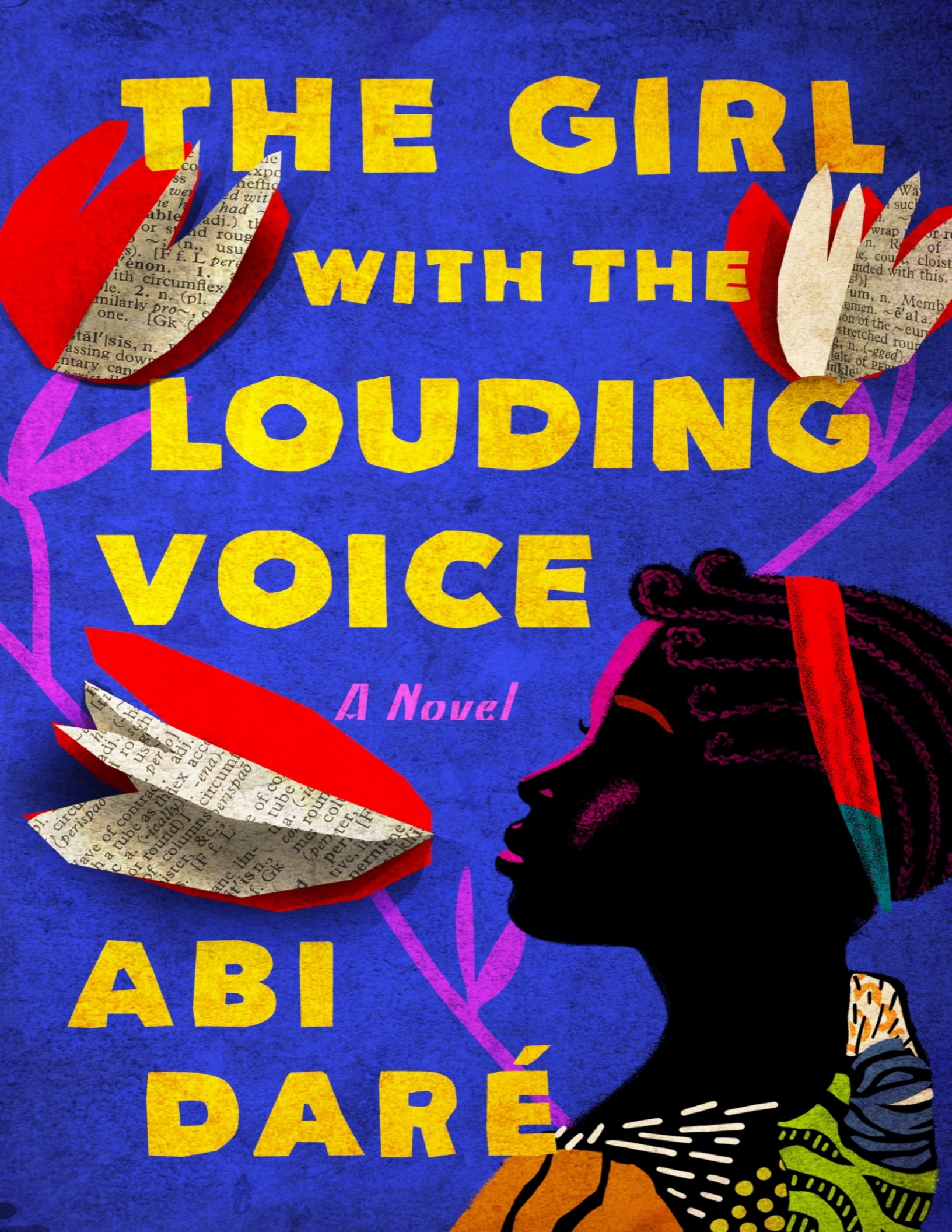


THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE

A Novel

ABI
DARÉ





**THE GIRL
WITH THE
LOUDING VOICE**

• A Novel •

ABI DARÉ



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To my mother, Professor Teju Somorin, not just because you are smart and beautiful and became the first female professor of taxation in Nigeria in 2019, but also because you made me see the importance of education and sacrificed so much for me to get the best of it.

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PROLOGUE

Nigeria is a country located in West Africa. With a population of just under 180 million people, it is the seventh most populous country in the world, which means that one in seven Africans is a Nigerian. As the sixth largest crude oil exporter in the world, and with a GDP of \$568.5 billion, Nigeria is the richest country in Africa. Sadly, over 100 million Nigerians live in poverty, surviving on less than \$1 a day.

—*The Book of Nigerian Facts: From Past to Present*, 5th edition, 2014

CHAPTER 1

This morning, Papa call me inside the parlor.

He was sitting inside the sofa with no cushion and looking me. Papa have this way of looking me one kind. As if he wants to be flogging me for no reason, as if I am carrying shit inside my cheeks and when I open mouth to talk, the whole place be smelling of it.

