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Opening Extract from...

THE CELLAR

Written by Minette Walters

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Minette
Walters

The
Cellar



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One

Muna's fortunes changed for the better on the day that Mr and Mrs Songoli's younger son failed to come home from school. Not immediately. Immediately, she felt great fear as Yetunde Songoli wailed and screamed and beat her with a rod because the ten-year-old wasn't in his room. It was Mr Songoli who put a stop to the punishment. Be sensible, he ordered his wife. The police will ask questions if they see bruises on her arms.

Shortly afterwards, Yetunde moved Muna to a room with a bed and a window. She pulled a brightly coloured dress over the girl's head and bound matching ribbons into her hair, hissing at her all the while

for being a witch and a demon. Muna must have brought a curse on them. Why else had Abiola not come home?

Left alone, Muna stared at her reflection in the mirror on the wall. Was this what Mr Songoli had meant by being ‘sensible’? To make Muna look pretty? It was very confusing. After a long time, she heard the sound of cars drawing up outside, the doorbell ringing and unknown voices speaking in the hall. She would have retreated to a darkened corner to squat on her haunches if Yetunde hadn’t ordered her to sit on the bed. It was uncomfortable – her back began to hurt with the strain of staying upright – but she didn’t move. Immobility had become a friend over the years. It allowed her to go unnoticed.

She was beginning to hope she’d been forgotten until she heard footsteps on the stairs. She recognised Yetunde Songoli’s heavy tread but not the lighter one that followed behind. She stared impassively at the door, watching it open to reveal Yetunde’s great, bloated body and a slim white woman, dressed in a shirt and trousers. Muna would have taken her for a man if her voice, when she spoke, hadn’t been soft.

Yetunde lowered herself to the bed and put an

affectionate arm around Muna's waist. She was so heavy that the mattress dipped beneath her weight and Muna could do nothing but lean against her. She was too small and thin to resist the woman's pull. Don't show fear, Yetunde warned in Hausa. Smile when this policewoman smiles at you, and speak in answer to the questions I ask you. It won't matter what you say. She's white English and doesn't understand Hausa.

Smile. Muna did her best to ape the soft curve of the white's lips but it was a long time since she'd done anything so unnatural. *Speak.* She opened her mouth and moved her tongue but nothing came out. She was too afraid to voice aloud what she practised in whispers to herself each night. Yetunde would know for certain she had demons if she said something in English.

'How old is she?' the white asked.

Yetunde stroked Muna's hand. 'Fourteen. She's my first-born but her brain was damaged at birth and she finds it hard to learn.' Tears dripped down the bloated cheeks. 'Was this not tragedy enough? Must my precious Abiola be another?'

'There's no reason to think the worst yet, Mrs Songoli. It's not unusual for ten-year-old boys to

truant from time to time. I expect he's at a friend's house.'

'He's never truanted before. The school should have called my husband at work when they didn't get me. We pay them enough. It's irresponsible to leave a message on an answerphone.'

The white crouched down to put herself on the same level as Muna. 'You say you've been out all day, but what about your daughter? Where was she?'

'Here. We have permission to teach her at home. A Hausa speaker comes to tutor her each morning.' Yetunde's bejewelled fingers moved from caressing Muna's hand to stroking her cheek. 'Children can be so cruel. My husband wouldn't want her teased for her disability.'

'Does she have any English?'

'None. She struggles even to speak Hausa.'

'Why didn't her tutor answer the phone when the school rang?'

'It's not her job. She wouldn't take a call intended for someone else.' Yetunde pressed a tissue to her eyes. 'It's so rare for me to go out. Any other day I would have been here.'

'You said the first you knew that something was wrong was when you returned at six o'clock and

listened to your messages.' The crouching white examined Muna's face. 'Yet it must have worried your daughter that Abiola didn't come home at his usual time. Will you ask her why she didn't tell you as soon as you opened the door?'

Yetunde pinched Muna's waist. She's talking about Abiola. Look at me and pretend concern. Say something.

Muna turned her head and whispered the only words she was permitted to use. Yes, Princess. No, Princess. Is there something I can do for you, Princess?

Yetunde dabbed at her eyes again. 'She says she thought he was with our older son, Olubayo. He takes his little brother to the park sometimes.' A great sigh issued from her chest. 'I should have been here. So much time has been wasted.'

Muna wondered if the white would believe such a lie, and kept her gaze lowered for fear the blue eyes would read in hers that Yetunde was being deceitful. Muna's life was less painful for being thought too simple to learn any language but Hausa.

