

She had to pee. That was what woke her up that morning. Not the heat. Not the whizzing sound of the solar standing fan a few inches away from the bed. Not even the prickly feel of Adam's toes poking at her thighs. She felt her bladder being pressed into, and after opening her eyes and rolling into a position where she could sit up and then stand with minimal effort, she headed for the bathroom.

She usually savored moving through the apartment alone like this, in the death of the night or the earliest hours of the day. She would move through the rooms in the dark, feeling her way as she went, and try to notice something new about the cold tiles beneath her feet, the texture of the walls, the taste of the air, and how each space contoured itself as she moved and turned, the smell and feel of it. It was even better on days when the power was down and the street bulbs or lights from neighbor apartments didn't filter through the blinds like fireflies and taint the unlight as she stepped through it; always with wonder, an intangible thing tangibling very hard in her chest as she waited to discover something before unfound. But right now, she could feel her thighs clamping together, so instead, she headed for the bathroom door, walked in, and after taking a few steps, loosened her wrapper and sat on the toilet.

When she was sure that the last drop was the last drop, she reached for the bidet and unclasped it from its stand. After she placed the bidet back, she put her right hand on the wall and lifted herself before she walked over to the side of the wall with the light switch, turned it on, walked back to the toilet, and tore off some toilet paper to wipe herself with. When the whiteness only showed a faint stain of yellow, she nodded to herself and threw it in the trashcan, better safe than sorry. Then she sat on the toilet again and washed herself with the bidet.

In the bedroom, she stood over Adam and watched him sleep. There was a pillow fort that spilt up her side of the bed from his, was meant to anyway. But naturally, just like Adam, one of the pillows was already in his arms, pressed to his chest like a lover or a child while his leg was stretched over another one, crossing into her territory. She wanted to yank that hairy leg and fling it away from her side, and she could too, he was that skinny. But mostly, she wanted to laugh. She could no longer remember what she had been so mad about when she set up the pillow border while he stood and stared at her with his skinny arms hanging helplessly by his side. Actually she did. She just couldn't be sure why it had made her that angry. She took off her wrapper, threw it on the bed, picked up an abaya from the pile of clothes on the sofa by the closet and after pulling it on, she walked out of the bedroom.

Walking through a house in the dark was not as dangerous as it sounded, and she did not only think that because she had lived in this apartment for half a decade and could recognize every room even if she was bundled up like a pile of loose fabric and thrown from one part to another. All she needed was her feet on the floor, her palms on a wall, or even when all that was impossible, she knew she just had to be still, feel the room in motion and look for it without seeing it. She would be standing still in a dark room yet walking in another one, and then she knew she would recognize it and call it by its name. As long as she had been there before and knew it. A thing that had a name was a thing that could always be found.

She was in the hallway that led to the study now. Even if she had not been counting her footsteps or realized when she turned into a narrower space, she would have known because of how damp the wallpaper felt. She turned the lock of the door, pushed it open and walked in. The darkness here was different and felt more dimensional. The night from outside pushed into the dark of the study through the huge windows of the room. This had been the one place in the house that Adam had stood his ground, all of his body even. I don't understand why you feel the need for the house to be some cavern but I will not have heavy blinds in the study, he had said while the man who had come around to take the measurements for the curtains stood awkwardly with the tape around his neck and the pencil hanging from his lips like a giant toothpick. There has to be somewhere where there is always natural lighting, and I would prefer it to be where I work. Then his voice had softened. Zainab, I'm actually begging you. I'll be painting here and I need to see it. I can't see with just light bulbs.

When the room suddenly flooded with light, she closed her startled eyes as she steadied herself. Adam must have left the study lights on last night when he came to bed, and before the generator went off a few hours later. She kept her eyes closed as she moved till her fingers turned the lights off on the switch. Shutting the door of the study behind her also muffled the sound of the alarm that always rang through the estate when power came on. Going by the new schedule that the power company was working with these days, she realized that she must have been up and walking through the house for longer than she thought. Her Apple watch confirmed her suspicion; 6.40 am and way past fajr, she was a bit surprised that Adam was still asleep.

Zainab was born the same weekend they shot Anini at Bar beach. Whenever her mother told her that story, and she often did, she always led with the radio announcements. The ones that notified the general public once there would be a public execution. She told Zainab how her father had wanted to go alone, saying the gory sight was not fit for intending mothers but he wanted to see for himself that the armed robber who was as famous for his supernatural powers as he was for his murderous reputation didn't escape death this time. But she had insisted because she also had a right to witness Anini's ignoble end, even though, as she whispered to her daughter with a mischievous chuckle, the actual reason she didn't want to stay at home was because she didn't want to be alone with her mother-in-law who thought she used her pregnancy as an excuse to be lazy and order her husband around.

They were only a few minutes away from the execution site when her water broke and she started feeling contractions. Zainab's father had been trying to parallel park. Everything after that happened in a rush, but she remembers the sound of the gunshots and the noise that followed as the car pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the hospital. Zainab was born no later than 20 minutes after her mother got checked in. She was 2 weeks early but she made up for it by giving her mother a quick delivery. 'You were in a hurry but, mashallah, God still had to take a great evil away from this world before he let you arrive in it', her mother would say, gently touching her young daughter's face.

