When I started this, it was meant to be a chapter in a novella of a man's reflection on his relationship with his mother when he returns home for her funeral; how he navigates grief and estrangement. Now, I'm not so sure that I want this to be more than a short story.
Does this feel complete to you?

I decided that none of the characters aside from the mother, Oyinlola, would have names. I know I have done this before, I am not sure why this is important to me yet but I know it is. The protagonist, when spoken to directly, is addressed by a nickname, and the grandmother is called 'Iya Agba' which loosely translates to elder mother. The twins are called Taiwo and Kehinde, which in Yoruba lore, is more of an indication of them being twins, and the order in which they arrived into the world.
While I would certainly appreciate other insights, what I am worried about is that this story could appear to exist in a vacuum without enough world building. While as a reader, I am not preoccupied with the setting a story plays out in, I understand the importance of visual storytelling. I also know that references to the period and place a story is set in adds context and background to unfolding events in the story, and how this can influence a character's persona, as well as their decisions.
I also fear that the story might be limited by how little the reader knows about the protagonist. So far, apart from a snarky comment by one of his sisters when the story begins, there is almost no insight about who he is besides a young man who was neglected by his mother.

"They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you"

-This be the verse, Phillip Larkin.

Hello Mummy, Goodbye Mummy

We bury her today and nothing happens. The weather is just so; the sky looks like the sky and there are clouds here and there that form no cryptic shapes or patterns. All day, the twins try to gather themselves. They stare into space and at each other, they jump and are startled every time someone touches them or calls their name, and I know they feel it too.

I had been quite sure that she'd show up; in a downpour of rain, even though she wasn't one prone to such dramatics, perhaps a burning sun instead, a fog? I had even pictured a whirlwind. I didn't think Mummy would just leave without saying one last goodbye to her children, a sign to show that she did see them honoring her and that even in death, their bond remained unbroken. But all I can feel is the harsh December harmattan wind that has wrapped itself around my lungs, made my nose bleed, and left a memory of dust everywhere it touched.

I sit between the twins on our drive home from the final burial service at church. I was already seated when they opened the car doors on opposite sides at the same time, paused, and quietly got in. When

asked why I wasn't in the bus that had taken me to church, I stare at the 'Jesus saves but if you bash this car, you'll pay' sticker on the windscreen as I feel my face get hot. "Mummy Ibadan wouldn't stop making comments about how I wasn't in the same car with both of you, and everyone in the bus kept turning to stare at me. So I came here to wait for both of you instead". Kehinde rolls her eyes, mutters something about how it wasn't their fault that I chose to act like I needed to be handheld and told the proper thing to do, then leans over me to speak to Taiwo like I am not there. They talk non-stop throughout the trip, mostly facing each other while I sink into the middle car seat with my fingers grasping my necklace and rubbing on the pendant. "Pele, bobo. I hope we are not spitting on you", Taiwo's voice, and her hand on the leg I realize then that I must have been shaking again, pulls my roaming mind back into my body.

I haven't been called 'bobo' in a while, only Taiwo called me that. It has been six years since I last saw her before the funeral when I came home briefly for her daughter's naming ceremony. It had been a small party with some members of our family and her in-laws, and everyone, including Mummy who conveniently disappeared from my sight till I left, had been shocked and a bit uncomfortable when I showed up, but Taiwo seemed rather pleased. While I had missed her wedding, largely because I was away in Ghana for work and the wedding invitation had arrived just a week before, she had shared her woes about her miscarriages with me after we both established an initially uneasy relationship over exchanging Instagram reels. I didn't deceive myself that we were friends, but there was something. We both carry Mummy on our faces, we have the same nose, full lips, and high cheekbones that softly lifted her face but made me look intense in photos; the only connection to our mother that I had been allowed

to share, and one that I knew maddened Kehinde. She had resented me for it, and perhaps still did, especially when people assumed that I was Taiwo's twin, not her. Kehinde shared her resemblance with the framed portrait in the living room, our father who neither of us was old enough to know before he passed away. This secretly pleased me. While we all had been loud, playful children together, Kehinde had been too happy to exclude and ignore me as we all grew older. It was almost like she was relieved that she, whose face looked nothing like ours, was not the one who was cast away by our mother. There are now familiar tiny moles under Taiwo's eyes and around her chin, she squints when she is listening or trying to concentrate, and new lines on her forehead furrow when she speaks; our mother has settled fully on her face. I summon what I hope is a smile and shake my head. She smiles back and many hands pull at my throat, that is what it would have looked like, that face so close to mine and smiling kindly.

