



Miss Appropriate

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Retold Fairy Tales

Miss Appropriate: Another take on Dayrell's "Of the Fat Woman who Melted Away" by Tuere T. S. Ganges

"Daryl? Honey? Would you be a peach and fix me a bowl of Ivy, your skinny wife's, stew?" Delphine asked her strong and powerful husband for yet another act of kindness.

Like always, he obliged. "Yes, Delphine, my most plump and delicate wife," Daryl sang with the twinkle in his eye Delphine loved more than anything. Then off he ran out of Delphine's hut to Ivy's where his skinny wife stirred her pot of stew with one hand while balancing a nursing baby to her breast with the other.

"Daryl," Ivy sighed acknowledgment without taking her eyes off the swirling bits of yam in her stew. She'd been focusing on the stirring to keep her mind off the stinging pain from her nipple. (Her youngest son was a fierce and greedy sucker.) But now, with her husband's presence in her hut, Ivy welcomed the pressure of her baby's nubby gums clamped upon her areola to mask the inner-wincing of her reaction to what her husband had surely come to request.

"Fix Delphine a bowl of stew." His words were cold and void of love. That was nothing new. He'd always been distant with her, mechanical, since the day he'd approached her parents and threw down her dowry at her father's feet.

Ivy sucked her teeth in acquiescence then motioned for her oldest child, her only daughter, to take Delphine's bowl from her father's hands as she'd been doing since Daryl arrived at their compound with his fat wife in the middle of the night two years ago.

Ivy poured stew into the carved, wooden bowl with jagged stars etched in an uneven pattern, and looked away as her own child took part in service the lazy, more cherished wife.

Daryl took the bowl from his eldest daughter and turned without sharing one kind word in her direction.

Ivy sucked her teeth again and began to mutter to no one in particular. “She can’t cook because she’s made out of oil and the heat will make her melt away. She can’t work the farm because she’s made out of oil and the sun will make her melt away. Heh-heh, two years and no children? She’s made of oil! He probably lay on top her and slide off her oily belly!” Ivy threw back her head and laughed. Her braids and beads bounced upon her shoulders. Her next youngest son tugged at her skirt for his turn to nurse.

Ivy looped her pinky into the corner of her suckling son’s mouth to break the vacuum and free her pained nipple. She left the warmth of the bubbling stewpot and placed the sleeping baby on his mat. She put out her arms for the next child to take the next nipple. At least he’d learned to be gentle. She nursed him first when Daryl set out for a third wife when Ivy looked forward to someone new joining their growing clan and taking on some of the work that never seemed to get done completely. That milk (before Delphine, the third wife) was surely sweet and that son was fed with love and hope.

She watched the sleeping child, the youngest conceived in Daryl’s act of dominance after Ivy questioned why Delphine had yet to join the family during the planting season. That one was growing fat from her angry milk. He reminded her that he’d be the most unruly child later every time he gnashed his gums around as he nursed. Or when he’d wake her up just after she’d fallen asleep with his alarming cries each night.

“Delphine asks about her chores,” a young girl stood at Ivy’s threshold. She was Delphine’s youngest sister sent along with her to work in her place so the new, and favored, wife could sit in the shade and not melt away.

“I don’t think it is appropriate for you to do your sister’s chores,” Ivy barked. Her youngest was strapped to her back. She held her hoe, basket, and water pot fashioned from a hollowed gourd while her daughter managed the other three sons so that they stood in line with their water pots and baskets. Everyone had a job to do that was right for his or her size. Delphine’s sister was only about five years older than Ivy’s eldest child, she couldn’t really fulfill Delphine’s share of chores, and Daryl never insisted that either really tried.

“Delphine says that our mother’s rules about her delicate condition must be followed, therefore, Delphine says it is appropriate for me to fulfill her chores. Your husband agrees.”

“Well,” Ivy scoffed, “Miss Appropriate and the world she thinks belongs to her. Everyone caters to everything she wants! Makes everyone else’s lives more difficult! Daryl thinks she’s so special, but what does she do? She shows up with you in the middle of the night! She says, ‘I like Ivy’s stew. I want Ivy’s stew.’ And she gets some of MY stew! She says, ‘Oh, I can’t work but my sister can do it for me.’ And YOU do some of the work as she proudly smiles as though her fat fingers had been wrapped around the handle of the hoe! What next? Are you to have her babies and pass them over as though she’d pushed them out of her own loins?” Ivy sucked her teeth.

Delphine's sister lowered her eyes. She held her breath.

Ivy noticed. "No! I was just talking. No!"

The young girl's eyes welled-up with tears. "Delphine cries every night because she has no son. 'My beauty may fade,' she cries, 'and then, when I am no longer beautiful and have no son, my husband will beat me like his skinny wife and his ugly wife.' She wants me to lay with your husband as he sleeps and it too dark to see. She wants me to hide my belly as she complains about her own. She will send for our mother when it is time and then Delphine will walk out of the hut with the baby and accept gifts under the shade of the tree."

