MAYBE DYING WAS NOT A BAD THING AFTERALL

A Novel by Bardi Osobuanomola Catherine

About 53,000 words

PROLOGUE

This is a story in which the narrator introduces as an entity that sees everything.

CHAPTER ONE

Narrator

Humans live unfortunate lives. That is a fact.

I can introduce myself, but I don’t think it will be necessary since this story is not about me. But if your curiosity will not let you keep still, I must let you know that I am someone whose skin is like polished teeth. My eyes have peered over anything and everything since the world became a dwelling place.

I try to stay unnoticed most of the time, but sometimes it is impossible when I gently carry weightless and translucent souls. These ones have their eyes watching the ground grow further away, then a scream follows after, their hands scratching at my delicate skin, as though it were possible to crawl out of my grip. Then there is a point they realize, my hands are strong and invisible, clear like nothing. The only way you’d know I’m there is the feel of my invisible fingers, the sound of my breath and the wetness of my tears.

You may be wondering if I feel anything when I transfer these souls to purgatory. What will be my reaction be? Am I like my maker who takes lives and consoles by giving breath?

Of course not.

I cry and I cause storms that wash the earth.

People curse me for my tears. Your kind hates me. I do however, try to be considerate most of the time but it is difficult when my heart wills itself to wail.

Sometimes I like the tears. The sadness teaches me more about my true nature and how fragile humans are. You see, I am no different from you, not at all. The only notable alteration is your ability to make decisions, even though those choices can lead you in pits deeper than gravesites.

As I have been hinting, my one saving grace is distraction. It is the only way I can keep myself sane. I do not know when my creator will deem my task finished or when someone else will take my place. In the meantime, I have chosen to study the little things, to watch the lives that interest me and guess the outcome of their choices.

You might be wondering, what sought of life will interest me? The one who claims to have lived longer than forefathers.

It is the different ones.

The ones who don’t belong, those who are out of place in the society. They are the ones I can’t bear to look in the eyes. They are the ones capable of enduring true pains, distress to the point of driving themselves over the edge in desperation.

This brings me to the story I want to tell you. Of two children whose lives remains at the top of my mind. It’s not a long story, really, nothing to bore you to sleep.

Well, I’m not going to force you to listen. But if you feel like it, I will tell you a story.

CHAPTER 2

Narrator

Let’s talk about the place that no longer exists. Of the solid ground.

Some of you are likely to think that a place can just not exist. Well, I’m here to tell you that this village, the one people used to know as Mmiri returned to dust. And that is a fact. My eyes do not tell lies.

And my mind is as sharp as a new Knife.

It’s like I see the stars glowing from millions of light years away and miles if my sight is not obstructed by tears.

As you might expect, bad things happened in Mmiri. They couldn't just leave a place without a justifiable reason.

In the beginning, it was just a problem anyone could solve, but very soon, the problem would spin out of control.

Then there are those who are left behind. The sad ones who are left to remember the painful and solemn memories. Occasionally, watching them turns my skin black, almost like the ashes from burnt firewood – white and ashy, if such colour does exist. When this happens, anyone can see the earth darken in shade and they know a ruthless downpour of cries will rumble the sky.

The person left behind in this story is an old woman who is crumpled to her stomach. She lays on the bed watching her packed bag and the empty room reminding her that she should have left earlier.

There is a man outside snoring on the veranda. He has slept there since last Saturday, waiting for the woman to wake him up to start their journey. But for days, she preferred to lay limp without thinking, without watching television and allowing her body gather dust.

There is a house in Imo waiting for her, right after the village where her life began. I remember it now, the rickety streets designed to chip legs of children too little to run on them.

The woman is seventy and at sunset, she switches her position to lie on her stomach. I know what she is thinking about. Her mind is clouded with pieces of life she cannot return to.

She wonders if he thinks of her from his grave.

Bear in mind that I do not read minds. I read situations from movements and gestures. And tonight, there is one thing I can tell you – this woman will not sleep. She switches on the bedside lamp he gave her the day he returned from Ife. They left it on every night they slept together on the same bed. Her hand stretches to graze the glass panel, the metal handle and finally the cork that smells of kerosene. She sees the zebra patterned adire pillowcases she collected from his mother through the orange flame. They no longer shine the way they used to. As she stares, she remembers when the boy asked her to cover his skin with it when she made his hair. As her fingers strung the curly strings on his head, he asked her what she wanted on her birthday. Without thinking, the woman, when she was young as a flower mentioned leather slippers. He seemed a little excited. She assumed there was something more behind it. But then he was gone.

The woman drags herself out of the bed and changes out of her nightgown. There is no time to waste. Why now, of all the years, did she remember that gift? She calls out her driver’s name from the window.

“Vivek! Come immediately.”

There are five bags, stuffed with her belongings. She plans on staying there for a long time and they each contain things she needs to survive with. She follows Vivek outside and watches him place the bags in the booth.

The woman waits for him to turn the car around. When he does, she gets in and they cross the black gate fresh as her journey.

CHAPTER 3

If this story were to be told properly, we would start at the beginning, before the winds and storm and the body that rushed out of the swollen gutters. That was how stories were told.

Let’s begin with the Yoruba couple that moved down the street late 2000s. Ayọ̀bámi was slightly above twenty and tall as her husband, peach skin and thick like an adult tree. She was the type of woman, men drooled after and whispered about at the local palm wine joints, away from the prying ears of their jealous wives. Once, the market women converged under the mango tree with wrappers across their chests and scarf around their heads, accusing her of purposely flaunting her curvy hips to attract their rotten toothed husbands. Ayọ̀bámi had killer looks – dark eyes reflected green rings in the sun, shoulder length black hair and thin lips- features that later lost its way.

Where she resembled fresh wine, her husband Kunle was the polar opposite. He was seventy and had fine winkles around his eyes, sagging cheeks and a black round birthmark on his forehead. Sitting on their veranda every morning, wearing a trouser and a flimsy shirt, he would watch a sheet of newspaper he threw wonder in the wind for hours until his wife complained about him getting a cold.

“Kunle! What is wrong with you,” Ayọ̀bámi cried, running outside with a wet spatula. “Did you forget your age? You will just die like fly inside this cold.”

He regarded her in a slow smile. “Isn’t it just wonderful? That we’re here. Here together where we can be ourselves,” Kunle replied, tearing another piece of newspaper. The wind grew wilder by the second, tearing through her long skirt and bellowing the sands surrounding them in their small compound. “I like the sound of the breeze and the feel of it against my wearing skin,” he said, flinging a torn piece in the air. “The days are no longer on my side. So Ayọ̀bámi, let me enjoy this.”

The couple’s age difference was another topic that had the women converging again to spill gossips and throw insults. About three-quarter of the way down the street as one headed towards the end of the village and the beginning of a neighboring town, the grounds were occupied with too many stools to see the sands. They were under a palm tree, stricken with shades, and the shallow whisper of the fonds fighting against the winds.

“What they are doing is a taboo!” one of them said snapping her finger over her head.

“If she was born in this village ehn?” another replied stretching forth her hands to dust it before the others.

“I’m sure she collected another woman’s husband.” That one, crinkled her nose as though she caught a whiff of something bad.

Everyone had something cruel to say, one way or the other, and everyone agreed. Well, almost everyone. Ekene preferred to watch and listen to the others talk, and made no comments to their gossiping lips. And no one disturbed her refusal to input nor called out on the way she stared into space.

Ekene was the wife of the village’s medicine man, Zoko. She was skinny and wore bones on her cheeks. She was the only daughter of her father. That was all anyone knew about her background, but it was enough to single her out in gatherings. Her skeletal features once frightened little children, drawing mothers from their homes to threaten the cursed woman. That what they called her; a cursed woman without an ounce of flesh and rumours believe she sold her skin to tie her mother’s womb. But regardless, they still invited her to these sought of things, and she knew they wanted to keep her close. Everyone knew Zoko’s marriage to her was one of convenience, and the people were happy when kegs of palm wine was passed to her elders. The wedding was the day after the Yoruba couple arrived, so they were invited to witness the glorious moment. Ayọ̀bámi had watched Ekene search for her husband in the crowd, her hand over a small calabash of palm wine and shining crimson beads dangling on her neck. Zoko was sitting beside her, spine erect and proud, eyes gleaming with the reflection of his bride’s sequenced red blouse. Ayọ̀bámi had seen recognition in his eyes, it was the exact way Kunle stared at her in the midst of judging lions. Then, Ayọ̀bámi knew the man admired his bride, even though her face was blank like sheets of inkless paper. Ekene eventually found Zoko, who swallowed the contents in the cup-tilting his head back in a gulp- and Ayọ̀bámi watched Zoko stand, taking his brides hand in his and kissing them softly. After the wedding, Zoko travelled to seek medicinal herbs in the forest, so Ekene stayed back to take care of their home. Ayọ̀bámi stole glances at Ekene from her veranda as she separated stones from bean seeds. Hair plaited back, wearing a dull fish wrapper tied across her chest, Ekene was outside making a little girl’s hair. She wiped her forehead sweats with her forearm and spat in the sands. To Ayọ̀bámi, she looked worn-out and tired.

“You should mind yourself Ayọ̀bámi,” he warned, coming out of their house. “Their life is different from ours.” He sat with a grunt.

Ayọ̀bámi bit her bottom lip. “But it’s not fair. They just got married which day here.”

“And so? Better mind your business.”

“Ejor. Her husband did not try at all. ”

Kunle sighed “And so? Instead of worrying about others, let us worry about ourselves.” He sounded tired, like an old pickup truck.

She turned to her husband and noticed the chocolate-coloured bags under his eyes. She stared at them and a moment of silence passed. Ayọ̀bámi drew closer to Kunle, and planted a kiss on his lips.

“You’re right,” she whispered softly. “Sometimes I forget that day is coming.”

Kunle smiled, exposing his brownish teeth to which she responded promptly with a toothless grin. He stretched his hands across her shoulders, and they sat like that till the sky turned pitched black, even the heavens ornaments refused to lighten the grounds. But they enjoyed it, so long as they were in each other’s arms.

When that day approached, the day that Ayọ̀bámi and Kunle dreaded, a dark cloud-thick and lumpy-swam over their home. Her husband vomited curdled blood and passed out thunderous gas, symptoms of the last stage of a vile disease and the early stages of his death, and Ayọ̀bámi brawled out until her eyes turned red. These were dark times for them; Kunle loosing pounds of weight, Ayọ̀bámi forcing him to eat, Kunle vomiting the food she fed him and Kunle unable to get up from his bed, it was chaos. Ayọ̀bámi refused to let him see how much she was affected, so she preferred to walk by the stream when the world was asleep to scream away the sensation sweltering in her guts.

This was where she spoke to Ekene for the first time. Ayọ̀bámi stumbled on her washing clothes sweating profusely despite in the midnight air. There was a kind of emotion that burst through her when they locked eyes, which let liquid scurry down her cheeks. Without caring, she told Ekene her pains and Ekene let her ramble and curse without saying a word and she was grateful for it.

“Do you know what I wish for?” Ayọ̀bámi asked, without expecting a reply. “I wish the gods of our father spare my husband.”

Each day Ayọ̀bámi visited the stream after that, Ekene was always there washing her clothes. And each time she spoke, Ekene always listened and said nothing until one afternoon when she handed her crushed leaves wrapped in a transparent plastic bag. Ayọ̀bámi collected it and stared for a heartbeat.

“What is this?” Ayọ̀bámi asked, shaking the contents and they splattered on every inch within the bag.

“They are herbs.” Ekene collected it from her and pushed down the splattered contents to the bottom. “You will give it to your husband.”

“Will it cure him?” She stood up quickly. “Is he going to be better?”

Ekene shook her head. “It is good for pains and vomiting. Give it to him three times a day.”

“Thank you,” Ayọ̀bámi said, even thought it was far from what she truly wanted.

“Thank my husband,” she said. “I asked him to make it.”

“Has he come back?”

Ekene said nothing. She just watched Ayọ̀bámi collect the bag, and went back to her business. Ayọ̀bámi knew to keep her boundaries even though she saw tear well up in her eyes.

For the next four weeks, Ayọ̀bámi fed her husband the herbs and luckily he was able swallow every time without throwing them up. He was able to walk around his room, feed himself and they even had sex at the end of those four weeks. Ayọ̀bámi even started reading the books she brought with her from Ife,

Ayọ̀bámi got a job as a secretary at the hospital Kunle was working after university. She thought it was good at the time, to find something doing in order to support herself. Kunle was much younger then, fine skin with grey hairs dotting around his nest of black hairs. It was love at first sight.

The first time, she noticed Kunle had a strained marriage was over a heated argument on the phone. To which he cried hysterically after and the only way she could comfort him was with arms around his back. Ayọ̀bámi felt warm under his arms, like a duvet was thrown over her body. He had used a manly musk; smelling a little like orange juice and more like candy. Ayọ̀bámi didn’t know how she knew, but she knew Kunle was going to steal her lonely heart. Ayọ̀bámi remembered Kunle withdrawing to lock gazes with her. She remembered asking him to dinner and he accepted in a heartbeat, surprising Ayọ̀bámi. She remembered taking him to the Mr Biggs close to her rented apartment. They had spaghetti that day, and the day after and the following week, till the days ran to a month where they sealed each date with a kiss.

It was later she found out, his wife had cheated on him and was asking for divorce.

When it became apparent how serious their relationship was getting, Kunle signed the divorce papers, releasing one quarter of his property because of the prenuptial agreement he refused to sign. His son was above eighteen so he was recused from painfully watching their son choose between his parents. That day, he invited Ayọ̀bámi to his home for the first time and they sipped tea and digestive biscuit. Kunle’s fingers trembled each time he brought the cup to his lips and Ayọ̀bámi noticed, of course she noticed, he literally made a decision that would change his life.

Ayọ̀bámi understood him. She made a life changing decision to move from Ibadan to Ife, a state where she didn’t know anybody, because she sought for a better life. She loved that he had chosen her, she loved the idea of spending the rest of her life with him but those ideas made her forget that dreams could easily be mistaken for reality.

“I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life in your arms,” she had told Kunle.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way my Ayọ̀bámi,” he had replied. “Peace to us for all eternity.”

When the doctor, Dr. Potter, a stern bald man in his late fifties diagnosed him of cancer, her world shattered into tiny pieces. “I suggest you choose this time to enjoy life,” Potter said, looking over Kunle’s case file with a hard stare. While she cried, Kunle remained still in his seat without reaction, as though he already knew.

“Is there no cure?” Ayọ̀bámi had asked in-between sobs. “There should be a cure.

“I’m sorry.” Potter replied, glancing up only briefly before returning to flip the case note, glasses sitting on the bridge of his nose. She remembered Kunle standing, chair scrapping harshly on the ground, a dazed smile spreading across his face.

“Let’s get married my Ayọ̀bámi,” he whispered. “Marry me.”

It was not the exact outrageous proposal women dreamt of but Ayọ̀bámi was happy he chose to marry her amidst his crisis. It was then, the first judgment came, from the eyes of the doctors swelling with a mixture of disgust and astonishment.

A week later, Ayọ̀bámi married Kunle in the hibiscus garden at his backyard. It was just them and the priest who anointed their union, yet somehow news spread to her in-laws their son had married a girl twice his age. She could sense they had come prepared for war when she watched them matching out of their cars through the glass panes on the door. Ayọ̀bámi wanted to leave them standing outside and go back to sleep. Maybe their legs would turn to dust if they stayed too long in the sun. There were three of them, all women with large hook buttocks head deep in conversation. They all hunched their backs against the sun and wore a determined frown that made their faces nauseating. One of the women was his mother, Iya Aburo and she was the oldest in the group. And when Ayọ̀bámi opened the door, their faces remained in that twisted snare. She could guess the words that would come out of their mouth would be offensive words that would twist her stomach. Instead, they stared her down like she was some insect and pushed their way inside.

“Where is my son?” Iya Aburo asked, looking around the room as though she had stashed Kunle under the chair.

Ayọ̀bámi smiled. “Yes, ma, he is upstairs. I will call him after I give you your drinks. What type do you want?”

One of the women, Femi, Kunle’s aunty shook her head from side to side. “Which one is drink again? My friend, go and call Kunle. We have important things to discuss.” Then she hissed right after.

Ayọ̀bámi smiled again, left the sitting room and headed for the stairs. She knew what the ‘important thing’ they wanted to discuss was. She knew their presence was going to cause a shift in their marriage. It irritated her and she wanted to tell them to leave their house, but then she was too scared of those women who could tear her with their eyes.

She was surprised to find Kunle awake. He was pacing the floor when she entered the room.

“Let’s go,” he said without looking her in her eyes. The journey down the stairs felt like forever and when she got there, she perched on the edge of Kunle’s chair.

Then the questions kept coming.

“She is the one abi?” his mother started. “She caused your marriage to fall apart, abi?”

Femi nodded in agreement. “I know she enticed you with her young breasts. I have thought about it and slept on the issue many times?”

The last woman, whose name I never knew, fair, pale yellow like the insides of Ebelebo fruit stared me in the eye. “Look at her. Those eyes like egg whites enticed our son to commit adultery.”

Ayọ̀bámi had closed her eyes. She had expected the harsh words, but they made her heart feel heavy. When she opened them, she was alarmed by the appropriate gleam of tears in her eyes. She waited for Kunle to put them in their places, but when he said nothing and listened to their insults, she tuned herself out of the conversation.

Kunle was uneasy that night, and Ayọ̀bámi could feel the tension radiation off him. He stared into space, hands placed in a tight fist and a scowl settled on his face. “What’s on your mind Kunle?”

He turned and kissed her on her forehead. “Let’s travel my Ayọ̀bámi,” he said, voice thick.

Ayọ̀bámi straightened her frame on the bed and the night suddenly became bleak. “Travel to where?”

He shifted, taking her delicate peach hands into his. Kunle caressed it slowly, and brought it to his lips, planting another kiss. “I don’t know. Just somewhere that is not here.” Ayọ̀bámi opened her mouth to protest but Kunle silenced her with his finger on her lips.

So that was that. Kunle bought them bus tickets to a village far, far away, a place where he knew they would find peace. And peace he found as he died the beginning of the fifth week in his sleep.

At his burial Ayọ̀bámi cried a river, in a midnight black dress and a veil draped, covering her face. Her complexion had turned pale, and her figure was beginning to lose its curve. She was beginning to look like Ekene as the days ran by. Village women would drop by in the evening to offer their condolences and she received them warmly, even though she heard their whispered gossips about how they thought she had killed him for his money.

After Kunle, Ayọ̀bámi should have gone back to Ife to continue her life and maybe find a younger man to marry. She was twenty-five, her life was just getting started. That was the right way to go, if she wasn’t found with child.

Let turn to another page in this story. The day Ayọ̀bámi and Ekene labour screams filled the neighborhood and the children were born on a mat outside Zoko’s home. In labour bliss they named their children; Kunle and Onaye.

Kunle, named after his father symbolized the endless love his mother had for his father. He wore a small crescent birthmark on his neck and gifted deep brown eyes, features he inherited from his late father. At a young age he looked like a small bird, dark and skinny, unlike his parents. Remember when I said, Ayọ̀bámi’s features lost their way, this was why. But Ayọ̀bámi kept hoping his skin would lighten out with time.

Onaye was chubby like a fattened cow and wore bright skin any mother would kill their children to have. But her father was not proud, because she was a girl and would not carry on his legacy.

This is how the two children were born, a disappointment. You see, children are made to lighten the load on their parents, but these two increased the weight on them. And in the end, Kunle’s death will be most unfortunate.

CHAPTER FOUR

ONAYE

Kunle saved me for the first time when I was twelve years old. Now when I looked in a mirror and saw the kind of woman I had become, I thought of him and watched the sadness crawl through my spine. But when he was alive, when his world crashed down, seeing the way things turned out just thrusted anger inside me.

When we were small, our mothers introduced us. It was on a Saturday morning, when we were old enough of sweep and clean the village. That day, the boy smiled up to me, showing his milk teeth and I smiled back. Our feet slid into the sand under the palm tree, both of us happy we were finally allowed to play without our parent’s supervision. At the time, we didn’t care about the children that kept their distance, we were just happy to be children. Well, it got to a time Kunle as not too fond of the stares we were getting. It was when we were nine, he started getting into fights with the other children. That one never knew how to keep his temper. And I always stood away, watching the events unfold. One day, we were picking up dry leaves from the ground, our little legs running around the village because we wanted to know who would pick more than the other. One of the children was angry over something, and pushed down his waste basket. I watched Kunle push him down the same way and he fell down splitting his lips and that was how his bottom lip had that dark shade like stained ink.

I could have intervened and stopped the fight but my mother thought me how to always stay silent where there’s chaos.

My mother was not like most mothers. She was a slender woman with a flat chest, unlike most of the women in our town and me. My father married her when she was thirty, an age too old for marriage as far as most villages are concerned. So, that was one of the many reasons some concluded her marriage to my father was one of convenience.

They looked good together. A perfect match, they always said.

My father was as much undesirable because of his deep love for herbs and poisonous mushrooms. He was better for the forest. It was his birthright. On their wedding day, the guest chairs were mainly occupied by curious eyes and empty lips eager to fill them with saliva of gist’s. When the elders declared them husband and wife, they said the crowd laughed. They were glad the village outcasts had finally sealed the knot. If she were at least beautiful, then those laughs would have seized after the ceremony and the years after. That night, they consummated their marriage like every newlywed did on their wedding night and my mother’s tummy protruded on one of the nights he left to seek for herbs. Of course, he didn’t know she was pregnant with me, because he would have stayed behind to care for her. I heard my father loved my mother to the teeth, that on their wedding day, his eyes glistered with desire.