At home, as we wait for the officiating pastor's car to arrive with the coffin, I look around to see how many faces I can recognize. The air is dense with grief and the smell of people, most of whom I don't know. The people standing in the shade of the palm tree by the fence look like they have been there for a while, some of them have placed scarves, handkerchiefs or whatever spare piece of clothing that they have on the roots above ground and are sitting on them. I wish we were doing this somewhere else but mummy had wanted to be buried in her home, that's what the twins said. There is a woman in what should be her fifties sitting on the floor with a small circle of people around her, watching her warily. No one is quite sure who she is. She had walked in through the gate with a couple of people when we got back from the final burial service at church and started wailing, flailing her arms, and at a point, rolling on the floor. While I listen to the twins mutter irritably to each other about what must be

important funeral business that I'm not allowed into, she breaks free from the circle and starts to dash around the compound. When she begins to jump frantically, her body hitting the floor hard and sand sputtering about, former onlookers decide that the sideshow has gone on too long and move to restrain her. 'Beatrice o', she cries several times, in between heaving and asking that she be taken to and allowed to jump into the grave. It eventually takes my uncle, Mummy's youngest brother, and a man from the church wearing an odd corduroy suit to hold her down. For a woman who couldn't have weighed more than 60 kg, she is absurdly strong.

No one called my mother Beatrice, it was her middle name and everyone knew she hated it. But on the posters and pamphlets we did for the funeral, the graphics guy, for some inexplicable reason, had written it as her first name before Oyinlola which was what anyone who knew my mum, and was old enough to contain her first name in their mouth, called her. The twins had been incensed when they realized this error but I was rather amused, a part of me imagined Mummy's spirit floating in the room and getting upset over being called Beatrice. When I thought of it, I felt a cool breeze on my neck.

As the wailing woman moves her body back and forth while sitting on the floor, I wonder at what point she'll be satisfied with her performance. This is what happens when you hold any kind of ceremony in your home with the gates and doors open, all sorts of strange characters wander in and claim a piece of whatever you are celebrating, or in this case, mourning. Now a strange woman is breathing heavily in my mother's home with a restraining circle around her. She will hang around until someone puts a few naira notes in her hand and thanks her for coming to honor her 'friend'.

The little girl with the wooden beads on her cornrows who has planted herself in the shrubbery around the blue Storex tank that we are both reclining on is still holding the hem of my Buba. The edges of her hair have been pulled too tight and have shiny bumps that look painful. I wonder if she's still in discomfort or has grown accustomed to it. I do not have the faintest idea whose child she is, even though I'm sure that the high-spirited women in the matching green hats who brought her over to 'greet' me, and asked that she stay with me while they found out if the 'Songs of Revelation' choir were around, had mentioned something about who she belonged to. When the women told her to 'stay here with your uncle' and left us in awkward silence, I had given her what I believed to be my most reassuring smile but she merely stared at me as though I was something strange, stuck her thumb in her mouth and held on to my Buba with her other free hand. I do not mind this. It is the only form of contact that has not left me nauseous since I came home the night before the wake, 3 days ago.

It had been decided before I arrived that the space at the back of the duplex's boy's quarters and by the fence would be Mummy's final resting place. It is close to her raised tomato garden beds, but a safe distance from the soak-away pit. The dismantled battery cages for the poultry she never got to farm are propped by the wall of the fence, they look almost skeletal. TJ, our mai guard who lives in the quarters, is probably going to be too spooked to look out of his windows for a while.

The officiating pastor from Mummy's church who is finally here claps his hands together and announces that the interment ceremony is a private one. I look down and extend my hand to my little friend but she's gone. I feel a smudge of fear as I look around, hoping to catch her face and the clickety-clack of her hair, but she's nowhere to be found. Then I comfort myself that since I can't see the women

who brought her either, they had probably come to collect her while I was too distracted to notice. I watch the people who are not family or considered close enough friends trickle out of the compound and contemplate asking the twins if they know the little girl who has now disappeared, but they seem preoccupied with the guests offering final condolences and saying their goodbyes.

A man holding one of the food bags that we gave out at church walks past me as he leaves, and does a double-take. I keep walking but I hear him ask someone if they know that man that looks like Iya Ibeji.

“Ahan, that’s Iya Ibeji’s son now, were you not in church when Pastor told him and his sisters to stand up so we can pray for them?”

“ Iya Ibeji has a son???”

At the grave site, I stand next to the twins. I look at the suspended casket in the open grave and feel nothing. I want to say I’m sad she’s gone, but for me, she was never really here. All I have are questions I thought I’d buried long ago.