Ivy felt pain in her heart for the girl. She could have been her own sister and the sorrow would have felt just as deep.

"Ivy? I really hoped to have my own husband one day. Even if that happens, he will return me once he sees that I will no longer be a virgin and the rest of my life will be lived in shame."

Ivy sucked her teeth. "We're nothing but cattle to them! They can have a different wife for every night of the week but beat and shame us for not being pure? How can Delphine even think of this scheme? Her own sister? How can she even think it will work? We must stop her and this madness."

A few days later, Daryl announced he'd be traveling to the neighboring village to speak to the council about the inevitable arrival of the British missionaries who were known to show up and impose their gods on others before taking whatever they wanted once tribesmen argued over the way life was and the way life could be. Ivy had hosted the elders the week before by preparing a lovely spread of kola nut and yams before taking her space by Daryl as the head wife. She heard their fears. She heard them argue over what to do and whether they should do anything at all. They argued well into the night with the only agreed upon resolution to talk to the neighboring village. If Ivy knew her husband and men like she thought she did, Daryl would not be home until the next morning. It was perfect for her plan to get rid of Delphine and save her little sister.

Ivy helped Daryl prepare for the journey and set him on his way before the cock crowed once. She then set to wake the children for a sunny day in the field. As always, Delphine's little sister stood in her threshold asking the usual.

"Delphine asks about her chores."

"Yes, sister. Tell Delphine that she is to do her own share of chores today. You can tend to the children."

The girl gasped. "Ivy? No! Delphine will melt away!"

Ivy looked at her blankly. "Have you ever seen Delphine melt? Women don't melt. We are strong and we work hard. Men believe we are weak and your mother played along. The sun is barely crowning the trees. Have Delphine come here."

The girl sulked away and did as she was told.

“Ivy?” Delphine demanded. Her full, plump frame filled her threshold. Her rage filled the air. “What is this I hear that you command I do my own chores?”

“As Daryl is away, I am in charge. I say everyone pulls her weight today.”

“I don’t think it appropriate. Everyone knows I will melt away in the sun. Daryl will be disappointed when he returns and I am dead.”

Ivy sucked her teeth. “Is it appropriate that everyone do your work while you get all of the adoration? Get over yourself! You’re not going to melt, silly woman. Get a basket, hoe, and some water. There will be many yams today.”

Delphine began to cry. “But everyone knows I will melt and must have things done for me. It has always been this way.”

“But must you claim other’s work as your own? You fear the possibility of melting as your young sister works until her fingers bleed. I, and the ugly wife work until our backs ache so badly, I wish to die, and then I must cook for my family. You send for MY stew! Get to the field!”

Delphine cried, “I did not ask to be made of oil! I did not ask to be so fat and beautiful that many men would ask for my hand. I did not ask for my mother to set forth rules that I never labor in the sun! You are so skinny and so cruel! I hope Daryl beats you twice for my death and returns you to your family in shame!”

Ivy sucked her teeth, “Just as your sister will have to do once her husband returns her because she gave birth to a child you will claim as your own?”

The younger sister had been standing with her head bowed as Delphine fussed and wagged her finger in Ivy’s face. Upon hearing Ivy betray her confidence, she glared through her tears.

Ivy covered her mouth with her hand as though the act could suck up the words she’d said. It didn’t work.

“You told her?” Delphine yelled at her sister. “After I brought you into my home and shared everything I’ve been given?”

“Shared?” the young girl shrieked. Everyone jumped within her skin because no one had ever heard the girl’s voice rise above a whisper. “I get a few spoonfuls of Ivy’s stew if you remember I am there as you devour it greedily! These bracelets I wear are only because you could not get them over your palms! I must sleep in the coldest part of the hut! I should be so grateful that I give you my child and my hopes for having my own husband?” The girl picked up her hoe, the hoe she’d been using in the fields as she did Delphine’s share of the chores, and she handed it to Delphine.

Delphine raised her chin proudly, grabbed the hoe, and headed for the field where she worked until she

melted away except for one toe that had been covered by a leaf.

When Daryl looked for his beloved Delphine the next day, the sister confessed the whole story and cowered in wait for the beating she deserved but did not receive. Instead, Daryl ran in a rage to Ivy's hut.

"Ivy? You forced Delphine into the sun? I have nothing left but her toe that was under a leaf!"

"Daryl!" Ivy responded, "did you ever think to ask why she never made herself clothes from leaves to protect herself from the sun? She could have done her share of work on the farm! You let her take advantage of everyone just because her mother told you that Delphine could melt away? How stupid you are to believe such a thing!"

Daryl became more enraged as he clenched both fists and yelled, "but she DID melt away!"

Ivy sucked her teeth and sighed with annoyance. "She just wanted to get out of doing more work!"

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