When I was delivered, a girl, my mother wept in pain and my father handed me over to the midwife to rid her of my sight. For days, the midwife fed me with her breast milk as Mama needed time to come to terms with the fact that she gave birth to a girl. That history may repeat itself.

They said my eyes were wide and green, skin yellow as peach and quickly, I became a disappointment to my parents. I was shy. I was quiet. I was slow to learn, so learning about medicinal herbs was next to impossible. The only good thing about me was my beauty.

Mmiri named me ‘witch’ because after me my mother did not conceive again and my father’s family accused her of giving her womb to her coven to feast on. I heard she did the same to her mother’s womb and this made me believe that this was the true reason she never married early. When I heard the accusations for the first time, my young mind imagined my mother in the midst of women serving her uterus to them in golden ceramic plates. Then, they would eat and thank her for giving them a delicious meal.

There was something about mothers; their inability to look away from a child they carried for nine month. I am six when my mother constantly taught me games when other parent made their children do house chores and to stay away from me. She taught me a variety of them; Ten ten. Ayo game with stones, this was until the udala season came, when we used their seeds instead.

The last game she taught me was something her mother invented; the silent game, where you speak only when you needed to and closing your ears with invisible corn. My mother was determined to keep me safe like her mother did when she was younger.

I remember being in shop, stones grinding green leaves roughly on another. The smell was sharp, and bitter. A different leave was added. They mixed together, slender fingers added pressure, me sprinkling water and Mama’s sweat dripping into it.

Two women, hair in threads, one pregnant and the other one not, stormed into the shop barefooted. I noticed them first as Mama was immersed deeply in her business. The pregnant one, Mama Ada, limped with her arms around the other woman, Mama Onyebuchi, sweating her blood from her knee into the ground and its aging cracks.

The women moved quickly to the raffia mat, Papa used to treat his patients and Mama Ada was let down slowly, to lie flat on her back. It was the heavy grunt that made Mama notice their presence. With the water bowl still in my hands, I watched her move to the injured woman, asking her friend to step away. She examined the wound carefully, pressing down softly around it. She blew on it, then rushed to the herbs she was grinding, grabbed a handful and pressed it on her wound. She screamed in pain, iron-clad grip on the mat caused an incurable tear. Mama was not born a medicine woman but being married to one had its perks. When Papa was out, she took charge of attending to the villagers- simple or complicated matters.

Mama tied it with a cloth to help keep the herbs in place, not too tight and not too loose, just in-between. Her fingers moved easily, delicately around each perfect knot. The woman’s face was still scrunched up in pain, lip tightly pressed together and eyes wide as a rabbit’s home territory.

My eye caught Mama Onyebuchi’s fidgeting fingers, her love for the far corner of the room. It was obvious she felt uncomfortable. Mama Onyebuchi was shorter than most women, and plump with accumulated fat around her hips. When she noticed me, her face became hard and lips placed in a scowl as she eyes me up and down.

I averted my gaze and looked at the finishing hands of Mama, tying the last of knots on her patient’s knee. Mama stood and stepped away to examine her work, a small smile found its way to her lips. She did a good job. Mama Onyebuchi watched with distaste.

“Everything is one thousand naira,” Mama told them.

The injured woman looked up and managed to stand in her pain. “You should be grateful I even came to your shop sef.”

Mama shook her head. “These materials are for my husband and he worked hard to get them.”

“Then I will give him when he comes back,” Mama Onyebuchi said.

“What difference does it make if you give it to me now,” Mama said calmly. “My husband did not place the herbs on your foot.”

“But I don’t know if you will use the money I give you to tie my womb. Please, I want to have a male child for my husband,” Mama Ada said, beckoning on Mama Onyebuchi to help her walk.

Mama just stood there, like an object without life, taking in their insults. My fingers tightened around the edges of the bowl, the devil tempting me to drench them with the cold water.

Somehow Mama knew my patience was growing thin, so she held my hand tightly and said, “Let them go. They will give your father the money.”

“But Mama...”

“Reacting will only make things worse,” she said, turning to me. “Go and bring me more leaves let me crush for the next customers.”

At that time I didn’t understand her way of doing things but watching how strong she was in the face of trouble, increase my admiration for her. Even when she died - fell into the stream and let the currents carry her body to shore - I promised myself to always stay hidden, quiet and watch instead.

I remember little of the scattered memory of her death because my mind was soaked in a dark place for days; my father weeping on her grave, the women calling her death karma, Kunle and his mother visiting to pay their condolences, Kunle and I talking about death; yell, yell, yell, he kept me in his hold for hours telling me he understood what it meant to loose someone, even though he didn’t. He seemed to know how to calm me down because the anger and fear vaporized in the warm tuck. He caressed my temple with his thumb and blew air from his mouth into my tears. An unconventional way to wipe tears and when I asked, his answer was a short shrug.

By the end of the year, we became best friends even though we were not the same. Yes, every one believed we were because we were friend but let me tell you, Kunle was not human for a while.

CHAPTER FIVE

KUNLE

I see myself in her even though I did not want someone to be like me. Even though I begged on my knees every morning with my hands pressed together on my chest that another like me should not be born. But I was a child and not a god, so little did my prayers change fate.

At first my anger scorched like sun when I saw her at the stream, tear drops filling the water, then I watched her crumble in the face of death- vulnerable and tender, and I thought, maybe I should be there for this child, in a way no one was because I understood. I did not belong and neither did she, we are unwanted but we needed to try to cope because choice was something we lacked.

I get we are the same age, but I am stronger and I am male.

So, I gained a purpose. If the people do not like us, they will grow to fear us. And by fearing us, they will want to like us. It is the only way me and Onaye can protect ourselves.

CHAPTER SIX

ONAYE

The afternoon Small Emeka fell down the stairs and broke his wrist, Kunle ran to Papa’s shop to break the news, and even now, many years later, I remember the beads of sweat dripping down his chin, heavily breaths he released from too much run and of course, the silent smile threading on his lips. This was a sign I should have taken into consideration at the time, but my mind was too occupied with the thought how he looked like after the fall.

This incident happened when we were fifteen.

When he slammed the door open, few minutes after Papa left to deliver medicine to his patients, I was picking up dirty bowls from the ground. Kunle told me and I threw the bowls in the corner, slipped my feet into mix-matched slippers, and we both ran to Small Emeka’s home.

“Someone pushed me from my back and I fell down,” Small Emeka said, words mixing with tears as he cradled his broken wrist. He was round-faced and shirtless, and wore a protruding tummy, too large for a twelve year old.

“This person is evil,” I heard someone say in the crowd that started thickening with people.

“Did nobody see it happen?” someone else asked.

I cried with him, then I was ashamed of crying, and returned home without a second thought. Kunle yelled at me for my actions, telling me I should not feel for someone as bad as he. You see, Small Emeka was the last son of Mama Onyebuchi, a little tout who refused to learn how to speak right nor let us live without reminding us of our mistaken existence. He was one of those children who Kunle used to fight with when we were younger. Regardless I felt bad for him, an emotion Kunle refused to understand. That was the kind of person I was. Kunle and I ended up having a fight for the first time ever that day. Our yells accompany pushing, then shoving, then in anger Kunle kicked our wooden door and gifted it a hole that never healed. In the heat of the moment, he told me he pushed that Small Emeka. He was speaking ill about me, he was planning on throwing stones into our shop and he planned it with other children. I refused to speak to him for days after that, and when I heard Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi was taking him to Ife to see his grandparents for the first time, I sulked in my room, too ashamed to ask if he was coming back.

Kunle ended up staying longer than his mother. She wanted to come back because it was close to harvest season, and if she trusted anyone enough to help in her abscence, it was my mother but we all know she was six feet buried under heaps of sandy soil. And she knew better than to trust anyone who thought she infiltrated the land and cursed it with her abominable marriage.

As the year passed, flashes of our last moments together came to me like pictures and I found myself missing him terribly. I started going to his home, creeping through the window shaft, somehow my brain told me it was the right move to make if I wanted to see him, but the sensible coherent part kept reminding me, Kunle was at home in Ife.

It was during one of those visits that Kunle’s mother spilled her son inherited a considerable amount of money from his father.

“To our unborn child. Kunle’s father had hope for us,” Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi said, her voice coated heavily with her Yoruba accent. “And if he decides to want it for himself, and decides to stay in Ife to feel more at home, so be it.”

Kunle’s mother expected him to consider staying, I could see it in her eyes. That motherly desire to always want the best for her child. Later I realized, Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi had her own fair share of poverty before her marriage to Kunle’s father, and no mother would wish her children suffer like they did. Two thousands accers of land and half a million naira in the bank- those things could take care of the whole village, those thing were Kunle’s inheritance.

I did not want to be selfish, so I lied about hanging out on her yard for the last six months. I told her Kunle had hidden my thread as payback for yelling at him when I should have been grateful for sticking up for me. But she knew I was lying like Mama always did. Before Mama died, I learnt two things; she put me first before herself and detected every lie on my very lips.

“I know you miss Kunle,” she said. “I don’t know what happened between you two but if it’s any consolation, he had that devastating look at the bus park.” She rubbed my hair down and smiled like she understood. Too shy my voice may betray me, I nodded instead. “Come in whenever you want. I’ll give you hot tea.”

So every now and then, I found myself wondering into Kunle’s home after school instead of going home. Papa did not mind, and I was sure he did not care. Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi kept true to her words, feeding me cups of warm beverages- milo and milk saturated in sugar cubes. I got used to spending time in her home, to picking weeds from her farm, crushing bug eating away her fresh leaves, sometimes I even forgot we were not related in anyway. And sometimes I forgot Kunle had a decision to make and this was partly because I never taught he would turn down his inheritance. Imagine how mortified we were when we got that phone call to pick him up.

“I did not like it there.” That was his reason for returning to Mmiri Nothing more than those six words that changed his life and mine.

#

Every last Saturday of each month, the women gather in a chosen home to discuss the matters in the village and provided solution to problems that surpass their husband’s strength. These problems usually were brought to the table by the women leader, Mama Ogadi, the wife of the village chief, so her position was sought of an entitlement. During those meetings, she provided snacks - plantain chips and palm wines to satisfy the women, but I saw it as a bribe, to stop the women from chewing her for not having a child.

But yet, anyone could see the way they avoided touching her hands when she distributed the packets of plantain chips.

The meeting only ever needed the indigene’s to attend- so it did not matter if you were a foreigner married to someone from the village, so long as the right blood did not course through your veins. So Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi was not the only alien in Mmiri, but she was the only one who cared less of what they thought and attended those meetings regardless. After a member’s burial, the women would gather in the crowded living room to feed and drink, Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi always found her way to their table in smiles. During the chief’s birthday, homes were to provide a tuber of yam each and presented by the women in fish wrappers and blue blouses, Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi was there too, in a blue sequenced dress and a basket of garden-fresh tomatoes. Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi who she would later learn the consequences of her actions, tucked her figure in their midst with the urge of wanting to belong.

The year Kunle and me turned fourteen, there was a feast two houses away from my home- Mama Fati was celebrating the return of her husband from the United States. He had gone to study, gain knowledge after winning some competition, an opportunity many were not privileged of having. Now he was back, the village gained a gem. To them anyone who traveled to a white man’s country was seen as a god. Where the men chose to clamor in the depth of the palm wine joints, the women dined in her home fondled with simple decorations- a dozen balloons and strips of yellow and blue ribbons neatly knotted around the legs of the dining table. Sitting on one of the chairs was Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi, arms folded across her chest and she watched the women munch on packet snacks Mama Fati’s husband brought. Those snack were given to us in our small portion on the raffia mat spread away from them. If there was one thing Kunle and me learned about given food, was to prevent it from entering into your mouth, especially if it came from people who never had your best interest in heart. And let’s say, those snacks weren’t poisonous, Kunle would fall dead from the amount of salt added to processed food. Cystic pimples, swollen tongue, inability to control gas, those were his symptoms. At the end of the celebration, we would bury our share, or fling them in the stream, so long as it was never found.

“Are you not going to eat that?” Fati asked.

I shrugged, placing my snack beside me. “We are saving them for later.”

“Saving it for what. Are you going to swear with it?” Toby scrunched his nose, as he worked his way to the edges of his snack wrapper. “Or it’s for your cult.”

“Toby. What brought that leg now,” Kunle spat.

Toby placed a piece of dried potatoes in his mouth. “What? I’m only speaking my mind. You two are always together, like birds of the same feather.”

“Two ends of the same coin actually,” Fati said.

Toby and Fati were siblings, children to Mama Fati and ugly like the back of a rusted spoon. Kunle’s words, not mine. They wore nearly similar features- where Toby was short and lanky with an eagles face, Fati was short and thick, already filling up her skirts at sixteen. Some boys tend to hit puberty late, so there was a possibility he would grow as tall as his father. Fati was older than Toby with a year, hence why we called her parents by her name, and why many of us refer of the mother by certain names.

Kunle looked around, at the women clustered in the dining room. They had gone from munching to having small talks. There were ruffling noises coming from the entrance, we heard high pitched voices and Mama Fati rushing to open the front door. Kunle scrunched his face, his fingers glazing mine on my lap. “Let’s go,” he said, holding my hand firm. He pulled me up and we walked away from the sibling’s laughing gazes, through the quiet kitchen and tucked ourselves into the corner, were our souls disappeared.

“Do you think they saw us?” I peeked from the cabinet where we hid, but there was little I could see. “Are you sure it was Mama Onyebuchi?”

“I heard Small Emeka’s voice. I’m sure she’s the one.”

I was grateful Kunle reached the way he did, unless I could have cried my way home. He knew I was soft hearted. I once tried to own up to them, abandon my mother’s silent game but it was useless, their mouth were sharp and razor blades tearing the layers of my skin. So I stood back and watched Kunle puff his chest who taught was a lot stronger, which he was. Although, he never won, his presences sometimes weaken their resolve, and maybe it was because his skin was as black as tar.

“A crow,” his mother concluded. “Like its shadow on concrete.”

“Do you think your Mama will realize we’re gone?” I said amiable enough, pushing myself away from the cabinet.

“She probably saw us leaving?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes I am sure Onaye,” Kunle said, sitting with his back pressed to the wall.

“What if Mama Fati finds us in the kitchen,” I said. “She might shout at us.”

“And so what?” Kunle said, beginning to have that boyish grin. “Stop worrying abeg.”

“You know I hate it when they shout at me.” I glanced away, hiding the blush beginning to creep up my cheeks. This was one of the many disadvantages of being light skinned, the inability to hide facial anxiety.

“Trust me. You don’t hate it as much as I do.” His words ushered in a comfortable silence. Then he broke it by saying, “What if she really found us and shouted. Imagine her being so angry that she farts like a blow horn.”

There followed our whispered conversation of a sort which usually involved my utmost insecurities; about who was going to yell, if they someone thought we were lost and son on. Finally, Kunle said it – he made a ridiculous assumption- and we laughed hard. Kunle’s voice sounded like he was in pain, wheezing as he crossed his arm around his stomach. We must have made too much noise as Dubem came around the corner holding two mangoes in his hands- one in each.

“There you two are. I’ve been looking for you since,” Dubem said, sounding annoyed. This was not the first time Kunle and me left the crowd to find solace in our personal space, and Dubem always had to look for us when he arrived.

Dubem was one of the orphans in Mmiri. He was our only other friend who rather picked sides based on the first striker than on the uncanny colours of our skin. He was lean and a footballer – a sport nearly all the boys in town knew how to maneuver- but his case was different. He had told me it was his dream when I asked one time why he played the game so much. You should see him running around the field at school dribbling the ball moving faster than his legs, around or under his opponent’s legs and finishing strongly with a strong kick through a space created by placing two stone a meter away from each other. You should see him the smile on his face when he scores, filled with hope of a wonderful future in a professional team. You should see him beat his chest, but who would tell him life had a way of feeding you sand instead of garri.

Dubem sat down next to Kunle stretching his hands to us. “Do you want? They are sharing it in the parlor.”

I shook my head while Kunle said, “You know we won’t eat it,”

“More for me then.” He withdrew his hand and took a bite. His mouth remained open as he chewed nastily.

“Can you close your mouth?” Kunle complained.

Dubem shrugged. “So, what were you two talking about?”

“Mrs. Onaye was being insecure again.”

Dubem turned to me, placing one of his arm around my shoulder. “Na wa. About what this time.”

I pushed his arm abi. “Kunle, don’t tell him anything.”

“Why na,” Dubem grumbled.

“Because your mouth is too big.”

“Tchew. Please. My mouth is perfectly shaped on my face,” he said and took another bite from his mango.

“You know what she’s talking about. You will go and tell those your other friends.”

“It’s not like I do it intentionally,” Dubem replied, then gasped as though he just realized the kind of question he was asked. “I do not!”

“That is the problem. You don’t know when to shut up,” I said.

“Ahn ahn,” he grumbled. “What brought that leg now?”

“It’s true. When we go out there when the party is over, Fati and the rest will come to you to hear the latest gist from the witches. They have a way of manipulating you.”

“For your information I don’t easily get manipulated.”

“Really?” Kunle said. “Lets play a quick game. I promise you that it will not be a long one.”

“Just like that?” Dubem asked.

I did not know the game he was talking about. Kunle faced Dubem squarely and I watched him submit to Kunle’s questions.

“Two plus two?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Okay two,” Dubem sighed as he answered.

“Four plus four.”

“Eight.”

“Three times three?”

“Six.”

I already knew where he was going with the game, that I could not help the smile spreading on my lips.

“Who gave you the mango?” Kunle finally asked.

“Small Emeka,” Dubem answered as quickly as he answered the other questions.

“I told you,” Kunle said and clapped in triumpt.

I bit my lip, trying to contain my laugher when I saw the stunned look on his face like a deer caught in a car light. “Well, it’s not like it’s my fault,” he said faking a pained look on his face. There was nothing much to talk about after that, so we sat in comfortable silence, well almost comfortable if Dubem had not continued munching. It was when we left the party, strolling behind Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi in the solemn evening Kunle addressed the issue seriously. “I think we should stop hanging out with him.”

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

“One day Dubem is going to say something he is going to regret for the rest of his life,” Kunle said. “And that might end up hurting us.”

“Then we stop telling him things,” I told Kunle. “Cutting him off doesn’t make sense.”

“In my head it does o,” he replied, kicking a pebble off his path.

I shook my head, unable to continue the conversation. Dubem was our one and only friend, without him there would be literally nobody expect us and every insect the crawl down our walls.

#

While Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi went ahead to her house, Kunle and I diverted merely to the street just before, through a grassy pathway adorned with prickly bushes surrounding us whole. When you walked straight forward, the dark hues from the skies blended with a building never easily missed with its exfoliating walls reflective of time, mixed with the pains of lifeless plants and the slanted nature of the structure-as if it were to fall with a disappearing sun. A chief priest once lived there, but he was burnt alive in public. That story was told to everyone as children. According to the rumors, the chief priest, Oji, was a serial rapist of female children who had been brought by their parents to learn about their future – who was going to be great, who was going to be unfruitful and what not. The day the villagers found out, he was tired to a palm tree and burnt to death publicly. Since then, nobody has stepped foot in the building expect us. We were children who believed rumors to be only rumors and nothing else.

At first, the place really spooked me with its dark and ancient wall but slowly I began to ease into the environment. Kunle and me enjoyed watching the moon and stars from the veranda and since then I had found it simple and a satisfying hobby. The first time we came, we brought brooms and rag to clean it up, ridding it from the dry leaves that gathered through the years. We stayed there for a few minutes, sprawled on the cold hard ground, hands behind our heads, talking about what star got bigger or not and left when the insects begun to cry.

These were supposed to be cherished moment and I wished it was enough to cover up regret.

#

‘Every child is born different.’ I knew the phrase applied to every child before birth, but the true question laid after and this was it, ‘What is the child going to be?”

I guess I found out too late. And this happened with stitches already sewn in spirals around my neck. This was the day something truly exciting happened in our little village, since Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi’s visit with a man twice her age. It happened on a Friday evening. In the afternoon was inter-house sport’s day, and the field was filled with students clamoring in their uniquely colored sportswear and ribbons around their head. Dubem and I were in Blue house while Kunle was in Red, so it was necessary for us to stay away from each other if we did not want trouble. That was the thing with children, they rival over menial things. But I did not care, what I cared for was being alone.. I watched the races, matches, football and volleyball matches from the sidelines since I was not interested in participating. Few hours later, Red house was announced winner and we were to prepare for the celebratory party in the village square in the evening. We went back to Kunle’s house with a sulking Dubem to bath and eat, and change out of our school clothes and into the ones we took to his house the day before. We were on the road to the village square, freshly clean and smelt like hibiscus tea. The night was cool with the wind bellowing trees in every direction.

Kunle patted down his khaki shorts, eyebrows drawn together. “Ah. I think I forgot my medal.”

I turned to him. “Are you sure?”

“Check o,” Dubem said.

“Yes. I’m sure.” Kunle groaned, looking behind him. “I think I left it in the bathroom.”

“Mtchew. I’m sure you couldn’t let it go,” Dubem said, still angry his team took last in the competition.

“I need to get it,” he said as he made his way towards the house.

“I will follow you,” I said, turning to Dubem. “Please tell them we are coming.”

“Ok o. But be fast before I say something stupid.”

“Ah. Dubem?”

“What. You people are the one who said I talk too much.”