“For Madam Oyinlola, the journey is beginning, she’s at peace with her creator, but for us, there is loss, grief, and pain. I know that all of us here have had our lives touched by her one way or the other, that is why we are gathered here”

Perhaps it is because of how we are all gathered in a semi-circle by the fence, and I want to look anywhere but at the people standing with me, I gaze up at the house I grew up in and find myself trying to recollect the ways Mummy’s house, was ever my home.

"We brought nothing into this world, and we can certainly carry nothing out. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord"

From where I stand, I can see the window of my old bedroom. I'm sure there's some interesting memory about it rattling in my head but the window I'm looking up at looks different from the one I used to look down from. It used to be painted white, this house. That was what made the two storey building stand out on our street. For the longest time, Mummy had plans to have the columns that held up the first floor painted a dark shade of gray, but she never got around to doing it. I am not sure whose idea it was to paint the building in this amber shade of yellow with white trimmings but I'm almost certain that it wasn't the exact shade that had been pitched to my mother.

'For as much as the spirit of our departed loved one has returned to God, who gave it, we therefore tenderly commit her body to the grave in sure trust and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall give to us new bodies like unto His glorious body. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.'

The casket is being lowered into the ground, and I can hear the twins sobbing softly. I turn to see how Iya Agba is doing. She's the seventh person to my left, sandwiched between my cousin with the bleached eyebrows and one of the pastors who has his hand on her shoulder, and from the way I catch her eye so quickly and she readjusts herself on the wheelchair, I see that she has been staring me for a while.

We hold each other's eyes, my grandmother is probing, her eyes are asking questions that ring in my head and I look away first. She's not supposed to be here, parents especially mothers are not supposed

to attend their children's funerals, no matter how old they are when they pass on. "She is here because of you, you know", Taiwo had told me when we were getting ready for church, and I asked if it was proper for her to come with us. "Nobody knew if you would show up, she left Abeokuta the minute she found out you were back home".

The pastor pours a handful of sand into the grave and walks towards us with the shovel. I scoop the warm dirt in my hand and sprinkle it on the casket, the twins who are now on their knees are weeping profusely. Soon they will ask Iya Agba to also take a small portion of sand and pour it on her only daughter's casket, to soothe her to sleep again with another kind of lullaby that is the raining of earth.

Fifteen years ago, when I was nineteen and home from my first vacation from the university which was four hours away from our home in Ibadan, Mummy said I'd be spending my break with Iya Agba in Abeokuta. I had spent the better part of my journey home from Ife clenching and unclenching the muscles in my butt on the rickety bus' wooden seats while my mind spun a hundred delightful possibilities of how I was going to spend my break at home. The excitement of being in the university and my newfound independence had worn off quickly when I realized how much of my monthly allowance was disappearing into the waist purses of the various food vendors on campus. Less than two weeks after resumption, I discovered booze, parties, and the fact that some girls were not interested in any kind of conversation that wasn't happening at a fast food joint, or at least, a food canteen, usually with two or three friends in tow. All of this coupled with class handouts that the lecturers insisted were compulsory and we had to pay for, while assuring us we would fail if we didn't, sent my bank account into a downward spiral before I could even realize it. By my third month in school, I was going through

my allowance in two weeks. I ate in the different rooms of the girls I had 'fallen in love' with at the freshers' party, between the three of them, they kept me quite fed through the week. Whenever I called home to say I needed more money, my mother would simply mutter that she'd see what she could do and hang up the phone call before I got another word in. Sometimes it took a week, other times a couple of days more, but the routine was always the same. I'd call her again to remind her of the discussion about the money, she'd say 'okay' and hang up and in a couple of minutes, I'd get a credit alert. Like an automated service, the pattern never changed. Sometimes, I'd watch my roommates, especially the only other year one student in the room haggle with his mother in a way that made me feel like a fist was wrapped around my heart. He would laugh and spin yarns about all the incredible expenses in school and her, recognizing the elaborate scam he was attempting to trap her into, would laugh so loudly, I could hear her laughter spill from the speaker of the phone and fill the room. Occasionally, they'd even devise ways to dupe his father for expenses that didn't exist. After their conversations ended and he was off the phone, he'd turn to me and say "Oh boy, you no know wetin God do for you with your maale o. you see the kind drama I dey follow my mama do because say I wan collect money? I dey crave your anointing o".