“Sah?” I say, kneeling down and putting my hand in my back. “You call me?”

“Come close,” Papa say.

I know he want to tell me something bad. I can see it inside his eyes; his eyeballs have the dull of a brown stone that been sitting inside hot sun for too long. He have the same eyes when he was telling me, three years ago, that I must stop my educations. That time, I was the most old of all in my class and all the childrens was always calling me “Aunty.” I tell you true, the day I stop school and the day my mama was dead is the worst day of my life.

When Papa ask me to move closer, I am not answering him because our parlor is the small of a Mazda car. Did he want me to move closer and be kneeling inside his mouth? So, I kneel in the same place and wait for him to be talking his mind.

Papa make a noise with his throat and lean on the wood back of the sofa with no cushion. The cushion have spoil because our last born, Kayus, he have done too many piss inside it. Since the boy was a baby, he been pissing as if it is a curse. The piss mess the cushion, so Mama make Kayus to be sleeping on it for pillow.

We have a tee-vee in our parlor; it didn't work. Born-boy, our first born, he find the tee-vee inside dustbin two years back when he was working a job as dustbin collector officer in the next village. We are only putting it there for fashion. It is looking good, sitting like a handsome prince inside our parlor, in the corner beside the front door. We are even putting small flower vase on top it; be like a crown on the prince head. When we have a visitor, Papa will be doing as if it is working and be saying, “Adunni, come and put evening news for Mr. Bada to watch.”

And me, I will be responding, “Papa, the remote-controlling is missing.” Then Papa will shake his head and say to Mr. Bada, “Those useless childrens, they have lost the remote-controlling again. Come, let us sit outside, drink, and forget the sorrows of our country, Nigeria.”

Mr. Bada must be a big fool if he didn’t know that it is a lie.

We have one standing fan too, two of the fan blade is missing so it is always blowing air, which is making the whole parlor too hot. Papa like to be sitting in front of the fan in the evening, crossing his feets at his ankles and drinking from the bottle that have become his wife since Mama have dead.

“Adunni, your mama have dead,” Papa say after a moment. I can smell the drink on his body as he is talking. Even when Papa didn’t drink, his skin and sweat still smell.

“Yes, Papa. I know,” I say. Why is he telling me something I have already know? Something that have cause a hole inside my heart and fill it with block of pain that I am dragging with me to everywhere? How can I ever be forgetting how my mama was coughing blood, red and thick with spit bubbles, inside my hand every day for three months? When I am closing my eyes to sleep at night, I still see the blood, sometimes I taste the salt of it.

“I know, Papa,” I say again. “Have another something bad happen?” Papa sigh. “They have told us to be going.”

“To be going to where?” Sometimes I have worry for Papa. Since Mama have dead, he keep saying things that didn’t make sense, and sometimes he talk to hissself, cry to hissself too when he think nobody is hearing.

“You want me to fetch water for your morning baff?” I ask. “There is morning food too, fresh bread with sweet groundnut.”

“Community rent is thirty thousan’ naira,” Papa say. “If we cannot pay the moneys, we must find another place to live.” Thirty thousand naira is very plenty moneys. I know Papa cannot find that moneys even if he is searching the whole of the Nigeria because even my school fees moneys of seven thousand, Papa didn’t have. It was Mama who was paying for school fees and rent moneys and feeding money and everything money before she was dead.

“Where we will find that kind money?” I ask.

“Morufu,” Papa say. “You know him? He come here yesterday. To see me.”

“Morufu the taxi driver?” Morufu is a old man taxi driver in our village with the face of a he-goat. Apart from his two wives, Morufu is having four childrens that didn’t go to school. They just be running

around the village stream in their dirty pant, pulling sugar cartons with string, playing *suwe* and clapping their hand until the skin about to peel off. Why was Morufu visiting our house? What was he finding?

“Yes,” Papa say with a tight smile. “He is a good man, that Morufu. He surprise me yesterday when he say he will pay community rent for us. All the thirty thousan’.”

“That is good?” I ask the question because it didn’t make sense. Because I know that no man will be paying for another somebody’s rent unless he is wanting something. Why will Morufu pay our community rent? What was he wanting? Or is he owing Papa moneys from before in the past? I look my papa, my eyes filling with hope that it is not the thing I am thinking. “Papa?”

“Yes.” Papa wait, swallow spit, and wipe his front head sweat. “The rent moneys is . . . is among your *owo-ori*.”

“My *owo-ori*? You mean my bride-price?” My heart is starting to break because I am only fourteen years going fifteen and I am not marrying any foolish stupid old man because I am wanting to go back to school and learn teacher work and become a adult woman and have moneys to be driving car and living in fine house with cushion sofa and be helping my papa and my two brothers. I don’t want to marry any mens or any boys or any another person forever, so I ask Papa again, talking real slow so he will be catching every word I am saying and not mistaking me in his answer: “Papa, is this bride-price for me or for another person?”