Kunle was meters away from me, so I ran to catch up to him. We got to his house and I waited for him outside to get his medal. I started getting antsy when seconds turned to minutes and he was nowhere to be found. I called out his name, and was welcomed with silence. I decided to walk in, my fingers finding the lit kerosene lamp by the table- I needed it to illuminate the other parts of the room since the day was darkening.

I called again. Nope. No answer.

I was not one who feared the dark, yet I was not one who liked it either. Darkness usually sang in a voice of another world, far away, the way everything seemed calm and black. I walked in deeper finding my way to the bathroom I assumed Kunle was searching every cabinet and drawer. I shifted through the junk filled table – crippled landline, dirty placemats and a broken kerosene lamp. For some reason this telephone struck me for nearly thirty seconds looking at the buttons welcoming my fingers to press. It was my first time seeing the telephone teachers in school tell us about. I could have pressed those buttons numbering one to nine and felt the smooth texture of the surface, if Kunle’s voice had not broken the silence. “Hello?”

I splinted to the bathroom “Kunle, we are getting late o,” I called out. “Who are you talking to?”

I slowed my pace when Kunle’s figure came into view. He was standing in front of the mirror, staring straight at himself unblinking. Even with my light illuminating the room, you would barely see him because he blended well with the darkness. I called out his name, but he either pretended he did not hear me or he did not hear me at all. I stared at Kunle and reached out to touch his bare shoulders. His skin was cold as ice and wet with sweat, his breathing escalated rapidly going as fast as the heavy playing of drums, I could literally see his chest bobbing far up and down. He fell forward, hands spread out on each side of the mirror, eyes closed tightly as though in pain and then he rotated his neck slowly.

I stepped back. “What is wrong with you?”

Hearing my words, he jerked, gasping loudly as he hurriedly moved back, eyes wide in fright. “What? What happened?”

“I’m supposed to ask you that question,” I said. I kept my distance afraid of something I could not quite place my hands on.

The flames danced in his wet and jittery eyes. He looked around the room, his gaze touching every inch. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I think the drink got to me.”

I frowned. “What drink?”

Kunle smiled sheepishly, digging into his pocket. He raised a transparent cellophane neatly tied to small ball, a liquid dancing within. “They shared palm wine for the winners.”

“Ehn? And you drank.”

I kept looking at him, but his eyes moved elsewhere when he answered. “It was sweet na.”

“I know its sweet but it can make you drunk.”

“Abeg. Let it go for today,” he replied knowing how close his mother and I were. “Let us go before they start looking for us.” He bent low and picked his medal from the pockets of his dirty uniform under the sink. We did not say anything, because I was kind of pissed. He knew we did not take things people and yet he collected and drank.

What if he was poisoned?

Kunle walked behind me, moving soundlessly on his own with his head down, legs shuffling the sand and lost in a world of his own. That was how he was at times when he wanted a space of his own. I wondered what he thought about. Despite being pissed, I snuck glances in case the grounds became taller than him. There were moments when he would walk very fast, speeding with his amble legs. Then like an engine he would slow down to a stop. This continued until we got to the square where the party was in full swing. The parents were gisting among themselves while the children danced to the sound of the Akpere, other played games- ten ten and ayo seed. Mama Fati and her children distributed more packaged snacks around.

“Where have you two been?” Dubem jogged to us and grabbed Kunle by the elbow propelling his toward the crowd. “They were sharing can malt for the winning team.”

Kunle stood straight and still, just stopped moving as the world continued around him. I saw Dubem draw his hand back as though his skin burned. “Why is your skin cold? Are you alright?”

Kunle finally shuddered and came back. He looked around him, then turned to catch my eyes. “Where are we?”

“At the party na. What is wrong with you?” Dubem glued his palm on Kunle’s forehead, then glued it to his own. “Onaye, better take him home before he will come and faint here.”

“Free me,” Kunle replied. “I’m just tired.”

After that, Kunle very much became his normal self. With the way he laughed at the lazy attempt of Dubem participating in the dancing competition and chocked when he was pulled out for losing, nobody would think he was a drunk walking ghost minutes ago. Maybe he controlled himself better around them, never as relaxed as he was around me. To him, showing his weakness meant long days of taunting from the other kids. There were days he would forget and space out in class during lessons and when the teachers ask him to answer questions, he would stare right through him ignoring everything around him. The teachers would think he was being disrespectful and send him out to cut grasses in the field.

During break time, I found him shirtless and sweaty sweeping the cutlass over the tall grasses overgrown in the few month that had gone by. “Did you drink again?” I asked.

He stopped, throwing the cutlass on the floor and turned. “I did not,” he said. “It was because I’ve not been sleeping well.”

Truth be told, I’ve noticed the dark bag under his eyes swollen with lack of rest. “Why have you not been sleeping well?”

He shrugged, raising one shoulder high. “I don’t know. When I close eyes, I just can’t sleep,” he said. “Maybe it’s because my mother is not around.”

Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi left for Ife to attend her friend wedding ceremony. Somehow her going affected Kunle’s sleep. I experienced the same problem when Mama died, my eye were much bigger than his, and red with tears.

“Don’t worry. I’ll stay with you until your mother gets back,” I told him. Papa would not notice, since he was out groveling the grounds for herbs for two weeks. The amount of time it would take Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi to get back. And I was positive there would be patients- who would want a child to cure their wounds.

I was stupid, I was ignorant and my face was clouded with friendship. Soon, I wondered if I should have stayed in my home and not his.

#

Three months before the end of our final year in secondary school, a week since I’ve stayed with Kunle, the rains came down pouring over our roof. The water had first come with blocks of ice and then the wind that came with it snatched a handful of sand and dried tree leaves, throwing them wherever they wished. Just the first day, the water spilled out of gutters clogged with branches and rocks and big pile of dry leaves. By noon on the second day, we were trapped in our homes, verandas were below the water level and the sun refused to show its face. When the moon shone, people walked in the flood to savage their food from their farms- that was if they found any. The rain had reduced to a drizzle so they assumed it was safe to go out.

“I think we should help your mother with her farm,” I told Kunle as we watched people swim in the brown water.

“Do you really think there will be anything to harvest in this weather?” he asked. “Besides there will the things crawling in the water.”

“See you. So you are afraid of something?” I teased him.

Kunle watched me and laughed. “Lie and tell me you will not scream when insects crawl up your leg.”

I shook instinctively imagining a scenario. “Tchew. Forget I said anything.”

On the third day, the sun came out, drying the water enough for us to get out. After the last week of staying with Kunle and ensuring he was no longer sleep deprived, Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi finally came back with new set of ceramic wears. I never really understood her fondness for plates, or the reason behind having them in the same blue colour. I visited their home one time, and she was at their veranda tearing papers into bits as she sipped from her tea cup.

One weekend, when I was visiting she suggested Kunle staying with me as she sipped from her tea cup.

“Today, Kunle’s father died,” she said. “As Kunle grows, I’m reminded of my husband when I look in his face.” She was beginning to tear up at this point. “Then I wonder if he would have wanted us to go back.”

“What do you think he would have done?”

“To he honest, I don’t know,” she cleaned her eyelids. “It’s not like home was any better.”

“Do you want me to stay with him for a while?” I asked.

“I will soon go inside,” she sighed as she stood. “There’s no need. Isn’t your father back from his journey? Go and help him at home.”

Deep down I knew the reason for refusing was beyond that. Papa already warned me from hanging out with Kunle during a rant about destroying our minuscule reputation, when he told me about how being born was a mistake and if he caught me breaking any rules, he would throw me out of the house. Brutal, I know. But I understood, I was not who he wanted. I was a child too light for him to bore. In a nutshell, his anger would not only be on me but on Kunle as well and I did not want that. When Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi told me how Papa looked at Mama on their wedding day, and how she watched him rub her legs from afar, I could not believe it was the same man I lived with. The Papa I knew was a grumpy man who was strict about his native medicine practice, cared about himself more than he did his child and chose to believe superstitions over reality. I wondered how he would react when he found out I visited Oji’s home.

Sometimes, Papa was spending nights away from the home and I was either staying at Kunle’s or alone at home. On afternoons when he assumed I was at school and not writing tests, I came back to crashes and lewd noises from his bedroom. I would place my hands over my ears, but it did little to curtail the noises and the conversations that came after.

“Where is that your oyibo daughter,” a female voice spoke lacking breath.

“Which oyibo daughter?” Papa said laced with anger. “Abeg don’t bring that one in this.”

“Why na. Is she not your child?”

“I swear if you mention her again, I will throw you back into the street.”

“Oga, why are you getting angry over simple question?” she asked. “Let me just pack my going and be going.”

“Oya wait. Sorry.”

“No o. just give me my money let me go,” she said. “I should have not come here sef before I carry curse on my head. You know what people say about wrong children.”

“That they come from bad parents.”

“Exactly,” she said punctuating with snaps of her finger. “Are you sure marrying Ekene was not wrong. I mean, she was a rejected piece.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“It does o.”

I left the house and came back when it was dark.

“You should stay away more,” Papa told me the next morning as I grinded his herbs on the stone. “My business is crumbling because of you.”

I chose the play Mama’s silent game there – truth be told, I was frightened my voice may crumble and tears splutter. So I kept grinding away with my ears closed and lips sealed with invisible threads. His business was drying out, with people choosing to seek help from neighboring villages or other medicine men to sought out their medical problems and with the modernity warming into hearts, others prefer the syringes and tablets to manually grinded leaves. He was to blame as much as I was. If he were present in the shop more often, then I’d be less seen, dappling with my own problems than watching over a store no visitors would wonder. Now I questioned if he really did go hunting for herbs those times Mama was still alive or reaching another ladies pants with hands meant to touch another.

These parts of me were enclosed in tightly covered calabashes. Letting Kunle stay with me was going to open my sealed pains into reality. I preferred the dreamlike stay I lived in, and the place where my fear was limited. Kunle was like a brother to me but there were boundaries they could never cross, situations they would never understand unless your blood coursed through their veins.

Mama told me she wanted another child after I was born- she saw the vulnerability in my baby eyes and the turbulences in my future. She wished for a son, strong enough to protect his sister but she died when her dream stood ripe. Maybe her spirit drew Kunle to me, maybe her spirit wondered after her death, maybe Kunle was a fulfillment of her wish.

“I don’t like it when you stare like that,” Kunle complained. We were once again in our little bubble, at the abandoned building.

“See who is talking,” I said, shifting enough to gaze at the moonlight illuminating face. It was beautiful. It was shining. It was bold and commanding. My heart pounded as I gazed upon the apple stuck in his throat, small and protruding, bobbed with every saliva he swallowed. In my sixteen years, there have been no boy that caught my eye. I was too busy minding my business to worry about it. So why now did I suddenly feel conscious of my greatest anxieties? I spent time in disbelief that this person- the one who I knew as my best friend- was here lying beside me unaware of my emotion and the said girl was too chicken to tell. The day I realized I liked Kunle was the first time he told Small Emeka off- his shoulder squared, lips pressed in a frown and hands balled in angry fists.

I felt a rush of adrenaline.

An hour later, I sat at the edge of the Veranda, my legs dangling underneath and asked Kunle if he had feelings for anyone. He bent his sideways sitting beside me, bottom lip caught in-between his teeth.

“When you say like, what do you mean?” he asked with a questioning gaze.

I shrugged. “I mean do you like like a person?”

“I don’t know.”

“Answer the question with yes or no.”

“Then it’s in-between.”

“Why?” I said, my voice flat.

“Because I’m not sure.”

“Who?”

“Amebo.” He laughed and stuck out his tongue. “I will not tell you.”

Kunle was a difficult boy to read and if he did not tell me who he liked, there was no way of finding it out. And I doubted Dubem knew. Kunle sighed heavily, and laid back down. Something was troubling him.

I closed my eyes and opened them. “What’s on your mind?”

“If we were born differently, I wonder what our life would have been like.”

“Is it Small Emeka again?”

He nodded. “They think they can judge us when their hearts are unclean. Someone should just teach them a lesson.”

“Hopefully, that person will come one day.”

“The sooner the better,” he sneered,

I grinned. “Oya tell me about this person you like.” I nudged him with my elbow. “Is she fine?” *Is she me?*

Kunle rolled his eyes. “Yes. She is very fine like fresh hibiscus leaves.”

“Then I want to meet her,” I said.

Kunle looked taken aback and sat up in one full swing. His eyes searched mine, asserting if I were serious or not. “Are you serious?”

“Before,” I said. “If this girl really exists as you say, then I want to meet her.”

He eyed me in a non-offensive way, his face cradled in humor. Finally he jumped down and wore his slippers beside my long forgotten ones. “It’s getting late.”

“So?” I folded my arm. “I will not leave here until you answer me.”

He smiled sheepishly- a look you rarely saw on Kunle. “My mother will look for me.”

I sighed and laid with my elbow facing him. For the next minute, we locked eyes – me daring him to agree and him forcing me to drop the matter. I tried to ignore the mosquitoes buzzing in my ear and the possibility of them sucking my blood.

“Fine,” he groaned. “I will tell you tomorrow after school.”

He agreed. It was what I wanted, yet my heart felt heavy in disappointment.

I actually wanted to know the kind of girl who stole Kunle’s heart, it was this will that had me wait outside our school gate after school hours.

“See this one,” a voice spoke in my ears.

Without turning, I already knew who it was. His collar was unbuttoned and tie loose across his neck. Behind him was Fati, her brother, Toby and two other kids from my level. I knew them as Somto and Chukwu.

“Are you waiting for me?” Small Emeka asked, reaching for my hair.

I stepped back, hand tight on my school back. “What do you want?”

Fati smiled at me. “Why do you think we need something?”

“J-Just go. K-Kunle will be here soon.” I hated myself for stumbling on my words.

Fati’s brother laughed. “As if he can do anything.”

They gave me a look and in that second, I saw a deer standing the midst of wolves. I assumed they would back down if I mentioned Kunle, but there was little a name could do without being bodily present.

Small Emeka opened a bottle I had not noticed in his hand and poured the content over my head. It smelt like the beverage Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi used to give me. “Ah! I thought you will look like us,” Small Emeka said. “Next time I’ll bring something darker.”

“You people should stop all this things,” I pleaded, droplets of the sticky liquid entering my mouth. “I’m begging you.”

“Then you’ll have to kill us first,” Small Emeka said and roared with the others in ear splitting laughter.

“I go kill you now!” Sand flew as Kunle attacked from nowhere. His fists arched down, aiming it on his left cheek. I heard the sound of flesh pounding and saw red liquid pool from Small Emeka’s lips. Small Emeka didn’t – couldn’t fight back, Kunle was bigger and broader and watching him throw punches to a figure two times smaller was frightening. His hatred, his wrath, I studied this person – bloodshot eyes and extended long arms- Kunle looked different. Scary different.

“Chineke. I told you this boy is cursed.” That voice made me glance up to meet the grounds covered with people- parents and school children, curiosity and disgust latched on their faces. From their expression nobody was going to stop the fight. The air must have carried the sound of bones breaking and his grunt through glass and between grasses. I briefly wondered what punishment Kunle would face for plummeting his school mate. Was the school going to take care of it or the village since the incident occurred outside school? And what would Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi say?

Kunle released his hold on Small Emeka’s collar, stepping away from him and stared at his work. For a second, I thought I saw a smile. He rubbed his bloody fist on his blue trouser, wiped the sweat from his forehead, ignoring the murmuring around him.

“Kunle?” I called out.

He turned but didn’t reply. Small Emeka was crying, hands shaking, trying to get up from his shame.

“He is possessed,” Small Emeka said in-between sobs of rage. “The bad deeds of his parents have come to hunt us all.”

Thunder clapped, insinuating his point. The sky darkened and a heavy downpour followed after. I grabbed Kunle’s hand and pulled, but he stayed there like a stone. And like stone he stayed when Small Emeka’s naked mutilated body was found floating the next day in the swollen gutters.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NARRATOR

That dull afternoon.

The day Kunle rippled the village with his heavy punches on Small Emeka’s face.

How does one watch him pushed to the ground by a roaring heap of ridiculous, greasy, foolish humankind and not feel the depth of your soul squeeze?

Years later, the start was me.

The time my tears brewed Mmiri to cold tea and caused a spectacularly tragic moment. And for the first time, I regretted letting the tears well from deep inside and coursed down my skin. This moment involved a boy with a yellow umbrella, a gutter and a man who saw the scene play out. He was the only one who saw Small Emeka die, and he narrated so well the story that nobody had a choice but to believe.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TRAVELING TRADER

It was on Saturday. The cloud was like spoilt yam, white and gray. In some places, it was pure white but that day in Mmiri, rain was brewing within the grey thickness.

Earlier, there were children playing Suwe outside of their homes, on the street and in the plantain fields. But when the rain poured down, those children were no more scattered around, instead they were cooped up in their houses. I hid as well, under mechanic shed with my bag, heavy with rice and Iron beans. The rain was raw on the sand, so bits flew my way, on my foot and my slippers.

Then, the rain slackened enough for me to scurry my way to the Traders meeting.

A small boy in blue shorts and white singlet, carried a yellow umbrella long the rows of bushes. He placed his umbrella close to himself, so his face was well hidden. The rain tapped on tight material, sounding to my ears like when rain hit roofs. I stumbled out of my hiding place and noticed he held a bucket of eggs which meant he was on an errand to deliver or collect.

About three minutes down the street as we surprisingly headed for the same direction, a tree had fallen with a pictured sign board enough to block the path. I hadn’t realized the rain fell that heavily. Beyond us, the branches had found their way into the gutters and water spilled out of them into the sandy streets.

The small boy turned to the side street that had been cut through the nest of bushes. This road roughly curved though the soiled area farther down the place we now crossed, the river bank. Despite the reducing rain, the water continued to rise, the boy increased his pace and I thought I should too. It was a long dark afternoon and any other day I would have agreed that following a little boy leg on tail was suspicious and uncanny. Here I was because I knew little about shortcuts.

The small boy paused just beyond the dung up sand at the edge of a junction piled with motorcycles wet with rain. Behind those packed machines was a store buckled with chains and padlocks. I thought the owners were hidden in there but with the way the owner protected it, I doubted. And that meant, they were far away because there were no other stores, trees except for the one I saw far down and it would take five minutes to get there.

He put on speed once more and because where we were was familiar, I took my time walking as my bag was beginning to weigh down my shoulders. Then one of his feet slipped and he went sprawling, eggs flung high and screaming in pain. From his new height, he tried catching falling eggs like some superhero in cartoons, but they came down too fast, cracking on the wet sands. I remember the event startling me, so I stood and watched.

“God punish you!” he yelled, dismayed and tried standing up, scraping one knee and he began to cry a little. It was his fault he slipped, only if he had slowed down.

He got up and went over to the turned over bucket. He bent and picked it. The once white bucket was brown and dirty, covered fully in mud.

“God punish you!” he yelled again, kicked the bucket hard, but not enough to set it rolling. The small boy glanced around, searching for his umbrella which had been carried by the wind slightly across the gutters.

The small boy sighed and walked over to the gutter. He dropped to his knees and stretched. The gutter water was overflown, dark and smelling liquid. If only, they were taken better care off, it would have been easier to climb in and out without fear of catching malaria or something worse. The umbrella was stuck in a herd of bushes which made a gentle rustling sound as the boy tugged to no end.

I knew with his height, there was no way he would succeed.

I would have helped him, in fact I was already on my way there and wouldn’t have stopped if those new hands hadn’t pulled the umbrella away. Not to the small boy. The person had pulled it to himself.

The small boy blinked and stood. He could barely make out what he saw and neither did I. I saw the boy frown, and speak. If I had been closer, I would have been able to make out the words spoken.

There was a boy on the other side. The atmosphere was dark with the rain clouds, but the light was good enough so I was sure who I was seeing. It was a taller boy, lanky yet spotted muscles and broad shoulders. I could only see his side; nose pointed to the sky and lips curled upwards. His chest was bare and laps covered in brown shorts. His body was dark like midnight, a rather odd skin tone and I thought the lighting was to blame. What really stood out for me was the colour of his hair. It was white, white like Anapuna salt.

The other boy held the umbrella over his head, twisted and turned. This set the small boy off, causing him to angrily stomp his feet.

“Do you want your umbrella?” The other boy smiled.

It surprised me, I was able to hear him speak and his voice sent chills running down my spine.

“Give it to me,” the small boy screamed.

The boy laughed. “Why should I give it to you?”

“Because it’s my own.” The small boy reached forward, then the other boy drew his hand back. “I will tell on you o.”

“Tell on me to who?” the other boy asked taking a menacing step forward.

“You no dey scare me.”

“Oya, come and take it,” the other boy said. “If I don’t scare you, jump over the gutter and take it from me.”

“Do you think I can’t do it?” The small boy reached forward again and the other boy moved back.

“I never said you can’t,” the other boy said.

I wanted to tell the boy to forget the umbrella and leave, when my mental switchboard turned off my reasoning for no reason. Right then, my body was stiff and disobedient. I wanted to move, but I didn’t. I saw myself watching the scene unfold.

The small boy leaned forward, checking the depth and size of the gutter. Suddenly, he placed his hands on his nose. I could smell it too. The decomposing smell of leaves and goat shit. And Fart. The kind that is released after a night of drinking Cowbell milk and swallowing hot beans.

“How do you expect me to cross this?” the small boy complained.

“You jump,” the other boy said. “That is if you really want your mother’s umbrella.”

The small boy hesitated. The wheels in his head crunched and turned. “Better be prepared o. Is it because they didn’t punish you last time? I swear when I tell my mother, you will be flogged in public.”

“Are you sure?”

“Just wait and see.”

The small boy jumped.

The other boy seized his arm.