When Adam later finds her, she's sitting on the sofa and distractedly scratching her scalp through the holes in the hairnet she has on to keep her braids in place. Her legs are up and resting on a footstool. The day has broken and the living room has taken on the hue of a forest on fire. The lack of light gap blockers in the spaces where the sun scatters through was another compromise she had made for Adam who insisted that they were unhealthy even though she had earlier agreed to light filtering curtains instead of the blackout ones she preferred. He stands and watches the way the sunlight bathes her in a way that makes her look almost ethereal for a while and then readies himself to make his presence known. Zainab is easily startled and he doesn't want to risk anything that would set her off.

After she hears his footsteps, she angles her body on the sofa without fully turning but enough for her to see him walking towards her.

How far?, she smiles with her eyes blinking softly in a way that reassures him that his crimes the previous night have been forgiven and it's safe for him to approach her.

I'm okay, he says. He feels his shoulders relax and takes his hands out of his pocket to stretch.

When did you get up? I woke up when they brought light and you were gone.

Not that long ago, I was stretching my legs for a bit before I spend another day on this sofa doing nothing.

He smiles, then a small frown crinkles on his brow when he sees her put both hands on her high belly. Are you okay?

I don't know, she says as she rubs both sides of her distended stomach. Then she looks up and sees his face and hurriedly shakes her head. No, no, I am fine, Adam. I just, I don't know, I had a feeling.

Did he move again?

We don't know if it's a he or she, Adam. But no, it wasn't that kind of a feeling. Actually, babe, can you make me some oats? I just realized that I'm starving.

Well, it is better than you calling our child a 'it', he says. But no wahala, which berries do you want it with?

No o, no berries. Do we still have bell peppers? Please help me cut small and add to it when it is done. Add onions too, the purple one not the white one, that white one is too sweet.

He nods and starts to walk to walk away. He is in the kitchen for less than a minute when he hears her yell. Adam, don't forget to add salt before you cook the oats o! You always forget to add salt!

On the days they talk about how things came apart after that moment, Adam always makes a note to mention how quiet she had been when he came back into the living room holding the food tray and found her on her knees in a little pool.

She was just there, he would say to whoever was willing to listen. I was slicing green peppers in the kitchen, and Zainab was outside squeezing her face with her eyes closed while her body poured water.

He doesn't talk about how she passed out in the car when they get held up in traffic and the heatwave proved to be harder than her contractions. He leaves out details of the hawkers who after offering her wares and was firmly rejected because he didn't want to buy a soda or bottled water, stood by his car and stared at the unconscious pregnant woman in the backseat. He had waited for her to say something so he could explain his circumstances but then he saw an opening in the free lane next to him and cut in. It wasn't until he was about a mile away that he saw the small mob that had gathered in his rearview mirror and realized what he escaped.

This is what Zainab remembered when her eyes closed in the car. That she had been there before, here, this or that particular texture of nothing. That the last time, she was drinking a can of ginger ale and she got the call. The specifics change but what is true doesn't; and that time, what choked her in her throat was not the abstractness of grief. That the fizziness in her stomach crawled up her oesophagus, sprouted and mutated into a tree somewhere in her throat. The tree had branches but no leaves because death cannot grow a tree that grows a thing that lives. That these branches extended themselves and found form in the vine of her tongue. That it was hard to swallow when there was a tree growing from your throat but even harder to unswallow. That the fizziness that was left in her guts pushed against the fizziness that had transformed in the hallways of her mouth. That before she passed out, while her body morphed and bent her over as she panted because she couldn't wail, she thought it strange that her father said her mother was gone when it was she who was actually away, trapped in another country while her mother died of a blood clot. Zainab knew it was the same here, or there. But she could not remember the particulars of how this or that place worked. So she reached out to touch it.

At the hospital, Zainab blinks in and out of focus. The consultant and nurses reassure a frantic Adam that the heatstroke has not harmed her or the baby, and her contractions will strengthen once she's fully awake. A midwife soon comes in and palpates Zainab's abdomen while Adam fills forms and tries to keep his hands steady. When he hears her call his name and looks up to find her fully awake and holding on to a nurse's arm as she tries to adjust to an upright position, he rests his back against a wall and lets out a shuddering breath as he begins to cry.

The door makes a strange sound when Adam returns from making more payments after requesting that Zainab be moved from the semi-private ward to a private room. He stands by the doorway and examines the door hinges with his nose scrunched up and his mouth making inaudible sounds while the nurse on duty checks the Zainab's vitals again.

What is this one again, he says while he moves the door back and forth. Nurse, is this how the doors here sound? Or Is there something wrong with this door?

Zainab lets out a drawn out hiss and Adam looks away from the nurse and at her.

You called him, abi? And don't annoy me, Adam. Don't act like you don't know what I'm saying.