When the semester began to slowly round up, I could barely contain my excitement at the idea of free food, a standby generator, and all the events I would be attending with my friends from Uni who were also residents in Ibadan. I was also very excited at the thought of going home to Mummy and showing her how manly and mature I had become.

As I poked my head through the window on the bus ride home, to avoid the sight of the woman sitting in front of me who had bought every roadside snack she could find and was now meticulously peeling off the shell off a boiled egg, my head was filled with multiple scenarios of how I would be welcomed back home. I didn't fool myself that I'd get a grand reception but absence does make the heart grow fonder. I was her only son. That was supposed to mean something.

When the cab I boarded at the bus park dropped me off in front of our building and I pressed the buzzer at the gate, it was TJ, who has served as our mai guard since I was in primary school, that yelled excitedly when he opened the gate to find me smiling bashfully. While he playfully slapped me on my back and helped me carry my bags inside the house, I felt goose pimples rise on my arms. Things were going to be as I had imagined them; everything was going to be different now. I stepped in through the front door and called out for Mummy, just in case she had not heard my name ring through the compound. I moved through the house with my arms hung a bit farther from my body than normal in anticipation of the hug that would surely envelop me. That was how I walked into every room calling out for her until TJ came to tell me he was sorry he didn't mention it earlier, but Mummy had gone to a church event and wouldn't be back until later. He asked if I was hungry and offered to go get me bread and sardine at the store down the street that served as the neighborhood supermarket. When I nodded and he left, it dawned on me that there were no lights on and all the curtains were down, all of which should have let me know before I was told that I had been calling out to no one.

A couple of hours later, I heard the gates open and a car drive in. When I heard Mummy's voice faintly in a conversation with TJ as she alighted from her car and walked into the house, I folded my body in a

sleeping posture and pretended to be asleep. I waited for her to come in and sit next to me, or call out my name. I lay like this for minutes that felt like an eternity. When I eventually stood up and went downstairs to her room, I stood by the door and watched her stand in front of her wardrobe, and fold clothes into it.

"Mummy, welcome ma".

When she turned around and looked towards the sound of my voice and not my face, the same way she had done for as long as I could remember, I knew this was no special homecoming, nothing had or would change. She stared this way for about 30 seconds, then she stretched out her hand to beckon me to come closer with a tight smile on her face.

As I walked softly towards her, her eyes met mine for a second or two then darted away. There were very few moments like that where we both occupied the same space and at such proximity too, and each time it happened, I marveled at how familiar her face was, and how beautiful.

When I stood less than a foot away from her, she patted me on my shoulder, gingerly, a small frown curling her mouth. "Have you eaten?" she asked. I responded that TJ had gotten me bread. "Good, that's fine", she said, already with a distracted look on her face, "Welcome, we will cook rice at night. Go and rest'". Then she waved me away.

I had not been home for more than a week when Mummy said I would be leaving for Abeokuta because she didn't have time to have to babysit me through what she called my 'aimless juvenile behavior', which was just me sitting in the living room in my boxers and playing video games. Instead, I could make myself

useful as a man and go take care of my grandmother whose only companion was the help that lived with her.

While she told me, I stared at the framed portrait of who they say is our father hanging in the space by the TV console. He's dressed in a 3 piece suit; a detail one of our uncles once told us was added by the commissioned artist. 'Your daddy was a very sharp dresser o, if you see his suits? Very very sharp! But when fire burn the first house when all of you are still baby, it burn all of his cloth and fine photo too. So when we tell that person to draw this picture, the photo we show him only show his face, we tell him to add the suit so people will see it and know he use to dress veery sharp'.

When I looked back at Mummy to ask how long she expected me to be away for, she was already reading her devotional. I stood and watched her sitting on the sofa in her kente boubou and purple hairnet with her knees up to her chest as she read and nodded her head periodically. 'Mummy?' I called out. Besides the subtle pursing of her lips that were so identical to mine, there was no indication that she heard me call her, or that I was standing in the living room with her. I turned around, unplugged my phone from the socket in the dining room, and went upstairs.

I stopped crying in the early hours of the day after. It hurt to be carelessly sent away but I was also a bit relieved that I wouldn't have to deal with the awkwardness that always came with being alone at home with Mummy without my siblings who had just gone back to school. I decided I would leave the very next day. As I packed for my trip, I didn't let myself think of how the twins who were 2 years older than me had just spent their whole break at home, and how I knew Mummy had cajoled them into staying for one more week after their classes had resumed, just so she could have them to herself a little bit more.

At Abeokuta, it didn't take long for me to ask Iya Agba if she knew why Mummy didn't like me.