I saw the boy kick his leg and let his arm go. The small boy screamed in agony as he fell deep into the water.

What I saw was bad enough to kill the trust I had for others, killing my sanity and destroying my day; I saw disaster.

“Bye bye,” the other boy chuckled and threw the umbrella on him. “What comes around goes around,” he said, walking away.

I ran, I ran to save the boy drowning, but the dark water had covered him whole. Only when the rain finished falling, did we find his body washed up near a church during service. A late member was the first to find him and by the time the small boy was pulled out of the gutter, he was already dead. His eyes stared up to the sky, his mouth was wide open in scream – even with the heavy cries of his mother I could see hear the icy voice saying, “What comes around goes around.”

I wondered why he said that.

CHAPTER NINE

KUNLE

I feel myself changing and I don’t know if it is something I like. I know change is constant but I think I’m changing too early. I see things differently and I feel different like my body no longer belongs to me. The same steps I take today are the same I’ll take tomorrow, but then the other weeks are for another to walk.

If you ask me who? I honestly don’t know.

And I don’t know why I’m talking to myself in the mirror at four in the morning.

CHAPTER TEN

After Small Emeka died, Obi - King of Mmiri came to the main village in his white regalia to declare a week of mourning for the boy was a child and the child was an only son. He was tall and dirt skinned, muscular under his tight shirt and handsome like twilight. Before he left, his feet were graced with the tears of his mourning parents and other women who shared in their pains - or wanted to feel of the soothing skin of the handsome king. Stuck on their lips were words begging for redemption. They wanted the culprit found and punished.

This was before the Trader came forward with his story and yet they believed someone had killed the town’s troublemaker. He’d somehow asked for it by being too bold, or rash. If only he’d only kept to himself and avoided trouble, he might have been alive. As though anyone actually deserved to be dead.

Small Emeka’s burial was gloomy and grey, occupied with people transfixed on his body wrapped in white cloth at the altar. There were lit candles surrounding his body and the pastor blew on them as he prayed for his restless soul. Onaye watched with clouded eyes. Her tears fell, droplets wetting her black regalia and those eyes remembered from the ugly times they shared, yet they stung because she never wished him dead. And even though deep down she wanted him dead, it would have been in his sleep and less brutal than the way he left the world. Dubem’s hand grabbed my shaking ones and the other wiped under my eyes.

“Why are you crying,” he asked. “You should be happy.” It was then, she faced him squarely and saw his words did not project the look on his face. He had that look between happy and sad; indifference should be the word.

“You are not smiling yourself,” she told him, slurring in her words like a drunkard high on palm wine.

He shrugged. “Do you think someone really killed him?”

“I honestly don’t know,” she said and a new wave of tears came rolling down her chin. When her heart stood firm once again, she was standing by his grave site, her arms wrapped around her torso as she watched the able bodied men in the village lower the corpse into the dug hole. There were people taking sands into their hands next to her, and throwing them into the hole. Onaye turned and looked above many heads. Kunle was still absent.

It had been days since she last saw him.

When she went for a visit the day after the body was found, Ayọ̀bámi told her he had come down with a cold. And the day after that, he was out of town. And the day after that, he was down with diarrhea. And now… I only saw him few weeks later when a seething mob dragged him out butt naked.

This was after the trader came forth with his story.

“He was black,” the man announced at the market square. “I saw him with my own eyes. The boy killed Small Emeka.”

After two days, the new reached his parents ears and then the news got to the king. The afternoon after the two days, the king ordered Kunle to be brought to him for questioning because the parents of Small Emeka were demanding and angry and grieving.

When they broke down the door to Kunle’s home, Kunle was in the bathroom, washing his skin with warm water and Ayọ̀bámi was whipping up dinner in the kitchen. Ayọ̀bámi stared transfixed with a wet spatula on her hand. She flinched at the sound of Kunle’s screams and shoved her way into his room. Kunle jumped under tight grips, eyes were wide in alarm. He hadn’t dried his body; droplets of water covered him whole and his pubic hair was loosely curled.

“What are you people doing here? Leave me alone.” He flapped his bare wrist his captors faces.

“You must be punished,” one of the men said. “The evil spirit in you will be beaten out.”

Ayọ̀bámi held that man’s neck and pushed him, surprising everyone with her sudden gain of strength. “Don’t you dare refer to my son that way,” she said, stumbling to Kunle whose eyes were wet and red. It was impossible for Onaye to not imagine Kunle pushing Emeka into the gutter, they were always bitter towards each other and it didn’t help that they got into a fight before his death. When she found his bracelets near where Emeka fell and picked it, she couldn’t help her mind accusing Kunle.

This was before the trader came forth.

Kunle always wore his father’s bracelets since he came back from Ife and never took it off even when she asked. If he wanted to be buried, he’d want the bracelet to be buried with him- that was how much he loved that bracelet. When she picked it, she ran her thumb on the broken band- she realized it was ripped apart with brutal force. The goldsmith confirmed her suspicion when he told her one of the rings had fallen off. That day Kunle caught a cold, she told Ayọ̀bámi about it and told her to ask Kunle about it.

“I really think this is a copycat,” Ayọ̀bámi said, feeling the bracelet. “Kunle did say this was one of a kind but you know these days. Everyone wants to make money off the original. But I’ll still ask him about it.”

Ayọ̀bámi left and came back with an eyebrow disappearing into her fake bangs. “Sometimes, I really don’t understand that boy.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he threw it out,” she said. “Well I guess he no longer wants ties with Ife anymore.” Onaye knew Kunle was lying and kept the bracelet in her pocket knowing he’d want it someday.

But now, staring as the mob carried him out into the street, she felt scared. If he had actually let Small Emeka drown and the village found out, canning him to death, how would she survive alone? You lost your mother a long time ago and he was there to keep you company. Maybe, she was coming to a conclusion too fast.

Onaye heard the broken door creek, then the sound of someone slapping Kunle’s butt cheeks. She looked around the room, at the wet floor, the monogamy table and the scattered set of dishes Ayọ̀bámi had bought. There was a tea cup missing. The lamp was missing too. Someone from the mob must have stolen them, she thought. At every opportunity, a thief always found a way to whizzes valuables away; one day she hoped thunder would strike them dead.

The sound of rushed footsteps became faint and a few minutes later, Dubem came running. She watched him speak, yet her ears refused to hear. It wasn’t until he shook her shoulders did hums come rushing through.

“Onaye,” he said, panting heavily. “There are taking him to the shrine.”

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As they cut through backyards, Onaye placed her hands in fists and jumped high and low fences, slivers of memory glimmering within her. Why now? Why did she remember a moment now when they first found Oji’s place and what’s stranger was the fact that she never recalled living that memory. It was dark as usual and the night birds where wide awake with their noises, there was an extended gloom- she couldn’t remember ever staying out till midnight. She’d been relieved at the sight of familiar shoes at the entrance. There was a hand stretching out from the house, she grabbed it and went in, shivers running through her. The memory was only vague, barely seeming real but here she was standing in front of Oji’s house as though something had moved her there.

“What are you doing,” Dubem said grabbing her arm. “You know it is forbidden to be here.”

Of course she knew, that was why they went there secretly and never in broad day light.

Dubem pushed her forward as another memory watered down whatever emotions she had left and replaced it with a sudden fright of the unknown. As she stared on her path, a dull pain filtered up her arm, she saw fat fingers trailing its way down her throat, then watching as yellow eyes blinked in the bleak darkness. A scream lashed on her lips but the unknown was adamant to keep her silent as another set of those sickly fingers forced their way to her mouth. The unknown held her to her throat, and forced her to her knees in a swift push that split her knees and drew blood from them. The darkness through her eyes were now watered, and the next memory was of the girl laying on the floor with barely a sheet to cover her pride. The girl was pale now, her eyes glazed over and arms sprawled all over.

The hours went by and she finally stood, wobbly on her starchy legs. Shuffling on them, she walked out and it was a good thing she did unless the unknown might have returned to continue where he left of. That was if there was anything left of her he’d enjoying having as his. She cradled her hand, there was that searing pain which never left her alone and without explanation followed her down the hills to until her guts spluttered on bare ground.

“What is wrong with you today,” Dubem said.

Onaye jumped and met Dubem’s curious eyes examining her. She shook her head and said, “Nothing.” And continued along as though her mind was diffused. The memory had her comparing the touch of the unknown to Kunle’s owns as he were the only owe who had trailed her fingers down hers once. It was a silent night, the days she stayed with him when his mother was out. It felt safer to stay in his bed after minutes groveling at her feet to keep him company and aid his sleep. At first her head raised warning alarms; what if they were caught, what if something happened between both of them, and by something she meant if she would be able to keep her hands at bay since she was nursing her heary- but she ended up conceding to his words. The whole time, she kept awake while he snored beside her- he didn’t seem to mind she was there while assaulted her feelings and when she decided to leave, he trapped her with his heavy arms. Her nipples stood, thinking how it would feel trailing her tongue down his muddy arms.

So she knew, the unknown arms were definitely not his. And the memory definitely not hers.

Outside the shrine was crowded, so they had to fight theur way through to the front. A body away, she could make out bare Kunle on his knees before the chief priest, arms bond behind him with a rope. He was backing the crowd, so she could not make out the emotions on his face.

The colonization of the white men had not affected the people of Mmiri to the core for them to abandon their ritualistic ways of doing things. Even though many had converted to Christianity, even though the burial was done by the church, there was that itch to go back when fear overcame and patience seemed like decades of unanswered prayers.

“Do not harm my son,” Ayọ̀bámi screamed from where she was being held by two men at the far corner. “I swear to all that is holy that you all shall regret if you do anything to him.”

The chief priest nodded. “The eyes of the beast shall open when taken into mouth.”

“What does that even mean?” Ayọ̀bámi’s face was lit with desperation.

“I wish we can do something.” If Dubem were not so close, I wouldn’t have heard his words.

It made Onaye uncomfortable. She knew as well as Dubem that Kunle would have stepped in if anyone of them were in trouble-especially her, but she could never admitted it out loud. It would make her hate herself. It was strange to be here, unable to defend – her father once called her worthless, she had cried because they hurt, but now she knew he was telling the truth.

Kunle looked at his mother and he closed distance on his knees. “I will be okay Mama,” he said. “Don’t worry about me.”

There, Small Emeka’s mother began wailing from where she stood beside her husband who was trying to contain his anguish. The woman fell to the ground, cupping sands and flinging them forward. “My son o. My son o. You people must punish him for me.”

“Calm down woman, it is not yet certain the boy is the killer,” the chief priest said.

“How can you say that? Just look at the boy, abomination,” she said, then faced Ayọ̀bámi. “You and your husband came to pollute our village with your adulterous marriage and now, we are paying the consequences.”

“That is a lie!” Ayọ̀bámi exclaimed.

“Are you sure?” She picked a pebble, scrambling to her feet and advanced towards Ayọ̀bámi. She would have attacked her if her husband hadn’t pulled her back. “Leave me alone. Leave… let me end this once and for all.”

“You want to stain your hands with blood.”

“If it means getting rid of your curses, I am willing to take the fall.”

“That’s enough,” the chief priest raised his voice. “I think our questions will be answered after he performs the rite.”

“What rite?” Ayọ̀bámi asked.

The chief priest pretended to be deaf to her questions and the ones that came after. Onaye looked at the blood-colored cloth wrapped around a calabash cup a child in white wrapper and chalky dots across her chest handed to him. He shook the content and handed it to Kunle. “Drink it,” he ordered. “Tell us your judgment.” When he said those lines, Onaye knew they were directed to someone else, someone not seen by naked eyes.

Now, the air stilled. Guilt filled Onaye as he stared at it, dashing the edge of her hand against her eyes.

“If he’s guilty, he will die,” Dubem stuttered. “And live if he did not kill Emeka.” He sniffled and turned to me, his face crumpling. “Where are you going to?” He asked.

My legs were moving on their own, my head humming as my eyes forced itself close. I didn’t want to watch, my heart would not take it if he died, so it was better to leave like a coward a face the news later on.

PART II

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The woman left behind in this story dug a grave as soon as she arrived Ife. The grave does not belong to a relative but for someone, she used to know. She was doing more than she should have because the woman’s first son willfully left her in this unfortunate life. As her only friend, she was supposed to shovel the heaps of sand out of her grave as a sign of respect. Her son is supposed to shovel at least once, and watch the laborers lower her casket in it.

The woman only told a few people she was coming. Only the necessary ones. And when she got there no one cared about where or what she had come from. She was still a woman and immaculately light-skinned, with strong arms, so she was able to attract the street boys who offered to lend her a hand. To which she refused, of course. It was not their duty. This was a responsibility she put on herself to finish. There was heat and some sweat, and a memory of groveling out the grave with her bare hands and washing them with the water someone gave her to drink. The woman watched the sachet double. Her blouse was beginning to feel uncomfortable and her bra tighter on her skin, as if someone drew the straps. A man spoke to her and touched her arms, but the sun had already blurred her vision.

Then she was floating on the sea of the past years, her hand beating on her chest and feet digging into the sand.

“Why are you crying?” Someone spoke into her ears. “Is it someone you loved?”

The person was obviously referring to the deep hole but the woman answered, “A storm is coming.”

He laughed. “The sun is still very bright.”

“There is a storm inside of me that will never stop brewing,” she said, and her eyes darkened. When she woke up, she was slouched on a chair, her head turned to the side. There was a small pile of clothes on the floor next to her, thrown inside a carton box. No one else was in the building. The woman sat up and found more boxes in what seemed like a living room, but there was no couch or television. Just her, her clothes and the twenty boxes which did not belong to her.

She called out for someone, anyone and when nobody answered, she wore her clothes and returned to continue digging. Even when the sun felt like a furnace on her back, she dug two times faster. Her arms ached each time she lifted the shovel, but she kept going.

The woman was doing this to prove a point. That she was strong, able to withstand the harsh condition and not scurry away like she did those past years. She was there for days and they only found her when Dubem came to Ife. The person whose house she slept in was one of his friends.

“She’s tall,” the friend told him over a midnight call. “She looked like she wanted to die inside this gidigba sun.”

After two days, the taxi driver took him to Kunle’s father’s house. The housekeeper quickly showed him the way to the backyard because he might be able to convince her to leave the sun. When he stepped out through the corridor, he saw the woman lying on the hot sand. She hadn’t changed her clothes for days. They wore the stains of mud, and as Dubem drew closer, he covered his nostrils.

“Dubem? What are you doing here?”

“Get up,” he grabbed her arms and gave it a huge tug. “I’m taking you inside.”

She stood up, obeying automatically, even as her eyes swirled. The woman allowed him take her inside, stumbling on her feet on the way. “Give me ten minutes,” she told him and entered the bathroom as Dubem watched her. It was impossible for Dubem to see the woman without seeing his friend – two of them running around in their underwear around the house, sipping the tea his mother made on his veranda. When he left for school and wasn’t told why Kunle died, Onaye was the first person that came to mind.

Kunle’s body was covered with white cloth the day he returned, but Dubem hadn’t wanted to ask at that time. If he heard it too soon, how he died and if it were as unfortunate as the other deaths in that village, he might have killed the person responsible. He would find and chase them to the ends of the earth and do to them what they did to the people in his village. If he found out afterwards, when he returned to school, then he would only break something in his dormitory. But there was no Onaye or Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi to ask. Every year, he would visit Ife to ask and every time he was turned way.

“Go and live your life,” Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi said. “Stop living in the past. Kunle would have wanted that for you if he were still here.”

Onaye said it was ridiculous chasing after the past but today, seeing her wallow in his parent’s home, he knew for a fact Kunle was still in her heart. And he had something to give her, something she will forever cherish.

Dubem heard water beat down the curve of the toilet bowl, then the louder sprinkle of his friend bathing under the shower. He looked around the room, at the clothes scattered on the bed, at the empty bottles of water and the empty carbin biscuit wrapper lying on the floor. Mrs. Ayọ̀bámi would have had a fit if she were to see the state of her house. He felt a pain in his chest thinking of her and her misfortunes – losing those she cherished at a young age. During those times he’d gone to see her, she was just a shell, bodily there but mind somewhere beyond the world.

The sound of water from the bathroom went off, and a few minutes later, Onaye emerged with a wrapper tied across her chest. Dubem watched her sweep the pile of clothes to the floor to make room for the both of them. Her movement was slow, less fluid and her Forty something self-looked like she aged over sixty. There were bags under her eyes, wrinkles around her forehead, chapped lips like torn cellophane – she was not the girl he was used to.

“The ground gets harder as I dig further. It looks like a hole instead of a grave. Did you see it that time?” When Dubem shook his head, Onaye stood and pulled him outside.

As they stepped outside again, Onaye stared at the hole from afar. The fact of the hole was strange – it was already four feet deep. She’d been relieved to see her friend after a long time. Although things had gotten even stranger when he arrived but she had obeyed him as if he were her saviour and now they were standing together looking at that deep hole.

There had been a man once and he was not the boy she longed for. But she tried everything possible to let go of him. The man she met was tall and lanky, with armpit hairs and rippled muscles. He was Yoruba. She remembered allowing the man entering her home, then unpacking his things to make her house full. The daring names he called her; beautiful, darling, a love and more. Silvers of memory. The man making dinner and serving it on their cotton bed, washing her when her body was hot and sweaty. He was a sweet man. At times she compared him to that boy, then a flare of rage burns inside of her. It ate her, then it scorched her until she rejected the offer of marriage.

Onaye jerked on Dubem’s cold fingers and looked at her left hand. She still felt the ring that used to be there. As she stared at it, she remembered the disappointment on her future husbands face. She remembered the tears falling, the lips quivering and the sneering power drain from his eyes. The last memory of him was the truck packing his belonging out of her house.

Maybe it was a good thing the burial came when it did. She had a place to run to incase he returned and she was forced to love a man just to please him. She was not ready for that kind of life.

“Onaye…”

I waited for him to finish his sentence, but he said nothing else. She turned and watched his furrowed brows. “You want me to leave it alone?”

“More than two men dig graves. It takes at least two days to finish. Depending on how deep you want it.”

“Will you help?”

He sighed. “Look. I don’t know what you’re trying to do but he is not coming back.”

“I know. I know he is not coming back that is why I am doing all of this,” she said. “Will you help or not.”

“Not when you have not told me how Kunle die.” Dubem had not bothered to look at her as he said it, his eye finding solace in the distance.

It made her uncomfortable. He knew as well as she did it would be difficult to talk about his death, but it would be pointless to say that to him. Onaye knew he came because of that.

The delay made her think Dubem was still the same boy that pestered them to tell him what she and Kunle always spoke about; the type always looking for something to dig into and offer no apologies and expected everything to return to normal.

“Don’t worry, I will tell you,” she looked up at the sun setting. “When the hole is big enough and wide enough.”

“With the two of us, it will take at least three more days.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “The burial doesn’t start until Friday.”

Onaye went back inside to grab another shovel, then told the housekeeper to prepare food for Kunle’s friend. That he was here for the burial. It was the only way, the girl – short and stocky with horizontal marks on her cheeks – responded to her.

As she stepped out of the kitchen, a yellow taxi pulled over. It was the twins. Toby and Fati were in the backseat of the vehicle. They get out, paid the driver and their eyes met.

Onaye stood watching them close the gap between them. And for the first time, they were in the same space without tension, without fear.

She tried to think of something to say and the best she came up with was, “You’re here?” It sounded more like a question. They smiled, the kind that showed teeth and their past evaporated into thin air.

Now she had more hands to help her dig for forgiveness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

KUNLE

There’s no reason why my feet walked back, and my head blank when they sored through the sky. I saw a new place where news were by hands and not by mouth, a beginning where the world was given on a dish and not a calabash. I saw good; so why did I decide to come back to the old?

I lied to myself and everyone around me; I told them Ife wasn’t for me. I told them I wanted to be on familiar grounds and not where my fetus knew, when infact my soul knew the truth.

Something had dragged me back.

Something invisible and unknown.

Something I let into myself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ONAYE

Our friendship came drooling all at once after that, like waterfalls from the mountain depts. Before, Kunle and I imagined our life like rolling stones that stumble on hard rocks, but as long as we had each other we would smoothly move on

Instead, I spent my last years of secondary school avoiding Kunle, unable to look him in the eyes or deal with the sound of his pleading voice. I hadn’t seen his mother either. My guess was that she was either home trying to plan their way to leave the village or boiling in anger for the accusations thrown at her son. Being guilty caused me to avoid her too. I avoided social gatherings and kept to myself in my room after school.

On good days I went to Oji’s house and sat for hours before the moon became bright. I imagined myself flying. Like a bird flapping its wings. At times my imagination was the only indication I was still alive.

After dinner, my father kept casting angry glances my way, muttering curses under his breath. He didn’t understand the way my heart sank when he behaved that way. Didn’t he see how I longed for something other than tension?

My father was boiling in anger that I was staying at home more often. He kept his business elsewhere and came home only to lay his head and was out before the morning cock crowed. When graduation came, I wore one of Mama’s old dresses; a blue ankle length chiffon dress, with hands waving the heavens and a bucket neckline. And because I was much fatter than Mama and shorter, the bottom swept the grounds and waist line clutched my stomach. Ayọ̀bámi gave the dress to her when I was five, she said it was a token of appreciation for helping her spend a longer time with her husband. At the time, the blue was sharper and brighter. After many washes, they’ve grown old with threads sticking out from every sides. I had limited option- it was either that or nothing because Papa would rather die than buy a new one. I didn’t even see him at the ceremony either and I looked every minute. I sat on my own, far away from Kunle and Ayọ̀bámi, and away from the crowd that avoided them.