Adam looks from little thing to little thing as the room can hold while Zainab glares at him. The nurse mutters something that they both don't hear as she leaves the room.

I'm sorry Zee, but I had to, he finally says, pushing his words out like a deep exhale. I would never forgive myself if I were in his shoes. Please, just calm down. He's in the car, he doesn't have to come in.

Okay. See if there's a doctor outside, that nurse that was in here didn't seem like she knew what she was doing.

Wait, are you okay? And did I do the right thing? You are not angry with me?

Adam.

Yes, babe.

Find me a doctor.

The black sweeps her away again, and she starts to find herself comfortable in this current. It's just like night surfing, only this time, she's somewhere that's actually new, not there, not her old spaces that she moves through in pretend novelty. Something sharp jerks her back into the fluorescence of the room and amidst the noise of the doctors yelling instructions, she recognizes the hands gripping her elbow.

He looks smaller than Zainab remembers, or maybe it is the sharpness of the room lights that make her squint and cuts him to a scale that her pupils can accommodate. The last time they had been in a room together and she had held up the old iPad to his aghast face while she swiped through pictures of him and another woman, of him and another woman with a child that could have been Zainab's twin, her father still dyed his hair black. The moles under his eyes were not so loose and limp, and his cheeks still had that fullness that other people recognized in her face

whenever she went to his old office and asked to see Prof. Now, instead of that telltale black streak on his hairline, there's just skin and a hint of silver and gold curls, enough to show a man that has gotten tired of fighting time or just couldn't.

Madam, can you hear me?

Zainab turns her head as much as she can to follow the voice. It is the same consultant who had come in to ask her questions after she woke up the first time. But he's not alone this time. There are other white coats behind him but all the white of the room, the florescent lights and their coats are too much for her and her eyes can only focus on one face at once.

Madam, We are going to have to wheel you in. You keep losing consciousness and we may need to proceed to C-section. We have discussed this with your husband but you need to know.

CS? She asked weakly.

Yes, madam, we are wheeling you into surgery now.

Outside the theatre, Adam paces back and forth until Prof pulls him into a hug and tells him to breathe.

Zainab won't need the surgery, he says while he rubs Adam's back. She just needs to wake up.

She's not where she thinks she is, and she'll wake up when she knows.

Prof, *I* don't know what you are talking about.

She does. And she'll wake up.

When Prof lets him go, Adam begins to pace again, slower this time. Prof walks up to a window and looks out into the parking lot. He and Adam had spoken at least once a week since the pregnancy tests returned positive. The young man had sent him a ‘Zainab would kill me if she knew I was talking to you, but I think you should know...’ text message that had made him randomly chuckle all through that day. He wasn’t surprised that Adam was scared of Zainab, his daughter put the fear of God into everybody. But he had always thought that she would prefer a man who wasn’t....well, like him. Adam seemed soft and he sometimes wondered how they had gotten together, but he seemed like he had been properly raised in a good family and he clearly loved his daughter. It was enough.

It had been Prof’s mother, Alhaja, who realized that Zainab was often somewhere else. They had all thought she was just an easy baby. A child who barely cried and was almost always asleep, her mother couldn’t believe her luck. While she hadn’t thought anything of it before, the day Alhaja watched Zainab sleep, saw her wake up then extend her hands to reach out for nothing while her eyes stayed close, she knew she had seen this before.

First Alhaja had to tell her son. When he laughed and said she was being ridiculous, she reminded him of her late sister, his aunt who had been his caretaker when she went back to school to finish her degree. Then his face grew grim as he realized what he had to tell Zainab’s mother.

The thing about people in-between was that they had to learn to distinguish one form of darkness from another, and they had to learn it early as children. Without knowing the difference, all that did not have light was clear and familiar. They wouldn't know the ones that were dangerous, the sleeping they could not wake from if they stayed too long.

It took time but Zainab started to stay awake more, and more, and when she was 13 and had her first period, she stopped sleeping.

Perhaps it was because Alhaja, Zainab's grandmother had already passed on and there was no one to ask the right question or maybe it was that fear had a way of hiding the truth of things, but before Zainab's parents got into a car and drove for 14 hours back to Zainab's father's hometown, they took her to doctors who diagnosed her as an insomniac and prescribed sleeping pills that only made her tired and cranky but never unawake.

It took time but Zainab started to sleep again. She would sleep, and wake, and sleep, and wake. They told her about her sleeping and in-betweeness, and as she grew, she learnt to move through here and there without falling asleep.

When Adam finds Prof, he is sitting on the floor by the corner window. He wants to tell his father-in-law that one of the nurses came out and told him that Zainab is fully awake and pushing. That the doctors say she doesn't need to have surgery, but he finds Prof still and he recognizes the hollowness of his body.

What Zainab's parents never told her was that the in-between could switch places, that at certain moments, when the sleep was so deep, she couldn't resist the draw of it, someone else could take her place in it so she could wake. But when she pushes out her child as a burst of new energy rushes through her core, she calls out for her father for the first time in years.