

LEVEL 3.2

THE TALKING CLOTH

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Aunt Phoebe has things. Things and things and things. "A collector of life," Mom calls her. Daddy says she lives in a junk pile. "Reminds me of your room, Amber," he says.

I like visiting Aunt Phoebe. There's no place in her house to be bored, and she always gives me mocha to drink. Daddy says it will stunt my growth. Aunt Phoebe tells him, "Mocha is named after a city in Yemen, and this child just grew an inch or two, inside, for knowing that." Aunt Phoebe knows things. . . .

Today we sit in her kitchen and she tells about

the basket of folded cloths in the corner. "I bought these in Africa," she says. Daddy laughs. "I figured that was laundry you hadn't put away." She tells me stories, about her "collection of life" we visit. I sip hot mocha and listen, imagining the people and places she has seen.

Aunt Phoebe smiles and takes a cloth from the top of the basket. She unfolds it with a flourish - a long magic carpet runs like a white river across the floor. "What do you do you do with such a long cloth?" I ask. You wear it," says Aunt Phoebe. "It tells how you are. This cloth talks." "How can it do that?" By its color and what the symbols mean." Aunt Phoebe tells me. "This is adinkra cloth from Ghana. It's made by the Ashanti people and at one time only royalty wore

it," she says. Aunt Phoebe rubs the cloth against my face. It's silk and feels smooth. I imagine myself an Ashanti princess...

The cloth is embroidered in sections and hand printed all over with small black symbols. Like words. A white cloth means joy - yellow, gold or riches. Green stands for newness and growth. Blue is a sign of love, but red is worn only for sad times, like funerals or during wars. "Maybe I should wear red when your dad, comes to visit." Aunt phoebe says. Daddy laughs and pours himself some mocha. He likes to listen too. I know it. Aunt phoebe tells the meaning of the symbols on her cloth. One says, "except God I fear none," That's called Gye Nyame. Another is called Obi nka Obie. "I offend no one without cause." Each symbol

speaks of something different, like faith, power, or love.

I imagine cloths with my own symbols on them. Fred - he's my little brother - should be dressed in green for "go" with grubby little handprints all over. Everyone can see what kind of a mess that kid is. Aunt Phoebe's little brother is my daddy. "Let's see," she says. "Guess we could wrap him in gray pinstripe cloth for seriousness, with squares on it!" We all laugh, imagining that.

I ask if I can put on the adinkra cloth. "Of course you can, baby," Aunt Phoebe says. "When you're older, you can have it for your own." She wraps the adinkra three times around my waist, then across one shoulder - and still it drags on

the ground. "A cloth this long is a sign of wealth." she tells me. Daddy says, "Amber, you'll need to drink a lot of mocha to grow tall enough." "Well," says Aunt Phoebe, "this child has grown a lot, inside, just today!" I smile, thinking of it. This cloth means joy. I am an Ashanti princess now, and here is all my family gathered around me.