Fati and Toby came up to me after the ceremony.

“How come you are not hanging with them? Did you hear they might be leaving this village for good? Who wouldn’t when you are the center of attention,” Fati said.

“After what they did to Small Emeka, they deserve to be thrown out.”

It felt strange to be on the other side of the coin, to not get picked at or slammed in frivolous gossips. “It’s not your business.” I tried to look uncaring. I looked away from their prying eyes.

Toby sat placed a thick hand across my shoulder. “So, which university are you going to?”

“What was your jamb score?” Fati asked, falling on the chair next to me.

Their eyes gorged into my soul and I knew they were pretending to care so they could mock me afterwards. They knew I wasn’t going to further my education because I lacked the funds to pay for it and I hadn’t bother to enroll for Jamb lessons.

When I didn’t answer, Fati smiled and patted my cheeks. “Well, it’s not so bad. You can take care of your father’s shop after he dies.”

“That is if he doesn’t have another child with those women he brings home.” Toby smirked. “You should pray o.”

Of course they would know my father’s dirty secrets; that was if it was even a secret. I just assumed otherwise, to keep me sane.

“Our mother says that their marriage was doomed from the start.”

“Are you not being too harsh?” Kunle interrupted us, Dubem by his side. Their eyebrows scrunched together and face, set in a frown. The siblings sat still, Toby slowly withdrew his arm and at once, they scurried away. Kunle’s eyes met mine briefly, and I wondered how much he overheard, but I wasn’t interested in speaking with him. I stood and headed nowhere.

“Onaye,” I heard him call. “Where are you going to?”

After the long holiday, I started learning the rudiments of hair weaving from Mama Nkechi, a woman created when God had ample time to paint her perfect hands. I heard she was the best in making different hairstyles from the neighboring village. I spent weeks and months there and visited home once in a blue moon. The first time I visited, I heard Kunle had gotten into the university of and left already to study. The second time, I heard his mother had followed him.

“Onaye, pass me the needle and the white thread,” Mama Nkechi ordered.

The salon held a warmth of several women. There were some who sat in the cushioned chairs and submitted themselves to the ministries of wooden comb, the hooded dryers and to the hands of Mama Nkechi and her stylists she was training. Like me. The women quietly read books, sang to the music playing from the radio and made loud comments about the upcoming 1999 general election. I loved the place – the combs, the people and the mirrors that told me I was fine. Not in the beauty kind of way. It spoke volumes of safety.

I started spending most of my time making money from hairdressing business and I could see why my mother loved touching the strings of a stranger’s hair. The way the omen smiled after they see the work done, ravaged butterflies inside my stomach. Before she married my father, she made people’s hair for money and after marriage she did it as a hobby.

For the first few months as an apprentice, I was allowed to practice on a dummy’s head. I was often told to make simple braids. She didn’t like elaborate hairstyles and always asked me to weave the dummy’s hair all to the back. It bored me for a while, that weaving everything into straight lines. So I persuaded her to let me try it on a customer’s hair – I may as well practice on a person. After a week, I graduated to suku and currently learning how to fix weaves.

I found two needles and a tiny bundle of thread by the dressing table. And was giving the tools Mama Nkechi when she stepped aside. She nodded her head for me to continue and I did without hesitation. I threaded the needle and sewed the left over synthetic hair to natural braids.

“You are learning fast,” she praised when I finished. I beamed at the encomium in her voice. “The stiches are neat and very fine.” She smiled and stared at me afterwards. “When last did you have a good sleep?”

“I’ve been sleeping well ma.”

“Not to me,” Mama Nkechi said.

I was not ready to inform her the true reason why my mind wandered. I was not ready to inform her two other people – unknown females had fallen and floated in the same gutters they found Small Emeka’s body. There were no witnesses this time, just the empty air to witness their demise. The king had people searching home after homes, imposing curfews, so I heard from the mouths that said Kunle was back in town after the one, two years we stayed apart.

But after two weeks, the curfew was relaxed and merely announced they had fallen by accident. Apparently, they were out meeting men in the wee hours of the morning, but never returned on their way back. The rains poured down at that hour, and they sought of slipped and fell. Both of them, at the same time. That was the news they speculated, so life quickly returned to normal. They were woman and they were prostitutes, so why should they care?

Bloody fools.

“I was just thinking about my friend,” I told her.

I was relieved when talk shifted to the days I’d finish my training. She wanted to know how I was going to utilize what I learned, how many women may survive the embarrassment of walking around with untidy hair.

“I plan on going back to Mmiri,” I said. “I want to use my skills there.”

“Even though there is a possibility no one would want you to touch them,” Mama Nkechi said, breaking into my endless worried. “Or is there something waiting for you there?”

I wondered myself. Was there anything truly waiting for me?

One evening, I stepped on familiar grounds, by then my father was away searching for leaves, so I met his wife sucking udala in the yard. “I needed a companion,” he said, as if it explained everything, and maybe it did. Omu was young, slim and short, always carried all back on her head. She quiet and barely ever spoke to me unless were exchanged greetings. And the time when the house was boiling hot and outside was the solution to keep alive.

“Your father told me that boy is your friend,” she said. “You should see him instead on staying in the house all day.”

I turned to her. “Did he also tell you what happened with him?”

“I don’t know what happened with him or with anybody at all,” she sounded carefree. “I usually don’t judge a book by its cover.”

“So you’re not repulsed by me?”

“Of course not,” she countered. “If I have to be honest, you look beautiful with the white skin colour. You would have been ugly if you were a boy.” I could see her beaming from cheek to cheek.

“Papa doesn’t like both of us.”.

“That is why you should invite him become he comes back.”

“What if he doesn’t?” I asked. “I avoided him before he left for school.”

“You have to try and find out for yourself. Maybe he is waiting for you to talk to him.”

That possibility egged me on to Kunle’s home, now outgrown by weeds. Judging from the mushrooms stuck on the door hinges, the fallen dried leaves littering the yard, they hadn’t been here long.

“I think something is very wrong with him,” Ayọ̀bámi was saying after minutes of warm hugs. “Maybe he missed the scenery. I don’t really know what to say.”

“Is that why you came back?”

“He wasn’t responding. He became an entirely different person for the few days we stayed away,” she said and rubbed her hand against her eyes. “His eyes would glaze over and he wasn’t speaking very much.”

“Did he tell you why?”

She laughed. “Actually I became his least favorite person when I forced him away.”

“He never wanted to leave?”

“No. He wanted to stay,” he said. “After everything that had happened here, he wanted to stay and I could not let him stay by himself.”

“A mother’s love is greater than anything else.”

“Your mother would have been proud.”

“I know.”

“One the first night back here, the sky was his favourite thing to look at. He would stay out till morning staring from that same spot.” She pointed to the chair by the window.

“He always liked the sky.”

“But, it’s not the same,” she said and drew closer, the couch squeaked. “I heard him speak one time as if there was someone he was conversing with.”

“Are you sure there was nobody outside?”

“I was coming back from my farm and I saw him from outside talking to the air.”

“And he was the only one inside.”

“I swear on my life,” she said. “I made sure to lock the doors before I left.” Then she grabbed my hands so fast I barely registered the action. “ I heard you are back for good.”

“I…”

“I would take him back in a heartbeat to see a therapist but my hands are tied. Your mother gave me something to help my husband when he was sick, so I believe there should be something you can do to help him.”

“Herbs don’t work like that,” I told her, then slightly fainted when I saw the pained look in her eyes. “But I can ask my father if there is something he can do.”

Ayọ̀bámi perked up. “Really?” She held my hand tighter and raised it to her lips.

I flinched. I was giving her false hopes. The last time Papa tried to cure an empty shell of a woman lost between death and reality after the death of her husband, his patience sipped and anger grew that I saw for once there was nothing he could do for someone unwilling to return life. She died a few days after.

“You both can come to dinner this evening.”

Ayọ̀bámi tsked. One of the many mannerism she had picked up from staying in Mmiri. “I saw that women in your house the other day. Is it what I’m assuming?”

I nodded. “She is nice but I cannot stop thinking she might be faking it.”

There was silence after, a kind that was latched with weight enough to reel a herd of cows on the same string. That silence was short lived when Ayọ̀bámi spoke again.

“Do you know his looks have started changing? I know everyone changes eventually when ages knocks on their door, but with him, the change is too drastic. When I’m in the room, and he looks at me, I feel as if someone else is staring.” She shook her head as though she’d just realized what she said. “Infact, forget I said anything. Maybe this is just me being paranoid.”

I really didn’t think she was being paranoid, when they came throttling in with a basket of fresh tomatoes which I doubted came from her farm. They were gone for years, and even a soothsayer would know there was little nature could do to keep the crops.

In a few words; Kunle was not Kunle.

At first, I stood still, unable to form coherent words and decided to clamp my lips shut to avoid being an embarrassment. Ayọ̀bámi had left out the most important past when she hinted he was different. Kunle resembled a fantasy. He wore a gold looking shirt and black trousers, which had streaks of brown running vertically through them. His hair had matted thickly into dread and it slightly touched his shoulders- It had always been curly like ours and never like his parents. His eyelashes were longer now, you could almost see it going sideways. At the corner of his lips, on left side, there was a straight line cutting across both lips- it looked natural like it had been there since he was born? I heard Omu walking down to the room. I felt dizzy with relief when I stepped aside to let them in. I stared as he walked passed me, at his slimmer figure, and remembered the times we joked of him becoming fatter when he grew older.

“Are you going to stand there all day?”

“Kunle,” I said. It was like I was waiting for a confirmation of some sought.

Ayọ̀bámi joined Omu in the kitchen to prepare food for dinner. They had arrived earlier than expected, so the soup was barely halfway done. When I asked if I could help, Omu silently disapproved my help as she waved her hands for me to move on. A part of me knew she wanted Kunle and I talk, and the other knew she liked to work in a quiet environment.

My head was filled with thoughts as I led Kunle to my room- the silence looming over our heads like a heavy load. During our walk I couldn’t help glancing at my friend. He was staring forward, eyes focused on the only door on the corridor and turned his head when he noticed my gaze.

I opened the door, hinges creaking like crickets.

“This is the first time I’m seeing your room,” Kunle said, running his eyes over the basic interior of the room; a matrass and the open window- my father didn’t make much from his service.

Kunle made his way to the bed and sat. I sat across from him and crossed my legs across one another.

“How have you been?” I asked. “I heard you went to Ife for school.”

Kunle laughed. “I don’t think that’s the question you want to ask.”

“Ok. Why did you come back?”

“I don’t think that’s the question you want to ask either.”

“Ok fine. Why do you look like a bad picture of Jesus?”

“It’s not that bad,” he said. “I checked the mirror before I left the house.”

“Kunle, I’m not joking.” I peered closer to him. “You mother said you wanted to come back.”

“Ah. She has started reporting me.”

“She wasn’t reporting you anything,” I said. “She is worried about you.”

“She is the only one always worried,” he said, then let out a small smile. “I doubt if she would feel the same if we weren’t related.”

I knew what he was getting at, that she was likely to leave him like I did. “That’s a lie o.” I smacked him playfully on his arm to lessen the weight of my guilt. I wonder what would have happened if we kept in touch.

“Your breast is getting big,” he said, reaching out to run the back of his hand against my collar. Puberty visited me later than usual, causing my female parts to bloom after secondary school ended. I love the way my shirt defined my curves, and my full lips complimented my wide nostrils. Kunle used to say, I could fit cigar sticks inside them if I really tried. Kunle went up to stroke the corner of my lips, feeling the fullness under the thick layers. “We both changed as these years passed.”

I swatted his hands away. “But not all changes are good.”

“You hate the way I look?”

“It not by I hate the way you look,” I said. “The villagers will speak about it and you know.”

“I know.”

“Then why did you even come back when they came tear you with their sharp lips.” I sucked my teeth. “After what happened last time, did you not learn your lesson?”

He shrugged as though the events were merely a passing moment. “They can keep their opinions to themselves. I’m not afraid.”

“But you should be,” I said. “What if they blame you for the other deaths?”

“You mean the prostitutes.” He grinned at me and stood when I heard a faint voice calling our names. “I heard it happened the day I was back.”

“They think they just slipped and fell.”

“Maybe they just did and maybe Small Emeka slipped as well.”

He kept looking at me, but I couldn’t meet his gaze properly. Maybe it was shame or something else entirely. It made me uncomfortable, the way those dark eyes bore into my soul, and I could understand where Ayọ̀bámi was coming from when she said he had a stranger’s eye.

I cleared my throat. “If you’re not going back, how will you continue school?” My voice came out stronger than I expected, which was a good thing.

“I’m not,” he said, sitting down on the bed again. “School is not everything. I’m going to start a life here. I just feel like I belong. I feel free when I breathe. I don’t know if you understand what I’m talking about.

I didn’t but I nodded.

I got up when I heard our names called again. “We should go. I think I hear them calling our names.”

“After eating, we should speak some more. There’s something I want to ask you.”

“Can’t you say it now?”

He shook his head. “Later.”

Omu’s skill laid in her ability to conjure a good setting for a comfortable meal, and mixed with the Ayọ̀bámi’s love for exquisite cups, dinner felt like eating at a queens table. Ayọ̀bámi had laid out her cups on each place mats and brewed Lipton in them. Omu placed plates of soup, wraps of akpu, a washing had bowl and glasses filled with water.

“I don’t know if you eat akpu,” Omu said. “Some people don’t like it because of the smell.”

“It’s okay,” Kunle said, taking his sit.

“Did you talk to him?” Ayọ̀bámi mouthed as she scooped a spoonful of sugar in her cup.

I nodded and sat down.

“Mama Kunle told me you both are very good friends,” Omu said fluttering over his shoulder, putting extra meat in his plate.

“Please, don’t call me that. Ayọ̀bámi is fine,” Ayọ̀bámi corrected. Mama Kunle was a name she dreaded. She felt native and uncomfortable- those were her words when I called her by that. “My husband’s name was Kunle, so when you call me Mama Kunle I’m reminded of my husband. It’s as if I gave birth to him. My husband I mean.”

“I see. I always liked it when my husband used to address me like that.” Omu looked at me as she drew back her chair. Her being married was news to me, all I heard was that she was a food seller at the local market and every man wanted to eat from the palms of her hands.

I must have let the shock show on my face, because Ayọ̀bámi was staring and looked as if she was about to say something but Kunle put a hand on her shoulder.

What would the people think of my family now?

I curved my hand and cut thick, white Akpu into my soup, then twisted it until it was fully saturated in the ogbolo soup. I let the lumps melt in my tongue and swallowed in one go. No wonder my father married her, her food tasted my heaven on earth. For a while we ate together in silence, mouths chewing and swallowing, until Kunle said; “You’re not from this village.” It sounded more like an accusation than a question.

“Kunle,” Ayọ̀bámi scolded. “That is rude.”

“I’m just curious.”

Omu let out a smile. “No I’m not. I’m from the neighboring town but I came here to start business two years ago. That’s when I met Zoko.”

“Does my father know?”

“He pulled me out of my marriage. That is how I even met him. My husband was beating because I couldn’t give him children and his family blamed me for it.”

“I’m sorry,” Ayọ̀bámi said.

“Zoko treated me.” She raised her arm, there was a faded bruise below her elbow. “I told him what happened and he opened a shop for me here.”

“Does he know you are barren?” I didn’t intend my question to sound harsh, but I couldn’t help it.

“I think you father needs a companion more than he needs children.” I knew she didn’t intend to sound harsh either, but she couldn’t help it because it was the truth. If he needed children, he could have had more with those women he was bringing home.

“Don’t you think you should go back?” Kunle glared at her as she shifted. “Why did you even invite us? Have you not heard what happened to me?”

“That’s enough.” Ayọ̀bámi’s voice was stern and firm. “Why are you bringing that up?”

“I just think she wanted to cure her curiosity,” he said. “Even if she is from the other village, I’m sure she must have heard about the black child who killed someone. I don’t think I’m hard to miss.”

He saying nonsense for my sake and I knew it.

Omu ignored him and drank the last of her tea. There were different interpretations to the silent game; it could mean Kunle was right and she was just like the other people. Or she was avoiding a fight she wouldn’t win.

“Kunle, what has gotten into you,” I said after we had cleared the table and gone back to my room. “You were being rude to Omu.” Kunle was sitting on the ground by the joint wall and biting his nails, spitting them across the room. “Say something.”

“I’m not sorry,” Kunle said without raising his head. “And I will not apologize.”

“You’re different. You used to be bold but never this bold.”

“You can’t blame me,” he said, almost to herself. “A lot has been going on lately.”

“Like you growing you carrying dada?” I joked and he laughed for the first time. It was a beautiful sound, I almost forgot the reason I was angry with him.

“I want to grow my nails too but I can’t stop eating them.”

“It’s like you want to be chased out of this village.”

He started biting from his other hand and his voice was muffled when he said, “They won’t. They can’t. By now they should be afraid to touch me.”

“By now you should learn not to test their patience. One wrong move, they can come for your door.”

“Or my head.”

“Ah ah. It’s not funny.”

“Or they can tie me to a tree and burn me alive like they did to Oji.” Shivers ran down my spine when he said that.

“Shut up fest. Let’s go downstairs and help with the plates.” He made a face, but I was already out the door before he could protest.

“Where is Omu,” I asked Ayọ̀bámi when we entered the kitchen, and Kunle sat down on the stool. Ayọ̀bámi was fetching water from the big blue drum by the corner to rinse the soapy plates on the floor.

“She went to plant some tomatoes seeds at the backyard.”

“Is it from the ones you gave us?” I asked.

“I think so.” She returned to her stool carrying the bowl of water and dunked the plates inside. “Did you have any at home?”

“I don’t know. I only came back a few days ago.”

Omu came back to the room with a tray containing scanty tomatoes seed. “I forgot I needed to let them dry before I plant them.” She placed them by the stove and started moving them around. “My mother taught me to touch them so that they know what I want them to do.”

Ayọ̀bámi laughed. “I just leave them in the sun.”

Omu turned to Kunle. “Your mother told me you and Onaye share the same birthday.” She was trying to mend the torn stiches.

“We are actually the same age,” I answered.

“Did you know there is a tendency for people like that to get married,” she said. “There is this belief where I come from that those born on the same day are more compatible. Knowing each other means that the heavens have already made a pact.”

“I’m sure that’s just mere superstition.” Ayọ̀bámi sounded defensive.

“And he already has a girlfriend,” I told them.

“You have a girlfriend?” That was his mother. “Since when?”

“I don’t have any girlfriend.”

“What about the girl you said you liked?” I threw at him.

“You liked a girl?” asked Ayọ̀bámi.

Kunle merely shrugged one shoulder. “It’s an old story. I don’t think she liked me back sef.”

“Did you tell her?” Omu asked.

“It was not use after what happened.”

“Ah!” Omu exclaimed. “You two would have looked good together if the circumstances were different if Onaye’s father had not already promised her for marriage.”

“Is that true.” Ayọ̀bámi shook her head. “When did that happen?”

“It hasn’t happened yet but my father is adamant to find someone to take me away.” I rolled my eyes and reached for the clean plates. I stood and grabbed a rag hanging on the wall behind me.

“Is he serious?” Kunle asked.

“Very,” I said.

“That if he even finds someone willing to take her as his wife,” Omu said and I knew this time, it was the way she addressed things. She was harsh and more realistic than anyone I’ve met.

I knew my father wanted to kill two birds with a pebble. As a way of getting rid of me, he was going to accept a huge dowry from the in-laws and live his best life with Omu. Well it was a wishful thinking that might never happen in this lifetime.

“Why? She’s beautiful enough to secure a man. No?” Ayọ̀bámi countered.

“I think she can secure any man she wanted.” Kunle turned to me. “I heard the heart matters.”

“No man wants to marry someone with baggage on her back.” Omu stood straight and faced me directly. “I know you didn’t tie your mother’s womb but people will talk and it’s what people say that matters. Facts don’t matter.”

“Well it should,” Ayọ̀bámi said.

“This is reality, Ayọ̀bámi. This are different…” Omu broke of as the front door creaked. The heavy stride of feet followed. Omu shot a panicked look at both of us.

I bit my lip and quickly motioned for Kunle to hide.

“Don’t even bother. I saw the slippers outside.” My father entered the kitchen, a whiff of lemon and heavily perfumed bag simmered the pungent smell of Akpu.

I got up quickly. “Papa, I thought you will be back tomorrow.”

He turned to Omu, ignoring his daughter. “What are they doing here?”

Omu didn’t answer right away, so Papa pressed harder. “Omu, what is this boy doing in my house.” Not they but he. He was the one Papa had problems with. His fist were clenched tightly beside him, and if her were the slightest shade lighter, he would have been as red as mud.

“I invited them over.” I stepped in. “Is it bad I wanted to see my friend.”

Reckless. I knew it was stupid. Onaye wasn’t brave, she was the one who stood at the back when her best friend was force to drink shit you prove his innocence.

Papa placed his bag down gently and the events which followed after was like a scene from a moonlight tale. Papa pulled his hand back and struck my face and I felt the pains a second after Omu yelped and Ayọ̀bámi screamed the word “oh my God’ as though she wanted Him to interfere. Papa struck me again on the other side of my face to even out the painful sting on first cheek. “For being a fool,” he said. “All of you, leave my house,” he bellowed afterwards.