We had an easy friendship, my grandmother and I. With her, I was 'Baba mi', her little father. Whenever she came to the house in Ibadan, or we went to visit her, she would stuff us with kokoro, always making sure I got the crunchiest ones. But when my question reached her where she sat on the couch by her old sewing machine, all she did was glance furtively at me while she wore plastic gloves on her hand and made head gestures to the help to leave us. She spoke rapidly after that. What exactly did I mean by my mother didn't like me? What had she said to me? Had I been disrespecting her because I now felt like I was a man? When I could get a word in and I responded that Mummy did not deny me of anything and even gave more than I asked sometimes, but she was different with me from how she was with the twins, Iya Agba merely sighed, then turned her attention to the little spatula in her hand as she stirred the foul chemicals that she colored her hair with. Later that evening, while I packed the plates to the kitchen after dinner, she spoke in measured tones about I had to know I was no longer a child who could be given a pass to whine 'my mummy is wicked' cries, and had I forgotten that since my father passed away when my siblings and I were still toddlers, my mother had been both mother and father to me? "Baba mi, you are a man. Act like a man and stop being a baby."

We never spoke of it again; I never spoke of it to anyone ever again. I didn't need to say to the twins that while they and I were siblings, they were Mummy's children and I was not. It was hard to explain to other people, almost impossible if you didn't see it. I wanted to belong to her, because I did belong to her. She was my mother, I don't know why I wasn't her son.

It was harder for me because she was so tactile with the twins, they snuggled with one another on the sofa, slapped themselves playfully on the laps while laughing, and shared such long hugs. I remember Mummy once calling me to the study to look at something that was wrong with her laptop, and when I stood behind the chair she sat on, leaned over her shoulder and put my arm around her, she leaned away. After almost a minute of her awkwardly bending towards her desk and me not knowing how I could stand next to her and work on her computer without upsetting her, she asked that I take it to my room and figure out the problem with it. I felt like a sack of unwanted things. All the years I lived at home, I couldn't confront her or even pick a fight because I didn't feel like I existed with her. That I was something real and not a piece of furniture she had to maintain because she had brought it into her home.

I once made love to a girl with eyes that reminded me so much of the ones that refused to look at me. Her hands when they cupped my face were a revelation in tenderness and I broke into so many pieces, I do not know how her body could contain me. The morning after, I woke up to the sensation of her hair prickling my chest and ran my hands through her scalp like they were pathways to meanings. When she moved in her sleep and snuggled closer, I smelt the Damatol in her hair and began to cry. She woke up to what must have been the little tremors of my body and saw me looking down at her with tears on my face. I wanted to say, I'm sorry but this is what I do, break myself ceaselessly into women that will never hold me, cradle their bodies like lost songs when all I really want is to go so deep in them, I'll have to be reborn, to choose another womb to be nurtured in, get back all I have been robbed of. But then she cupped my face in her hands again and we kissed and we fucked like we were going to die the next day.

After I left her bed and said I'd be back by evening and I never did, we watched each other silently during lectures in class. When she called me with another number and asked if I was avoiding her because I had cried when we had sex and called her 'mummy', I told her I just wasn't interested in girls that gave it up easily and hung up. I didn't know that I had called her that while we had sex, but I knew I didn't fool her with my misogynist act, she must have seen right through me. Everyone eventually does.

Once, I told Taiwo that I didn't think I liked people. She had chuckled in her low voice and said, 'I'm sure they don't like you either.'

At the grave site, while Iya Agba's eyes still hold mine, the officiating pastor begins to round up the ceremony with a benediction. I hold Taiwo's hand and she holds Kehinde's, their families standing a few paces behind us reverently. I am still struck by Mummy's unexpected absence at her funeral. I see how the twins are shaken by how they can't feel her, how they keep looking for a sign like I also did, that she is still with them. I also can't stop thinking of the girl with the beads in her hair. I start to wonder if she was even real. Was that her? Had I been so immersed in the thought of a special manifestation that I conjured my mother up as a little girl?

But she had only stayed with me, I didn't see her go to the twins. Why would she choose me?

None of us have her now. Mummy is gone, and in this absence that persists while her beloved children stay longing for her to send them a sign one last time, she has treated us all the same for the first time. As we stand together, I feel one with them in a way I never did before. I want to ask them how it hurts, and

see if they'll understand. I want to tell them that this is what it always was like for me. But all I do is squeeze Taiwo's hand and say amen.

"And may the good Lord bless you and keep you. May his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you, may the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."

"Amen".