'You realise we need to search the house and garden, Mrs Songoli?' said the white, rising to her feet. 'It's standard procedure when a child goes

missing. Abiola may have hidden himself away rather than go to school. We'll make it as easy on you as we can but I suggest you take your daughter downstairs so that your family can sit together in one room.'

If Muna had known how to see humour in a situation, she might have laughed to hear Yetunde order Olubayo to treat her as his sister. But humour and laughter were as alien to her as smiling and speaking. Instead she thought of the kicks and slaps Olubayo would give her once the whites had left. He was big for a thirteen-year-old, and Muna feared for herself when he changed from boy to man. So many times recently she'd looked up from her work to find him staring at her and rubbing his groin against the door frame.

From beneath lowered lids, she watched the expressions on Mr and Mrs Songoli's faces. How anxious they were, she thought, but was it Abiola's disappearance that was worrying them or having police in their house? As Yetunde had brought her downstairs, Muna had seen that the door to the cellar was open. A bulb now glowed in the overhead light at the top of the steps, banishing the darkness she'd lived in and showing her that her mattress and

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small bag of possessions had been removed from the stone floor at the bottom.

She thought how harmless her prison looked, brightly lit and with nothing to show that anyone had slept there, and it gave her a small hope that whites were kinder than blacks. Why would the Songolis hide the truth about her otherwise? Just once, Muna shifted her glance fractionally to look at the woman in trousers. She was asking Olubayo about Abiola's friends, and Muna felt a shock of fear to find the blue eyes staring at her and not at the boy. They seemed clever and wise and Muna trembled to think this person knew she understood what was being said.

Would she guess that Muna had listened to the message being left on the answerphone and had known all day that Abiola had not arrived at his school?

The searchers returned, shaking their heads and saying there was no sign of the child although they'd found a mobile telephone on charge in his room. Yetunde identified it as Abiola's and began to wail again because her son hadn't had it with him. She rocked to and fro issuing high ululations from her mouth, while her husband strode angrily about the

carpet, cursing the day he'd brought his family to this godforsaken country. He bunched his fists and thrust his blood-infused face into the white woman's, demanding to know what the police were doing.

Muna would have cowered before such ferocity, but not the white. She took Ebuka calmly by the arm and returned him to his chair to weep for his beloved son. She seemed to have great power over men. Where Yetunde stamped and raged to get what she wanted, the white gave quiet orders that were obeyed. She used the telephone to request a child-protection officer to examine Abiola's computer and smartphone. She asked Yetunde and Ebuka for photographs and videos of the boy. Bags containing his clothes, toothbrush and comb were taken away. Sandwiches and pizzas were brought in.

All the while she asked questions of the family. Had Abiola been unhappy recently? Was he bullied? Did he shut himself in his room, spending long hours on the internet? Was he a boy of secrets? How much did his parents know about his friends? Did he run with a gang? Was he taken to school each morning or did he make his own way? Who had seen him off that morning?

The picture Yetunde and Ebuka painted in their

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answers was not one that Muna recognised. They described Abiola as a popular boy who walked to class with his brother each morning, keen to begin his lessons. They made no mention that he wet his bed most nights and slapped and kicked his mother if she asked him to do something he didn't like. He had to be bribed with sugary foods to go to school, fed to him in titbits from Yetunde's fingers. It was why mother and son were as fat and bloated as each other. For every sticky sweet Yetunde gave Abiola, she took one herself.

This trouble had come upon them, Muna thought, because Mr Songoli had cancelled the car that had driven the boys to class each morning and brought them back each afternoon. He was angered at how spoilt they'd become and told them they must learn to want their education as strongly as the bush children in Africa. Now Olubayo told terrible lies about the happenings that morning, swearing hand on heart that he had walked Abiola to the school gates. Yet Muna knew this couldn't be true. Olubayo had so much hatred for Abiola, and Abiola so much hatred for him, that they never did anything together.

Perhaps the white didn't believe the story either for she asked Yetunde if she'd seen the boys leave.

And of course Yetunde said she had. She would never admit to her husband that she'd been sitting before her mirror, massaging expensive bleaching cream into her skin. Such wasteful extravagance annoyed Ebuka.

'I'd like to ask your daughter the same question, Mrs Songoli. Will you put it to her?'

Yetunde raised her voice. Look up, Muna. This woman is asking if you saw Olubayo and Abiola leave this morning. Nod your head and say something. She expects you to speak.

Muna did as she was asked. Yes, Princess. No, Princess. Is there something I can do for you, Princess? But even as she whispered in Hausa she longed for the courage to say the words she practised to herself each night.

'Please help me. My name is Muna. Mr and Mrs Songoli stole me when I was eight years old. I would like to go home but I don't know who my parents are or where I come from.'