An hour later, Kunle’s white ceiling stared back at me. I was lying on his bed on my back, hands knotted on my stomach, wallowing in the events of the day. By the time Kunle came in carrying a pile of clothes, the moon had come up and the room was covered halfway in shadows. He placed the pile on the bed and bent down to light the kerosene lamp. I kept my eyes up until the orange flame illuminated the spot I’d been staring at and when I turned, Kunle was pulling his shirt over his head, showing layers of muscles he never had. I kept trying to focus my attention on the suitcase behind him, but somehow, my eyes eventually found itself glancing every two second. The bed shook as he flopped and sprawled beside me.

Nobody said anything. The sound of crickets and the shallow sound of a faraway owl filled the atmosphere.

“He was very angry,” Kunle said.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then what do you want to talk about,” he said, turning to face me. “The day is still young to sleep.”

I shrugged. “When did you start exercising?”

He scoffed. “I didn’t.”

I turned my head to look at him, and met his bright eyes staring back. “Then what did you do?”

He ran his tongue on lip scar. “I fucked a lot of girls when I left Mmiri. It was too tempting, to be honest. Now I understand why men falter at the sight of beautiful women,” he finished off with a laugh.

I slowly felt my consciousness slipping away, so I looked back up incase he could read what I truly desired. “You should have just stayed with them na. Mmiri doesn’t have beautiful girls.”

“When choice is involved, you have no choice to comply with the one that favors more.”

I popped myself on an elbow. “What are you even saying?”

“Honestly, I don’t even know. I just feel there is something calling me to finish…”

“Finish what.”

“I wish I knew.” Kunle raised his body halfway until his back met the wall. “So, let’s talk about you. Will you marry the man your father brings to you?”

I stared at him.

“If you don’t want to you can always find a man for yourself before he does it for you,” he continued. “There are men everywhere.”

“Not all men are men.”

“True sha,” he said. “There was this boy I met last year. He getting married to one woman like that and the day before the wedding, another woman shows up pregnant. They said it was his baby.”

“You see.”

“Then there was Oji.”

I sat up fully alarmed, eyes roaming outside the open window. “Why are you bringing up Oji?” I whispered.

“I don’t know. I just thought about him now, I guess,” he said. “Do you know that he had a scar just like mine?” He ran a finger on his lips. “I heard one of the girls he raped gave it to him.” He was so invested in caressing his lips, he was blind to my shift in position or was pretending to be.

“How did you get your own?”

“The scar? I sliced it.”

He looked at me, and there was a pause before realizing his words. “Are you mad?” I screamed a tad bit too loud. “I don’t like these new thing about you. How can you injure yourself and not care about it. That drink they gave you have scattered your head.”

Kunle looked alarmed; he hadn’t expected my reaction. He should have. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Sorry.”

“You should not be telling me sorry o. It’s not like I injured you.”

“But you did.”

My heart dipped. “What?”

“I saw you that day. You ran away when they gave me that drink,” he said. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Why did you leave?”

“Is that what you think?”

“Abeg, don’t lie.” He laughed but they didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Was the sight too appalling? Did you think I would die?”

Kunle stared at me hard, trying to see through my lies. His expression was a mixture of disappointment and suspicion. I hadn’t thought he’d see me in the thick crowd or I convinced myself he hadn’t.

I shook my head. My insides were tied and twisted. “Don’t come and be using big big English for me.”

Kunle folded his arm and watched me with scrutiny. “Just answer the question.”

“Answer my question first. Why are you staying?”

“I told you I don’t know.” Then he grabbed my arm and pulled me to him. His was close, eyes and eyes, breath on breath. “Let me ask you something. Have you ever felt like you’re someone you’re not? Like there is something inside you that is burning to come out? That there is a second person fighting to get out?”

I felt my hands shaking. “No.”

He smiled this time. “Trust me, if you dig deep inside you, you will find something. I’m sure.”

Our breathing mingled with each other and I felt our heads getting closer. There was an invisible fog clouding my brain from reasoning as I thought of kissing his lips. “Who is your second person then?” I asked, my voice laced with desire.

He looked away, thoughts far from the confines of that small square space. “Dubem said that his orphanage mother told him that Oji’s ghost never left the village.”

I wanted to hit him. “You are a confused human being. Since, all you have been saying is nonsense.” I pulled away and laid down, facing the window. I waited for him to say something, to continue where we left off but he said nothing, and at some point I fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was the first time.

It was also going to be the last time Zoko laid his hands on his daughter.

Even if he told himself he did the right thing more than a thousand times, his insides kept chewing itself with guilt.

This was all he could think about.

That unknown darkness… It was coming over him.

How does a father punish a child and ends up kneeling and howling in a heap before furry red eyes begging for forgiveness he knew she’d never hear?

That night, he regretted ever loving a woman blindly. That night, he regretted in passing for not giving her away when she came into the world.

A day in his childhood; An albino father holding bundles of tree cane. It was his sixteenth birthday. The man died and the son spat on his grave.

Zoko and his father were grinding herbs at their backyard. They planned on feeding a sick pregnant woman two houses down the road. The son was holding the juices in a plate rushing to give her before she gave birth. We know this story ended with tree cans and spittles.

This was why…Young Zoko’s mind was somewhere else. His was thinking of Abacha and fried snail. And soon his heart flew to the spluttered mess on the ground. Because he hadn’t noticed the stone behind those pile of red sands.

When he ran back home because he remembered there were leftovers his father kept away, the air welled up with cries of death and mourning. A shudder found its way to his lips when he saw how the stomach area protruded through the cloth and the pale fingers peeking from under. Instinctively, the bowl fell upside down.

His father was waiting for him in their veranda with bundles of cane because the wind had carried the news faster than his legs.

Zoko watched his house from where he hid, behind a tall palm tree in their front yard. He saw his father’s eyes bream with hatred and blame.

Of course he would blame him for getting there too late, when he knew there was little his herbs could do for a dying person.

It wasn’t like his father hadn’t beaten him before. As a child, your parent must have beaten you a thousand and one times, but never kill you. They just didn’t have the heart. Or so he thought.

With one eye open, one lost to his bleak future, Zoko Ayamefuna could attest to a congregation what it felt like to stand between life and death. And the boy wished his father dead as he nursed his eye with well water which did nothing to end the stinging pain and the one raising from the slashes on his body.

He climbed down and cried because it hurt. His wailings were loud and heavy.

Two women carrying a bucket of water on their head stepped into view, but he could barely see their faces clearly with his eyes, but he could feel the tension radiating off of them. He was listening to their torrent of whispered words running out of their mouth. In quieter moments, he slipped down until his back was on the ground.

It was true. They were going to blame him for being there too late. He was too weak to clear his name and too ashamed to tell them it was his birthday and all he could think about was Abacha and fried snail. Imagine how he’d look. They’d say, he cared more about himself than others.

When people made up their minds to believe something, there was nothing you could do to change it.

Just as how he couldn’t change his emotions towards light skinned people, much less his daughter who was two shades lighter.

In that moment, where he cared little about the world, his father was in a coughing fit inside his house.

This was how he died. There was a tightness in his chest, he kept rubbing ekuma on. He coughed a little to relieve himself. There was an intense spurt of coughing after. And the time stood still for him.

Zoko was sleeping and awoke when the sun was giving way to the moon. He remembered dreaming about his mother. They were playing ten ten and she was in a fit of laughter the times he stepped on his foot when he jumped too hard.

One step into the house.

The strong smell of feaces.

It would have been better if his father took care of his properties properly. All Zoko could think about was his father’s carelessness, of his inability to throw away rotten plants and insisted on keeping them in case they came in handy.

The boy covered his nose with his arm and became pure white when his leg met a hard and cold surface, like overnight Akpu. There was stiffness in his movement and the cloudiness of his thoughts. His father was dead as a doornail.

He understood for once what it meant to see someone dead. When his mother died, he was two and yet to conjure the right senses to reason.

Like a fool, he stared at the white substance which had been his father.

Next, he carried the body in his arms.

Zoko left the house and placed his father- dead father a few meters away from their yard, where someone would see and cry on his behalf. He was yet to shed a single tear and still yet to shed it after those years.

Two men came first, then two other women and soon, a crowd surrounded them. They were talking and discussed how a good man he was. Mere words death would never hear. It was eventually decided they would bury him in their backyard, beside his mother’s grave, and all Zoko did was sit and watch everything done for him. The last day included the grave diggers, a non-related hysteric crier and a group murmuring that he got what he deserved. This was for Zoko and not his father.

The only thing he did was when he changed into white wrapper, trying it around his waist to mourn.

He stood. The body was under layers of sand, and under his bare foot.

He spat.

The boy’s heart was heavy with responsibility.

Zoko had no idea what to do at his age. He was just sixteen and a novice when it came to herbs making. He was going to live on his own, fend on his own, live with the constant hatred from the villages, so he hated his father in turn. He also hated people who reminded him of him. He didn’t want a child but life led him to love, and now he hated that decision the most.

He hated turning into his father the most. He felt truly scared when his hand landed on her soft cotton cheeks, so he let himself cry with his eyes closed.

#

Zoko’s religious belief were dammed. It was what he told himself since the church came to Mmiri. When they told him, Richard- a crippled beggar on the street stood and walked his way home, he thought there was something he could to change his daughters colour and even make her into the son he wanted.

“I am not a magician sir,” the pastor told him. “Just embrace her the way she is.”

Insurable fool. He should tell that to those years his heart loomed in darkness and fright.

He thought eventually the hot sun may pour out its burning flames onto her skin as she aged, that was why he accepted her until his wife died, then leaving with her was like chocking on a stick. He even lied about looking for herbs when he had enough to last him for months, just to distance himself from having to face his father’s face.

“Clean your eyes. You should just go and apologize,” Omu told him as she entered their room.

“What father apologizes for scolding their child?” Zoko asked.

“So you did think you did the right thing?”

“Of course not.”

“That your pride will eat you up one...”

“It’s not by pride Omu. I’m reminded of things I should have forgotten a long time ago.”  
 “Is this about your father?”

“Yes.”

“Ah! You should forget a dead person o. It is not good,” she said. “You will just end up injuring your daughter like your father did. And I don’t think that is what you want.”

Zoko’s stomach dropped. It was worse if someone said your sins out loud, it was different, more painstaking- like you were punched in the guts. Onaye couldn’t end up like he was, scared at out his wits at any light skinned child his saw and any man with judgy eyes ready to swallow him whole. For the slightest moment, he wondered about her true feeling.

“And what is it with you and that family,” Omu continues. “Did that boy steal something from you?”

Finally, he remembered why he was angry in the first place. The emotions he felt before came back ravaging his insides.

Zoko laughed bitterly. “That boy is going to destroy her.”

Omu slowly closed the door. She walked across the room and sat beside him. “And how will he do that?”

“Did you see what Onaye did there? She protected him as if she wanted to. I know albino’s they do not protect people.”

“You are letting your father take over you again,” she said. “And that doesn’t answer my question.”

“I don’t just like him.”

“Because…”

Zoko was starting to get upset. “I do not need a reason to not like someone.”

“I know this is going to be difficult for you to hear,” Omu said, placing her hand on his shoulder. “But that boy is the only true friend your daughter has. If you were to take her away from him…”

“To hell with that.” He brushed her hand away. “There is something wrong with that boy. I can feel it inside me. He is bad influence on my daughter. She used to be quiet and respectful. She had never come out boldly to speak to me the way she did.”

“So now it’s about her being disrespectful.” She clucked her tongue. “If you really want her away from him, swallow your pride and bring her home.”

“You are right.”

“I am?”

“Yes. The marriage and everything will keep her away for good. From me and from him. I think her mother would have wanted this. I should look into more single men willing to take a wife.”

“That is not what I was trying to tell you.”

Zoko didn’t look at Omu. “Mama Otika’s son should be old enough for marriage,” he said to himself. “I should go and see them.”

“Is it not too late?” she asked worriedly. “You can go in the morning.”

Zoko sighed and stood before turning his head to her. “Are you following me or not,” he said.

“My God, what has gotten into you? Is that how you want her gone so badly?”

“Yes.”

“What are you so afraid of?”

They stared at each other for a few seconds, then Zoko rolled his eyes. “What I do and what I want to do is none of your business.”

Her face blew up with realization. “There is something you’re not telling me. And for goodness sake, don’t tell me there is nothing because I know there is something.” She stood and faced him squarely, daring him to speak.”

Zoko nodded, pulling himself together. “You’re right. There is something I’m not telling you.” Omu looked at her husband, at the hope of finding information he kept secret for years. “I will tell you when I come back.” He watched that look shatter but it didn’t matter, he wanted Onaye out of Mmiri for reasons he never spoke of.

That twinge in his chest returned, but it was alright. He’d stop for some palm wine on his way home. Move forward, he told himself as he padded through the street on his bicycle.

Move forward.

He felt better in the gusting wind. At least, it made his guilt sizzle away. Only the thought remained, and he knew someday he was going to come clean with Onaye. And come clean with himself, about the fact that his father may still be lurking in the darkness.

There were things his father did and blamed others for, but the fear of admitting the truth would have gotten him and his sanity killed a long time ago.

Next week, he promised. He would try to convince someone to marry her and till then, he would swallow his secret.

But this man’s life ended like a short film. On the rickety road, his bicycle swelved and he never got the chance to bring his daughter home.

#

In the end, he loved his daughter more than he let on. No parent truly hates their children. It is fear of the unknown that makes them act out.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AYỌ̀BÁMI

Glazed eyes, reduced interactions and silent walks.

Ayọ̀bámi thought the incident took a toll on him- that Kunle was just going through the harsh moment of realization of human cruelty and eventually he would come to terms with it like she did. At first, she hoped and wished on the thin line that it was a necessary phase he should pass through. That was before he wrecked the living room chair, dropped out of school and forced her to fly him back home. He called Mmiri home, forgetting it wasn’t- it was merely a place he was born and not where he should be. Ayọ̀bámi took him to see Dr. Phil, a counselor who advised her to leave Ibadan and who asked him what he truly desired. When Kunle told him he wanted to get out with iron clad gaze and tight knitted lips, she knew there was little she could do to make him stay. “It’s normal. He is going through a stage, everyone passes through,” Dr. Phil told her, and Ayọ̀bámi believed him and took him back to Mmiri against her wishes. She wanted to stay far away where eyes don’t carve her into figurines. It was funny how she and Kunle wanted the same escape from Ife and now she rather stayed there. Fucking irony, the whole thing.

“Do you know what the problem is?” Omu told her.

“That’s the thing Omu. I don’t know,” Ayọ̀bámi said. “I thought maybe he missed the scenery or his best friends.”

“It may be more serious than what we think.”

“What do you mean?”

“No one changes overnight,” Omu said. “When I was growing up, my mother made us believe in forces that…

“My child is not possessed,” Ayọ̀bámi said sternly.

“The earlier you believe, the earlier you are able to find a way to chase the spirit out. Take him to a church, or shrine, just do something before he is eaten inside out.”

Ayọ̀bámi’s breath hitched. Omu’s words worried her and the thought of losing her son was more frightening, chilling to her bones. She couldn’t lose Kunle, her heart wouldn’t bear the pain of burying him alongside his father. And if someone were to confirm, it might raise suspicions about the murders. And it didn’t help that the prostitutes died the day they arrived. When she thought about it, her eyes were closed throughout the day and open at night.

“Nothing will happen to him,” she told Omu. “He is a strong boy.”

“Ahh! A strong boy is nothing compared to evil spirits.” Omu laughed bitterly afterwards. “It’s like you don’t know what Nigeria is truly like. There are powers only God can handle.”

“Well, God is with him.”

“It’s not by saying God is with him. God is not a magician.”

Ayọ̀bámi crinkled her brows and tighten her lips. “See, I know my son and I know he is more than he seems. He is like his father.”

“I know you are denying the facts,” Omu said turning to her. She wore that pitiful look you’d give a mourning child. “I suggest you sit down and think. Really see that your boy is changing. I didn’t know him before o, but the long dada he is carrying is making him look like a mad man. That was what I thought when I saw him.”

“Why are you mentioning his hair?” Ayọ̀bámi asked.

“You should not let him carry that hairstyle,” she said. “It attracts curses. There was one man who lived in the village, who carried that same hairstyle. His name was Oji. Very wicked man. In fact he was more than a wicked man. If you hear what he did to children? Tufiakwa.” Omu clicked her fingers over her head.

“Even if I was against it, there is nothing I can do. He is old enough to make those kind of decisions.”

“Oyibo. You saw how Papa Onaye slapped his daughter,” Omu told her. “There’s nothing bad in scolding your children.”

“I’ll think about it,” Ayọ̀bámi answered and asked, “I haven’t seen Papa Onaye for a while now.” It was a tactic she used when she wanted to end a discussion, diverting the attention of the other person to a topic they are likely to talk about.

Omu bit the bait kindly. “I haven’t seen that one since. I’m thinking he’s still searching for a husband for Onaye.”

“Hasn’t it been two days?”

Omu hissed. “When that man wants something done, he can go on for weeks.”

They said their goodbyes shortly after, stood up and strolled back to their one story house where she met Kunle sitting on the veranda tearing paper. “What are you doing?” she asked sitting beside him. His head was turned sideways, away from her, leg crossed and hair placed in a high bun. “Your father used to tear paper just like that. He would fling it into the sky for the wind to carry.” In a long time, she hadn’t spoken about her husband and now, talking about it made her feel sane.

Kunle didn’t turn to acknowledge her presence. “I know,” he said in a low tone.

“He wasn’t incredibly social, but he had a social life,” she continued, a smile whipping on her lips. “Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been if I hadn’t met him.” She paused. “He saved me.”

“Is that why you gave me this stupid name?”

“Kunle!”

Kunle sighed and turned. Ayọ̀bámi gasped. His lower lip was collecting blood from the upper lip bearing a long gnash from its bridge. The scar matched the older one like it was burnt by fiery ropes. He gave her a gentle look. “Well,” he said. “How do I look?”

“What did you…” Her voice hesitant, unwilling to form the right words.

“I thought I would look better if I matched the other one.”

They stared at each other for a few seconds, then Ayọ̀bámi smacked his cheek and didn’t regret it. She smacked the other one with her back hand like Papa Onaye did, and felt hot tears rolling down her cheeks. “What did I do to deserve this? Have I not been a good mother to you?”

Kunle held her hand aiming for another slap and held it tightly. “It’s not your fault Mama. This is the real me.”

“Who told you this is the real you,” she yelled.

“Mama, he is never wrong.”

“Who is he?”

“He that parades the street. He knows me better than anyone else. I’m waiting for him to tell me his name and I think he will tell me soon.”

Ayọ̀bámi nodded, pulling herself together. “Omu was right. I have to bring the Lord to you.” She looked up at him. “We will visit the church in the morning and you will be back to your usual self.” Ayọ̀bámi refused to concur to Omu’s superstitious talks, but she had to admit her son needed help.

#

Ayọ̀bámi rarely saw Kunle at home. She understood he helped Onaye search for a shop, look for customers, entice them with discount talks and sometimes stayed with her to clean up after the day ended. Other days, no one knew where he slept.

On a week’s seventh day, he strolled in, dirt caught in his unwashed white collar and jeans. “Where have you been sleeping?” Ayọ̀bámi scolded.

“I had things to do,” he replied and shrugged a shoulder.

“Do I have to remind you that you have no job, no school to go to and basically no future,” Ayọ̀bámi said, gritting her teeth. “Now tell me, where did you sleep?”

He ignored her, moving to the direction of his room. His body reeked of smoke and a scent of perfume. Ayọ̀bámi held his shirt and pulled him back. “Mama!”

“Are you sleeping with prostitutes?” Ayọ̀bámi asked.

“Depends on the kind,” he joked, and Ayọ̀bámi pushed him enough to let him stumble on their furry rug.

“I am serious.”

“No I am not,” said Kunle. “I slept at Dubem’s place. He is around for the holiday.”

“You should have told me at least,” she said, watching him disappear into his room. He stayed there for hours and left at dawn to help Onaye. When he was gone, Dubem dropped by with a case of malt and a carton of carbine biscuit.

“So Kunle didn’t stay with you?”

“I thought he would come after I offered but he said you were sick. So I brought these to make you feel better.”

“He is lying to me now,” she told Omu when she came over that evening to collect more tomato seeds. “It’s like he no longer trust me enough to tell me things.”

“It’s not everything parents need to know about their children.”

“I need to know if it involves...” She paused. “If…” It was difficult for her to say the words.

“If he sleeps with prostitutes?”

“Life took a toll on him and I’m scared he will make the wrong decisions,” her voice broke. “I would have failed as a wife and a mother.”

Omu said nothing. She didn’t know what it felt like to have children and want to care for them, she wouldn’t understand the burning sensation eating your insides at the mere thoughts of seeing your blood crumble before your very eyes.

“What now?” she finally said and Ayọ̀bámi thought those were not the words she wanted to truly utter. It should have been, ‘did you take him to church, and do you now believe your son is possessed.’ And her answer would have been a fat no, because she was not ready to settle, there was no way she could keep her heart if there was a spirit inside him.

“Biko, everyone lies.”

That weekend Kunle slept outside, on the grasses where frogs and insects lay till the morning cames. Ayọ̀bámi found him with his arms akimbo, eyes shut to brightness and mouth open with snores. Ayọ̀bámi sat on their veranda and waited for him to wake.

“Kunle,” she called as he scrambled to sit. “What are you doing out here?” Her voice was tired like there was nothing else that could surprise her.

“I wanted to feel the earth,” he said, his voice dazed with sleep. “And mostly the grasses.”

“How was it?” she asked, swallowing a thick spittle.

“The grasses was soft to lie on, but harsh when I turned on my stomach. The crickets creaked in my ear all night, I could almost see them in my dreams.”