And my papa, he nod his head slowly slow, not minding the tears standing in my eyes or the opening wide of my mouth, as he is saying: “The bride-price is for you, Adunni. You will be marrying Morufu next week.”

CHAPTER 2

When the sun climb down from the sky and hide hisself deep in the crack of the night, I sit up on my raffia mat, kick Kayus leg away from my feets, and rest my back on the wall of our room.

My head been stoning my mind with many questions since this morning, questions that are not having answers. What is it meaning, to be the wife of a man with two wifes and four childrens? What is making Morufu to want another wife on top the already two? And Papa, why is he wanting to sell me to a old man with no any thinking of how I am feeling? Why didn't he keep the promise he make to Mama before she dead?

I rub my chest, where the too many questions is causing a sore, climb to my feets with a sigh, and walk to the window. Outside, the moon is red, hanging too low the sky, be as if God pluck out His angry eye and throw it inside our compound.

There are fireflies in the air this night, their body is flashing a light of many colors: green and blue and yellow, every one of them dancing and blinking in the dark. Long ago, Mama tell me that fireflies are always bringing good messages to peoples at night. "A firefly is the eyeballs of a angel," she say. "See that one there, the one perching on the leaf of that tree, Adunni. That one be bringing a message of moneys for us." I didn't sure what message that firefly was wanting to bring that long time ago, but I know it didn't bring no money.

When Mama was dead, a light off itself inside of me. I keep myself in that dark for many months until one day Kayus find me in the room where I was sorrowing and weeping, and with his eyes round, full of fear, he beg me to stop my crying because my crying is causing him a heart pain.

That day, I pick up my sorrow and lock it in my heart so that I can be strong and care for Kayus and Papa. But sometimes, like today, the sorrow climb out of my heart and stick his tongue in my face.

When I close my eyes on some days, I see my mama as a rose flower: a yellow and red and purple rose with shining leaves. And if I sniff a deep

sniff, I can catch her smell too. That sweet smell of a rosebush sitting around a mint tree, of the coconut soap in her hair just after a washing at Agan waterfalls.

My mama was having long hair which she will plait with black threads and roll around her head like a thick rope, looking like two or three small tires around her head. Sometimes she will remove the threads, let the hair climb down to her back so that I can brush it with her wooden brush. Sometimes, she will take the brush from my hand, make me to sit on a bench in the outside by the well, and twist up my own hair with so much coconut oil that I go about the whole village smelling like a frying food.

She didn't old, my mama, only forty-something years of age before she die, and every day I feel a paining in my spirit for her quiet laugh and voice, for the soft of her arms, for her eyes that say more things than her mouth ever speak.

She didn't sick for too long, thank God. Just six and half months of coughing and coughing until the cough eat up her whole flesh and make her shoulders be like the handle of our parlor door.

Before that devil sickness, Mama was always keeping busy. Always doing the-this and the-that for the everybody in the village. She will fry one hundred puff-puffs every day to sell in Ikati market, sometimes picking fifty of it, the best of the gold-brown ones from the hot oil, and tell me to take it to Iya, one old woman living in Agan village.

I didn't too sure of how Iya and Mama are knowing each other, or what is her real name because "Iya" is a Yoruba word for old woman. All I know is my mama was always sending me to give food to Iya and all the older womens who are sick in the village around Ikati: hot amala and okra soup with crayfish or beans and *dodo*, the plantain soft, oily.

One time, I bring puff-puff to Iya, after Mama was too sick to travel far, and when I reach home that night and ask Mama why she keep sending food to peoples when she is feeling too sick to travel far, Mama say, "Adunni, you must do good for other peoples, even if you are not well, even if the whole world around you is not well."

It was Mama who show me how to pray to God, to put thread in my hair, to wash my cloth with no soap, and to change my under-cloth when my monthly visitor was first coming.

My throat tight itself as I hear her voice in my head now, the faint and weak of it, as she was begging Papa to don't give me to any man for marriage if she die of this sickness. I hear Papa's voice too, shaking with fear but fighting to be strong as he was answering her: "Stop this nonsense dying talk. Nobody is dying anything. Adunni will not marry

any man, you hear me? She will go to school and do what you want, I swear to you! Just do quick and better yourself!”

But Mama didn't do quick and better herself. She was dead two days after Papa make that promise, and now I am marrying a old man because Papa is forgetting all the things he make promise to Mama. I am marrying Morufu because Papa is needing moneys for food and community rent and nonsense.

I taste the salt of my tears at the memorying of it all, and when I go back to my mat and close my eyes, I see Mama as a rose flower. But this rose is no more having yellow and red and purple colors with shining leafs. This flower be the brown of a wet leaf that suffer a stamping from the dirty feets of a man that forget the promise he make to his dead wife.