“Were you not bitten?” Of course he would have been bitten. If anyone heard them, they’d think their conversation was normal. That it wasn’t about what sleeping outside felt like. “There are mosquitoes outside all night.”

“They did but I don’t feel anything.”

“Are you sure? Mosquito bites are usually the worst.”

Ayọ̀bámi looked at him, really looked at him for the first time in a while. There were bags under his eyes, his neck was longer and his cheek bones were more prominent.

Kunle stared at his mother. “It did at first but he made it better.” Ayọ̀bámi shook her head and her son plucked a grass, brought it up to sniff. “Being one with the earth is the best thing anyone can wish for.”

“You don craze,” Ayọ̀bámi said, allowing herself to curse in pidgin for the first time.

“Have you had sex outside before?”

Ayọ̀bámi gasped. “Kunle!”

Kunle laughed and crawled until he hovered above her, pinning her with his lustful gaze. “But you should try it,” he whispered.

She pushed him and he fell, laughing as though he told a funny joke. “Kunle, what is happening to you?”

“Are you going to slap me again,” he spat. “You are becoming one of them. Those who think it’s all right to blame before knowing the truth.”

“Then tell me the truth.”

She stood and moved to him, but he scrambled away when she got closer. “Leave me alone,” he said. “I am going to do everything myself. I don’t need your help.”

Kunle left and locked himself in his room. And all she could do was cry her silent tears. With spaghetti legs, she trekked bare footed to the villages catholic church and threw herself on the pulpit. By the time the priest saw her, she was a shuddering mess. Ayọ̀bámi was filled with rage, how her son could change so much.

“For the first time, I’m questioning my decisions,” she told the priest. “Maybe this is my punishment.”

“What do you think you are getting punished for?” He replied sounding confused.

“Things,” she said. “I don’t even know what, or if I did something wrong.”

“Well, do you believe you did something wrong?”

“Of course not,” she said. “Superstitions, karma, those thing are not real. It was stupid of me to have even said that. It must have been everything that has been going on, and I’m starting to not think straight. Forgive me Father.”

“Sometimes, problems arise not because of your past mistakes. It might be a test from the Lord and he is waiting to see how you respond.”

Ayọ̀bámi laughed bitterly. “Isn’t this too much?”

“I really don’t have the answers you are looking for.”

“Then tell me if you think he is possessed.”

“You must understand something, Ayọ̀bámi,” he said. “When human beings are afraid or when they cannot explain something strange because they haven’t seen it before, they tend to associate it with superstitions or magic.”

“Are you one of those people?”

“We have our different flaws. Even we priests are not exempted,” the priest said calmly. “I will not tell you I understand what you are going true, but I can tell you to put your trust in the lord.”

“And if he doesn’t answer?”

“Sister Ayọ̀bámi, faith comes first.” Then he gave her a string of rosary, holy water, a mini crucifix and prayed over them in Latin. He told her to pray every morning and evening without relenting before letting her leave. The moment she got home, she knelt before her bed and counted her rosary, each bead stubble and round, rolled on her fingertips.

As she prayed, she fought the urge of her disbelief resurfacing, her skin prickling. Despite growing up surrounded by churches and priests- an unavoidable circumstance when you’re an orphan- her faith was lost when she’d come to terms with abandonment and grief. She wished Kunle was alive, but it was just her and her problems. Ayọ̀bámi heard Kunle’s door open and the footsteps that followed after. Of course, he would leave again till God knows when, she thought and she couldn’t bound him to her wishes. His father would have handled him better-she’d watched children fear their fathers and run to their mothers for solace.

Ayọ̀bámi pressed the beads to her forehead, until she felt the overwhelming pressure and pain. Soon, her tears followed, wetting the blue sheets.

“Wahala for single parenthood.”

#

Ayọ̀bámi didn’t tell anyone what Kunle said, not at first. It was too shameful and dirty to speak of. Omu wasn’t surprised when heard Kunle left the house and Ayọ̀bámi released a warm sigh when she told her Onaye hadn’t returned home either. At least, he was in familiar hands. She made herself believe a scenario-that she was probably teaching him how to weave hair and they’d stayed the night because they were too tired to find their way home.

At noon, Omu visited her again. The village wives were conveying at Nai Nduka’s house to settle matters arising. “Can you believe it? Her husband just died like that in the crash,” Omu told her. “Ehn, poor woman will have to raise their two children by herself. And I heard, she is pregnant with another one.”

The news brought grief but it was what she needed to briefly forget her own pains. “How did he die?”

“He was going for a seminal in Port-Harcourt from Abuja. He boarded one Sosoliso airlines, you know, ndi ego, people who have money. The plane just crash landed and burst into flames. Practically everyone died.”

“Oh God! How did she hear? Did someone tell her?”

“Gracious no. Who do you think will want to tell a wife her husband is dead, and there was nothing they could do to keep him alive?” She clapped her hands as though she was dusting them. “She heard it from the news.”

“Is she sure?”

“They called out the names of those who died. Poor woman fainted after. Her son rushed her to our house but Papa Onaye wasn’t around. That was how I even heard the man died.” Omu shook her head. “So are you going to come?”

“Going is not the matter. Will they want me there?”

“Who cares? They’ll be too busy calming her down to mind you.”

She thought for a moment.

“You’re right. They all came when my husband died, so I should go too.” As she spoke, she made her way to her room to change. She wore one of her simple blouses, plain blue and round necked, and tied a wrapper up to her chest. There was no way she was wearing a dress, or skirt, or jeans, it would make her stick out like a sore thumb.

There were layers of bathroom slippers piled at the lip of the house. She would hear loud moans from inside, and it got louder when they swept the curtain aside.

Inside was hot and filled with female bodies. Omu was right, for the last two hours she sat watching the woman lie, roll and cry, no one had noticed the yoruba woman in the corner. Her hair stuck out everywhere, eyes flaming read and skin white as clay. Her naked breast fell on top her wrapper and when she rammed herself on the ground, it fell off leaving a body badly rummaged by birth. Someone had to cover her afterwards to preserve her remaining dignity.

“And we fought before he entered the plane. He was very sick. Stomach flu. I told him to stay back but his meeting was more important than his health. ” She burst into tears as soon as she spoke.   
“But-But…” Then she groaned loudly like a birthing seal.

“But what?” One of the women sobbed, equally looking haggard.

The story she told made Ayọ̀bámi truly pity her. Her husband was going to leave her for another woman and he was working to take the children with him because she had refused to leave the village. He wanted them to have proper education-that was his excuse. Silly git, Ayọ̀bámi thought.

“How could he!” Mama Fati yelled.

“I know he wanted the best for them, but… I should have let him take them. Then he would not snuck around and maybe he would not have died?”

“Can you hear yourself? Who wants to die will died,” said Omu harshly. “Abeg, the man was meeting his mistress. It was unavoidable.”

The woman covered her mouth with her hand and sobbed. Ayọ̀bámi could tell she was in denial, wanting to believe there was something she could do to prevent the unfortunate from happening. And she could tell, she was still in love with him.

“You were not in control of his business,” Omu continued. “Move on because he’s not coming back.”

Murmurs rose in the room. Ayọ̀bámi grabbed Omu’s hand and drew her to herself. “Omu, her husband just died. The least you can do is sympathize with her.” Ayọ̀bámi whispered.

Omu huffed.

“That too much, even for you.”

Omu shook her head. “If someone had spoken to me like that, I would have left my marriage a long time ago.”

“She’s right,” the woman sobbed. “He said I was too oblor oblor, that he always felt like fainting when we had sex. He says the other woman is everything I never had. He says she is tall and slim and very portable in bed. I told him I gave birth to his children, and he told me I should be ashamed for giving such excuse.” Tears ran down her swollen cheek. She dug under the couch, sliding out packet of pills. “I went to the hospital since Zoko wasn’t around. They told me it can make me slimmer. I wanted to be finer than that woman when he came back.”

She undid a knot in her wrapper and took out a white cellophane. She took out white and blue pills and held them to her chest.

“Do your children know?” one of the women asked.

“Maybe. We were always fighting when they were at home, but I doubt they know the real reason.”

“Do you plan on telling them,” Mama Emeka asked. “Do they know he died?”

“Mba!” Her voice was high and spiked. “God forbid. They will never know they father was leaving us.” She looked around, at everyone one’s curious gaze. “Nobody should talk about it o. For my sake. Please no gossiping until I can tell them myself.”

Ayọ̀bámi saw heads nod and eyes roll and inaudible hisses from those close by. Of course, they were in for the gossips, too bad Madan Ndubisi thought they really cared. She was surrounded by wild sharks wanting to swallow her words and spit it out in the land of their husbands. Well, she must have done the same to other women, Ayọ̀bámi thought.

Heavens help her if the birds whispered in her children ears.

Mama Fati held her hand tightly. “Don’t worry. Nobody will say anything. You hear?”

Ayọ̀bámi wondered down those years when she was in the same shoes, watching the women ask questions in the face of grief. She was the kind who shut up when pained and cried in secret unless found so there was little they got out of her relationship with her husband. She nearly died when Kunle wanted to announce their marriage to his family after he signed the divorce papers. Ayọ̀bámi had told him of the repercussions it would have on his image, but truly, she was scared of words. She knew the his family wouldn’t be kind to a woman, they never were. They’d paint her in mud and blame her for his suffering marriage. She hadn’t told her son how she met his father, and she planned not to for as long as she lived.

When they forced Kunle to drink from the foul calabash, she wanted to get away as soon as possible. The convergence and whispers anytime they walked past made breathing difficult, the futile way everyone casually smiled iced her body oils.

The day before they left Mmiri, when she was in her farm harvesting her tomatoes, a ball flew, crushing a couple of her babies. Ayọ̀bámi merely thought it missed its direction until a young boy, Bami stepped on another one. He had the history of a small on his lips and it was black. “You people killed my friend,” he spat. “God will punish you people.”

“Mind your words,” she told him sternly. “There’s already proof he didn’t do it.” She stared down at him thinking it would scare him off.

“I don’t believe it. There is only one black beast in this village. That man knew what he saw.”

“Excuse me!”

“What?” He spat on the ground. “Is he not? He leaves pain in his wake everytime. Are you not a good example?”

Ayọ̀bámi fell silent.

Suddenly, she felt the need to explain to the child older than eighteen, younger than twenty. She bent to meet his furious gaze, trying not to crumble before him, forcing herself to swallow the tears. When she spoke, she expected him to reason.

“My dear, it was dark and the rain fell,” she told him. The boy was busy gritting his teeth, and fisting his hands. “He could have easily made out a wrong image. Please, my son did not kill your friend.”

His gaze didn’t soften. “Lie lie. You people dey lie.”

“Bami, I am not lying.”

“I watched him beat up Small Emeka. He looked like an animal. I also heard him threaten him. Emeka knew his secret, that why he killed him.” Then he pointed at the mark on his lips. “He did this to me when we were small.”

“I’ sorry for what you had to go true but my son doesn’t have any secret,” she defended.

“Ask him na. Let me see if he will not deny it,” he dared her.

Strangely, she never asked him-she forced herself to disseminate every reason to doubt Kunle. There was a time she wanted to ask, when they returned to Mmiri, but she ended up joining him by the widow to watch the children dance to songs sung by mouth and beats made from endless banging on buckets.

Ayọ̀bámi ended up perfecting an image crested with smiles, until anyone who saw her would think she was fine. They would only ever catch her when she told them, like Omu, but she never let her see her crumble. Heavens forbid.

Madam Ndubisi was the polar opposite. She let her vulnerability show, after all, people dealt with pains differently. She continued talking for hours, the women endlessly asking questions she willingly answered. Ayọ̀bámi eventually tuned out of the conversation, busying her hands on the loose thread on her wrapper, this was until she mentioned a strange occurrence.

Mama Ogor who had entered the kitchen to prepare food, ran out holding two wraps of pounded yam, the corner of her mouth, stained with palm oil.

Madam Ndubisi covered her mouth. “I wished he died,” the woman’s voice came out muffled. “And I told somebody.”

“You did what!” someone exclaimed.

The crowd gasping and clucking their tongues, Ayọ̀bámi stood up and drew deeper into the crowd flocking around her, and felt immerse heat, taking dozes of smelly armpits and unclean mouths.

“Talk na.” Mama Ogor sat, squeezing herself into tiny space left on the couch. “What do you mean?”

Mrs. Ndubisi choked on a sob. “I was angry. I was too angry that I did not want to sleep in the same house, much less the same bed with him. So...so I left and went to that house.” Her voice thinned on her last words. “I know I do bad. I didn’t just care.”

“And what happened?” It was Ayọ̀bámi who spoke forgetting she once desired invisibility. No one seemed to care who spoke, or who said what, there was a juicier stew on fire.

“I met someone there. It was a boy but I couldn’t see his face because it was too dark. I spoke to him and he asked me what I desired. I told him I wanted my husband to suffer for hurting me. Then he asked me what the pain felt like and I told him it felt like death.”

“Did you recognize his voice? What did he sound like?” Ayọ̀bámi asked. She wanted to know if the boy was Kunle, if he slept in an unknown place.

“Mba. His voice was light, like he swallowed a frog at birth.”

Ayọ̀bámi released a sigh, she hadn’t realized she was holding. She said nothing about her assumption and about what was happening with Kunle. It was not the right, place and time, nor would it ever be. If they were to learn he slept outside, the blame would eventually fall on him.

“So, you think he killed your husband,” Mama Chika said.

“Maybe he did,” Mama Ogor replied.

“That one is not possible at all.” Mama Emeka rebuked. “Ah ah. How can someone just leave this place and fly all the way to Abuja to kill somebody. And for what? You no even know this person.”

“What if it’s Oji?” Omu threw out, and the world was silent. Even Mrs. Ndubisi sobered up, looking like a lost puppy caught in the rain. “Maybe he is hunting this village like in the…”

“Abeg stop it. Just stop,” one of the women yelled and that was that for the conversation. A minute later Ayọ̀bámi went home, parting ways with Omu who silently mumbled to herself the whole time. Ayọ̀bámi didn’t bother asking, her thoughts were occupied with a strange question- mostly never had the time to think about ‘who killed Emeka? Who spoke to Mrs. Ndubisi? Could it be the same person?’

Ayọ̀bámi sat outside and watched the twilight looming and listened to light footsteps approaching her home. She kept her head to the wall and lips between her teeth, even as the familiar face, pale and striking with anxiety came into view. She took long strides, fingers fidgeting at her side and continuous liking of her bottom lip. Even her eyes were wide and searching behind her trail. Mama Emeka held her wrapper tip tightly in her hand and told Ayọ̀bámi why she came.

“What?” Ayọ̀bámi’s voice was clamored in disbelief.

Mama Emeka swallowed. “It was what we decided,” she said oddly calming for someone who thought they had a hand in her son’s death.

“I’m not telling anyone, obviously but why did you have to come all the way here to tell me to keep a secret.” Ayọ̀bámi placed her hand on her waist, and tilted her head the other way. “Or did you come for something else.” Ayọ̀bámi prepared her ears to listen to another mouthful.

“No, no. I just wanted to make sure.” Mama Emeka knotted her fingers, and paced the yard. “After you left, we decided. The husbands or children must not hear Oji might be involved in any deaths. We don’t do well in fear. At all, at all. And warn your children to never go to that house,” she paused. “I don’t even know why she went to that place. We don’t need this nonsense in our life.”

Ayọ̀bámi took a deep breath and went over to Mama Emeka and place a hand on her shoulder. Her brows were knotted together. “Tell me,” she said. “Do you think he really had a hand in the deaths?”

Mama Emeka brushed her hand off and stepped closer, Ayọ̀bámi felt her warm breath trickle down her nose. “You know that we have beliefs and those beliefs govern our village. It makes us who we are. You may not believe them but I do, and that seed Omu planted in our house reminded us about the stories our parents used to tell us. Just listen to me, and stay away from Oji’s house.” She walked away. Ayọ̀bámi watched her figure become small until she disappeared in the corner. It was strange how out of everyone, she came to warn her enemy- if she still thought they were the enemy. It was her child we’re talking about.

Nobody forgot the loss of a child that easily, unless…

Sometimes it felt like she was running in circles, and every time a clue popped up, it took her two feet back, father than where she started.

But this time, she knew. It’s her motherly guts, she told herself.

If she found out the truth about Oji, maybe she could save her son and clear his name.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ONAYE

How am I going to tell Dubem about Kunle’s death without hinting on the fact that Ayọ̀bámi suffered heavily before he died? And it was Kunle’s fault? How will I tell him he did it without knowing the effects?

There are more things that I know which I should not but because we were close like two threads knotted tightly together, it was kind of inevitable knowing what he was going through. And keeping everything has been killing me on the inside.

Maybe it is time for me to let go of everything.

Maybe it is time to remove the load weighting me down.

But am I ready for his reaction? Just what would he think of my hands?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KUNLE

The only emotion I feel is rage.

I always thought that as one grew older, you start to realise that you could just whisper to your emotions, ask them what they are saying, then listen and learn how to control them. Your emotions are a part of you, and in every situation they should bend to your will. As a child I was always able to control them well enough so not to leave any damage. But then I got older and they started to spin out of control and eventually they took over my hands, legs and feet, like a set of keys controlling a radio station.

If I were to choose something else to feel, it will be fear. To crumble into bent corners, tear stricken faces and then I will understand how others feel when they see me. Because I no longer understand. I can see the look in their eyes. The urge to want to stay away. What if this is the kind of person I truly am, truly made to be?

I wanted to say something to my mother. That everything started with my longing desire to set us apart from the flocks and make them long to be like us. But I ended up making us the black sheep no one would follow. Well I’m glad one of us was beginning to fit in.

Was that not the plan?

Then why do I still feel this desire burning inside of me?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was around Zoko’s disappearance, everyone started visiting the church. Not that his disappearance had anything to do with it. It was just that with the coming elections, people wanted something to hold on to, hope?

For Ayobami it was the hope they came for and Onaye just tagged along because she wanted to keep the woman company. It was like ‘we are in this together’ kind of thing, so she doesn’t feel like a fool for believing in God.

About a month after Ayobami started praying, Onaye went to church for the first time since her mother’s burial. She stopped bothering with the Sunday masses and only showed up on Christmas and New years day. She hadn’t been back to sit on those pews because she didn’t think it was necessary to speak to someone who let her and Kunle suffer in the hands of the people he created. But Ayobami seemed sure enough that by saying the rosary every day after the Sunday masses, that God may have pity for her son and let him leave a normal life.

We didn’t sit in the back pew where many children, dragged to the mass by their nagging mothers dozed off with their mouths opens or played games silently. We went close to the front row. We sat where we would have a clear view of the priest in his green regalia and his alter servers in their white vestment. Onaye specially wanted where the standing fan blew her face, so she opted to stay at the end of the seat.

When the priest stood to read the gospel, everyone rose to their feet as though the saviour was ready to speak. But the man beside her took out her voters card and held it close to his chest. The priest began his sermon shortly after. He started by telling us to rise and join him to sing out to the Lord. He sang into the microphone, repeating line after line over and over again then increasing his pitch suddenly and the words his spoke after were not sung; GUIDE US THROUGH THE PATH YOU WANT US TO GO IN JESUS NAME.

The congregation echoes a resounding ‘Amen.’

The man beside her kissed his voters card, raised it up, muttering, “Obasanjo. Obasanjo.” Other people around her did the same thing, muttering the names of candidates they wanted to win the election. There were still people among them, who were there to pray Kunle away. You could see the room in their eyes, how they would stare at his mother every now and then.

She wondered whose prayer their God would answer first.

“There is one thing you must all know about our father,” the priest said. “That he guides us along the oath in ways which are quite beyond our understanding. He uses means to do that. It can be anything or everything to achieve his plans for us, even turning our hearts and mind to follow his course. So we must be patient and endure. …”

The priest gazed over them with his eyes as he spoke. He locked eyes with Onaye and she felt as though he knew about the mangoe tree, she and Kunle used to steal from when they were little. His gaze lingered on her; maybe he wanted her to say something. She swiped her hand in the air as though she heard a mosquito passby.

Stealing was something they stopped doing a long time ago. When their parents didn't let them collect fruits from the other parents, they’d sneak into Mama Emeka’s compound to steal from her tree. They were not patient enough to wait for their mothers to return from the market with delicious fruit. Anytime theu snuck in, Kunle targeted the yellow ones like the sun and threw stone at the stem so they would fall on the ground. On their way home, they’d take their share; if four fell, it would be two each and six, they'd take four each. They’d peel the back with their teeth – Kunle always enjoyed eating the mango peels – to attack the yellow inside. The liquid dripping own their arms was sticky, so they’d lick it off with their tongue. The sweet taste had them going back for more.

That was until Onaye’s mother caught them flying the fence into Mama Emeka’s backyard. The village knew she built it to keep intruders away, but it was not high enough to stop two children.

Onaye’s mother told her husband and then Kunle’s mother. Zoko blamed Ekene for giving birth to a useless child. He blamed her for not giving him a son that would carry his reputation. The argument lasted two months, dying down when he left for his usual herb hunting.

Ekene was not as weak as anyone believed. She ripped Onaye’s buttocks with cane everyday for a weak, extracting a promise never to steal again. Onaye believed her mother was scared of the fact of exposing her family to more insults and ridicule from the woman. Maybe that was why she didn’t force her to report herself to Mama Emeka and her family. Kunle was given double the stokes of cane, because his mother had expected more from him because he was a boy and should have thought wiser.

The matter died with the strokes of cane and was never thought off until now.

The priest continued the sermon, and Ayobami took out a jotter from her back to note the important things he said. When Onaye looked back at the alter, her gaze was transfixed on the crucifix. The eyes of Jesus watched the congregation with solemnity, as though he pitied them. Onaye wondered if they were able to change from their stealing ways. It seemed like Kunle was stealing the attention of those who were meant to prepare for the election and she? What was she stealing. She had regrets that Sunday morning, about waiting for Kunle in front of their school. She wanted to know by all meant who Kunle had feelings for. She made sure to stand outside the gate, where Kunle would find her. But deep down she wanted to be swallowed by the crowd of overbearing parents and teaching and the students who were eager to clock out for the day. Swallowed gulp by gulp, she swallowed her spittle until the tip of her tongue became sour.

Each ear-splitting slap the angry mob gave him, because of his fight with small Emeka made her flinch. And she didn’t do anything to stop them. It was because she was afriand of them, but Kunle was not afraid to jump in and save her from their ridicule.

It was Kunle’s life she stole.

“Through endurance in faith, we can see that the end is never truly the end. Because who endures to the end will be saved...”

She tried to shut my eyes to the sound and my thoughts. She could see him clearly as she studied the crucifix. She could hear the slaps like the whips that landed on Jesus’s back, saw the way young Kunle teared up.

#

In the afternoon, Onaye opened up her shop to receive customers. The first person to enter was Kunle, barefooted and in a pair of shorts. He was smiling as removed the band from his hair, a smile that puzzled and annoyed her, as vacantly good naturned as if he’d just won the lottery. She drew out a chair and watched him fall into it, and pull himself closer to the mirror.

He picked up the bulletin from the table.

“Did you go to church?” he asked, cutting her a mischievous look.

“It’s sunday.” she said pointedly. “What else do you do on a sunday morning?”

He turned to look at her briefly. “My mother made you go, didn’t she.”

Onaye pulled a bush out of the drawers and used it to brush Kunles hair into order. A few years ago, there was nothing to brush. “It wasn’t that bad.”

Kunle shook his head. “Says the girl who stopped believing in church wahala.”

Onaye paused. “What do you want me to do with your dada?”

“Deadlocks,” he corrected. “Just make it look neat. I want to look good.”

“You talk as if you are actually going to meet somebody.” When he did say anything in response, Onaye knew for a fact that he was going to meet someone. A girl? She didn’t know and before she could ask, he changed the subject.

“Abeg tell me a story,” he said. “Like those kinds you used to tell me when we were little.”

When Onaye was a child, her father would cover her mother with cloth and tell her stories until she fell asleep. And it was just the two of them, nobody else. When Ekene died, Zoko Hadn’t bothered to tell her those stories. The only reason she knew them, was because she lurked around in the corridor, moving from doors to windows as she listened for her father’s voice.

She didn’t listen to every story. She chose the ones about the talking animals and forests, the magical musical instruments, and anything they stayed out of the ordinary. The ones that let her imagine and let her make up characters in her head. Sometimes she would not hear well enough, the she would opened the door sightly enough to stay unnoticed.

The stories he told were not all she listened to. She loved the songs that accompanied them because she knew them so well. To her, they created understanding, and made it enjoyable enough for her to seat three hours on the cold ground. The drum that sank inside the stream for its heavy weight. The one about a child that cried and the many attempts for his parents to stop his cries. The stories and songs reminded Onaye that adults were still children inside.

She would not sing along because she was afraid her parents would hear her voice and beat her for it. After the mango incident, she was not ready for another whipping. She learned to be light foot, like a feather and stiff a board, her ears always listened for any footsteps just in case.

Her favourite story was the one about the greedy hunter and he animal kingdom. That was the story Onaye told Kunle that day. Like a little child, he relaxed and listened.

Once upon time in a far away land, there was a hunter names Orizu. He was a very good hunter and he would always outdo the other hunters when there was a hunting challenge. He was good but every good thing has a negative side. He was very greedy and never satisfied with his catch no matter how successful the day had been for him. He wuld hunt everyday of the week, wben the days the villagers set aside as hunt free days. All the animals hated him.

One day, Orizu got into trouble, He had gone out to hunt as usual and he was so busy that he didn’t realize it was getting late.

“How did I not realize time had already gone,” the hunter wondered aloud as he began to make his way out of the bush. He was so much in a hurry that he did not notice the danger ahead. And like that, with my foot in, he got caught in another hunters net. He was very frightened.

“What do I do now?” he muttered softly. “How do I get out of this?”

At that moment, a rabbit was passing by and saw him in the trap. The rabbit was so happy to see him in that situation.

“This is great!” the rabbit laughed loudly. “Now I have to go and call the other animals. You would make a very good dinner for the lion and his brothers and you will no longer disturb our kingdom.”

“No. Please don’t do that please. I beg you with everything you hold dear,” he cried. “See, I will do anything you ask. Please don’t alert the others.” Orizu pleaded because he was frightened by the thought of ending up the lions belly.

“There is nothing else I hold dear,” the rabbit said. “You've taken away everyone that was dear to me.” Then the rabbit stared at him for moment and blinked as though he realised something. “Did you say you would do anything I asked?”

“Yes. Anything. Please. Just don’t call the other animals,” Orizu pleaded again.

“Alright,” the rabbit said. “You will promise never to disturb our kingdom again anymore.”

“But how do I survive with my family,” Orizu asked.

“Okay. Lets make a little adjustment. You will only come here once every eight days.”

Orizu agreed. It was a fair deal. The rabbit helped him loosen the trap with his teeth. He thanked the rabbit and went home. The rabbit broke the news to the other animals and they were very happy at this little agreement.

Orizu kept to his promise for a while, and then his greed returned. He started going to the forest once every five days, then once every three days and then he went back to hunting everyday. The rabbit and the other animals were very sad.

“And he promised,” the rabbit said sadly. “I will go and talk to him the next time he comes to hunt.”

The other animals tried to stop the rabbit but he refused and insisted on going to talk to the hunter.

Unfortunately, Orizu killed him while he was trying to remind him of his promise. The animals got very angry and decided to deal with him. They came up with a plan on how to punish him.

The next day, Orizu came to hunt as usual. Unaware of the plans the animals had for him, he made his way to the animal kingdom in confidence that he would have a great day as usual. He didn’t know there were ropes tied around the kingdom and then, he tripped on them and fell into animal shit that was littered everywhere. He got up, tried to move but got caught in a spiderweb.

“Ahhh! What is happening to me,” he screamed. In the fight to untangle himself, he fell into a pond filled with animal urine. Orizu thought the pond was filled with water. Not minding the smell he washed his face with it and poured some into his eyes. As it touched his eye balls, he screamed loudly, “Ahhh,” ridden with pains.

“My eyes. Who’s there? Help me.” he said to no one in particular. “Help!”

The animals began to laugh and make jest of him. He realised just then what had happened to him. He tried to open his eyes but he could still not see. Orizu pleaded and no one helped him. He rubbed and rubbed his eyes, but as he did this, the pains in his eyes got worse until he lost is sight.

The lion and his brothers didn’t eat him. And that was because they wanted him to live and regret his actions the rest of his life.

We all have reasons why we do the things we do. Sometimes, those things may be for the goodness of others, so they could live comfortably. If there was a greedy man, he must have thought about his family every time he went hunting and now there was no way his family would survive. We are going to see the same thing play out in this story and then you shall realize we cannot always get what we want without facing consequences.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KUNLE

I’m feel there is someone else inside of me fueling my rage.

I always thought swords and knives were the better tools to win the enemy, it wasn’t, to hell those who lied to me. Those pointy tips and sharp edges were not good enough to carve life into balance, instead they pricked at your existence until you drowned in a pit from frustration. My head is heavy. It didn’t matter to anyone because they couldn’t feel the weight pressing down on my skull and I intend to keep it that way. He intends to keep it that way until both of us become worshipped.

At least, it should compesiate for those years I feared and cried.

My second person is someone I see yet I don’t.

He is closer than I first imagined. He came to me like a broken plate, shattered beyond repair, eyes redder than blood and soul darker than night. I willed myself to walk in his steps when he told to listen to the voices around. And when I heard them, the nasty words raged my soul, then I allowed him hook himself to me like a parasite. I let him gain control; I couldn’t transform to myself into what I once was. I didn’t know it was just me, or he’s still there working his way through areas of my life. One minutes I hear him rumble, other times I’m at my feet, and sometimes I’m lying face flat on something soft or prickly.

Last time I looked in the mirror, my face was different. I looked like a beaten up cow under the bridge. He made the decision to grow out my hair, tear my lips, allowing the insects of the night suck at then and my scrawny limbs. I wonder what my mother would say when she found out her son is now locked away, and Onaye? My dear Onaye who I vowed to protect from the vile villagers- I know this my newself is the best way to achieve what both of us long for.

I no longer fear for my life and I don’t regret the sins I have committed.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ONAYE

I told myself my stomach only rumbled because I hadn’t eaten that morning. My father might have crunched his brows and squeezed his arse when he stuck my cheek, but not even a single wrinkle remained on his lifeless face. His lips were chapped-at least the remaining one yet to be eaten by insects and perched on by iron jacket flies as my Mama used to call them.

I had a sudden flash of the way he pricked his fingers when he looked at me from my mother’s laps those years when Mama was alive, and my insides rumbled once more. At times, he would chew on those nails with hatred brewing in his eyes. I always thought he enjoyed chewing on them, but then I was away for a while and his nails where long, fresh. I could see their sharpness-peeking every now and then-from under the layers of water surrounding them.

There was a period of time when I would have preferred my father dead. And don’t get me wrong, I still did minutes before I found his rotting body. If he was going to pay for his harsh and careless words, he should suffer in the same excruciating way. That was my prayer point every night. But not like this, not swollen to the bones with water and mouth open to silent screams and pupils covered in blood cloth and empty with dreams. And entangled with his bicycle in ways I never thought possible.

I could laugh. Many people did at his frail limbs twisted round the bicycle wheel.

I could cry. No one did in fact except one wheezing sound Omu released.

I could look for answers- why he died the way he did. I was no investigator, I was timid and scared. How would I ask questions boldly and welcome the treatment after?

I heard the walls speak every time they thought I was neck deep into my wounded thoughts and they said my father wished his demise on himself. They spoke of his past and his cursed marriage. They spoke of Ayọ̀bámi and her cursed son. I have come to a point where I’ve realized they were going to constantly judge us even if we hurt to the point of death or do nothing. This was the harsh reality I was always going to face.

But this was not going to stop me from finding out what happened to Papa. I knew he didn’t deserve it. I was only doing this because of that small part of me that wanted him to still like me and for my mother who may be turning over in her grave from unease for the man she loved.

#

Meanwhile Kunle and Dubem were settling in on a fallen log, eaten up by mushrooms and dirt. They were talking about the strike- it was all they could talk about. Well, what Dubem could only talk about; if the paying the lecturers was enough to guarantee they wouldn’t return to strike the following year, how they were being selfish. He raised his voice, slammed his foot on the wet sand until they glued to his heels. This was actually the talk of the town to those who had children in the Nigerian universities and those who wanted to avoid the nasty reality of their crumbling village.

Kunle leaned back and yelled. “Eyah. Well done,” at the two familiar faces dragging a large Ghana must go between them. Their faces were wet with sweat as they tried maneuvering the bag over a small puddle.

One of them turned to him confused, his brows scrunching together.

“Instead of you to help us,” he yelled back and hissed after. As though speaking to Kunle ignited his hidden strength, he lifted his side with a puff without breaking a sweat.

Dubem clicked his tongue between his teeth. “They don’t like you,” he murmured, and Kunle who couldn’t care less yawned and massaged his temple. His new cut on lip was closed. His hair put in a bun over his head, two strands falling around his neck.

“That is old news,” he said.

“How long do you think the strike will last?” Dubem asked, jumping to his feet and the log bounced harshly after him.

“Maybe the federal government will answer them next week,” Kunle replied.

“That what they said,” Dubem said. “But I know those people.” He shook his head and crossed his arms. “Their meeting will end in one dreadlock.”

“So what happens after?” Kunle asked.

“Everyone needs to move on eventually,” Dubem replied. “Maybe I’ll leave this village and look for work.”

Perhaps he was right and people needed to move on from to achieve something greater. But moving on required sacrifices, forgotten dreams and in his case, forgotten revenge. He desired to move on as well. The thing in him was stuck in the past- the thing in him wanted to keep him there.

A few days into the strike, as tensions in the village grew, the king imposed another curfew an hour after the sunset and women were throwing salt around their compounds to protect them from evil spirits. The Christians were sharing bottles of holy water and when they knocked on Kunle’s homes and poured a bottle over his head, Ayọ̀bámi had to keep him from knocking them over.

“Get out of our house!” he screamed. “Do you think I’m the evil spirit you’re looking for?” He spat in their faces and stormed out of the house to Oji’s. Ayọ̀bámi followed in her plaited skirt and chiffon shirt.

“You are not supposed to be here,” Ayọ̀bámi whispered harshly. “We were warned Kunle.”

When Kunle refused to leave, she let him rest on her lap till morning with her eyes wide open in case there were strangers approaching. She didn’t want him to hurt again.

In the morning, they were covered in bug bites and their lips pale from the cold weather. After she dragged him home, she boiled water to bath and made bitter leave water for them to drink. She didn’t know what to say to him, so she sealed her lip and said nothing. Even her thoughts were blank.

“Thank heavens he didn’t see you here,” she said. Mama Fati cradled her bowl of salt under her armpit, a small bottle of mustard seed perched on top of the mini hill.

Fati and Toby stood behind her in kharki shorts and a plain blue and red t-shirt. Fati wore a butterfly necklace, and her head was put in Bantu knots while Toby wore a clean haircut, and scanty beard decorated his chin.

“I didn’t know they were back already?” said Ayọ̀bámi, as she opened the door for them to enter. “Is it because of the strike? How is school?” Ayọ̀bámi knew she was never close to any of the village women, but she pretended- it was always better to pretend.

“We came back yesterday,” Fati answered casting a curious gaze around the house. “There was no point in staying when there’s strike.”

“I know,” she said and smiled as they entered. “Do you want to see Kunle?” she asked politely. Ayọ̀bámi didn’t expect to receive a positive reply, so she rammed into the front door as she closed it when they said, “yes.”

“Are you sure? I don’t remember you three being friends,” it was their mother who spoke.

Toby shrugged one shoulder. “It’s not a bad thing to be friends now.”

“It’s been years. We just want to know how he’s doing, that’s all,” Fati smiled and pulled her brother forward before her mother could object, and it seemed like she would. Fati was a girl after all.

“It’s okay,” Ayọ̀bámi said. “Just go straight. The door you see on your left is his.”

Ayọ̀bámi exchanged glances with Mama Fati as the children put down their bowls beside the couch stools.

Ayọ̀bámi laughed. “That’s nice of them.”

Mama Fati huffed. “Oh please, they just want to make sure the rumors aren’t true. You know, the one about him being possessed.”

Ayọ̀bámi blinked. “Possessed?”

“Darling dear, he must be a handful for only you.” Mama Fati grabbed her hands and caressed them as though they were fragile and delicate. They were meant to bring her comfort, instead she felt like a child with a problem.

Ayọ̀bámi withdrew her hands and placed them into her wrapper. “I admit there might be something between him and forces beyond our world, but my son is not possessed.”

“Oh yes. I can see that you are one of those people who like proof.”

“Yes, show me one. I like to see for myself,” Ayọ̀bámi said and sat on the couch where a tray of unbroken melon laid. “You people just assume there is something wrong with him.”

“Well, you just said something about an entity.”

Ayọ̀bámi suppressed a groan, it was obvious what Mama Fati came for, always the inquisitive type. Where the other women noticed her tight lips, Mama Fati would press until you gave her what she came for. Ayọ̀bámi might have asked her to leave if her children weren’t inside, and seeing as they weren’t running out, hot in tears, gave her the heart to continue. “I don’t what to think anymore,” she said. “I believe with time he will be well,”

Mama Fati sat down beside her. “So you think he’s sick?” she asked. “Onaye had that look when she saw her father’s body. She was sad but she didn’t look it. Mama Emeka went to her home, but Omu hadn’t seen her.”

“Why did Mama Emeka go to her house?”

“For the salt, of course. And to return her slippers. The poor girl forgot them and ran home barefooted. Dreadful thing that happened to that girl. First her mother, now her father. Have you seen her?”

“No, I haven’t,” Ayọ̀bámi lied. “Maybe she needs time to think.”

“What is she thinking about? She should go and marry before death comes for her next.”

“Mama Fati!” Ayọ̀bámi exclaimed.

“What! Since we found her father’s body, everyone has been leaving the village. Soon we will be only a handful left to fight whatever is killing us.”

“I know. But he’s not the one, I swear. He’s just in a bad place at the moment. He was always sensitive, and…”

Mama Fati nodded knowingly. “Love,” she said. “It will blind you one day. Instead of you to let us whip him till that spirit leaves his body.”

“Let it blind me.” Ayọ̀bámi nodded her head. “It has never failed me, and neither will it now.” There was a chance Mama Fati was going to tell everyone the spirit in her son deluded her, but it was better than crumbling before her.

“So it’s that love that made you fly all the way to Nigeria,” said Mama Fati.

“That was us our way of managing time,” Ayọ̀bámi replied, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice. She knew Mama Fati knew the whole story, everyone in the village probably knew by now-she’d mentioned it those times she was trying to fit into their gathering. Floating down memory lane, there were things she regretted telling them- from the sickness that killed Kunle and what cured him for the few days he had left.

Instead of sympathizing with her, they said; “You collected witchcraft o. That woman tied her mother’s womb and punished her husband with a daughter as the first child. We don’t know what she is truly capable of. Better distance yourself away from her,” and she did. The last years of her death, Ayọ̀bámi stayed home to care for her son, who at the time was not ready to admit he didn’t look her them. When she heard she died, she was overwhelmed by guilt, so she let their children stay friends.

“What do you think about her,” she’d asked him, as they returned home after the wake keep.

“I think she is beautiful. I don’t know why people don’t like her.” He had finished off with a toothy grin.

She had been happy they cared for each other, even though Onaye was more dependent on her son to fight off her bullies. She enjoyed seeing them together. At a time, she thought they would eventually fall in love, but he had laughed when she suggested it. “She is just my friend,” he said. “She doesn’t even like me like that.” The shoemaker mending his shoe chipped in with his broken English. “Wali she go like you, I swear,” he said. “Na ask you suppose ask am.” She wondered where the shoemaker went to, he was always here and there repairing shoes when you needed him. The thin Hausa man had stopped coming after Small Emeka’s death, and she wondered if he grew scared for his life.

Kunle had laughed right after. Ayọ̀bámi couldn’t remember she last time she heard her son laugh. Not the one mixed with force and sarcasm. A full-blown laughter of a child without worry, a sound made simply because someone made you happy.

Did you ever think of that?”

Ayọ̀bámi looked at Mama Fati, realizing she was waiting for a reply. “What did you say?”

Mama Fati sighed. “I asked if you ever thought of bleaching your son’s skin. He might end up looking like you at the end of the day.”

“And why should do that?”

“I’m sure your people prefer not to have someone like that on their family register.”

Ayọ̀bámi barely stopped herself from decorating her face with the melons. “So the strike?” She wanted to change the topic and she was glad Mama Fati looked interested. “What are the plans?”

She went off rambling about her children choosing to learn a skill they could monetize when school resumed. How her husband was planning to send them abroad, and a possible move from the village. “He got a good job in Enugu and they pay him well.” She placed the bowl on the floor, and undid a knot in her wrapper. Inside was silver necklace, assorted with tiny fake diamonds. “He said this is worth a million naira.” Ayọ̀bámi hated to trample on the hopes and dreams of other, so she smiled instead.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I know,” she said. “Not even Oji can steal my happiness.”

Before Ayọ̀bámi could ask about Oji, the children came out of Kunle’s room dragging their feet, and looking dazed.

“Maybe I should have told him first,” Ayọ̀bámi said. “I forgot he doesn’t like surprises.”

“How is he?” their mother asked.

“He is not fine Mama,” Toby said. “It is not the Kunle I used to know. But I don’t think he is possessed by a bad spirit.” He picked up a bowl and passed it to his sister, and picked his. Ayọ̀bámi was expecting them to say more, Mama Fati seemed interested as well, but it was as if they promised to keep their mouths shut, or threatened to do so. Children had their way of conniving in their meetings to best their parents, and they weren’t like Dubem whose mouth flooded words every two seconds into the wrong ears - with him, she knew how to get him to spill. It was clear they weren’t going to say anything, so Ayọ̀bámi ushered them out after offering them a cup of tea.

It was dark, when she decided to knock on his door carrying his dinner. Without waiting for a reply, she entered. Kunle was lying on his stomach, head smacked between his pillows.

“I brought food for you,” she told him.

He looked up sharply and his face was wet with sleep. “Oh,” he said, shifting to place his back on the wall. “Thank you.” His voice was calmer and polite than it had ever been. She watched him eat until not a single drop of rice remained.

She was happy.

Ayọ̀bámi was very happy.

“I think he is returning to his usual self,” she said, after running to see Omu. “Soon, he will be back to my young boy.”

“How. What happened?” she asked, and she told her how he ate his food and slept in his own bed.

“Aren’t they one of the children who hated him and Onaye?”

“They want to be friends now.”

“And you trust them?” Omu asked stepping outside fully, the evening wind making her scarf tails dance.

“Come on. They were little children and it was many years ago,” defended Ayọ̀bámi. “You should see then now. Grown into fine adults.”

“So what? You think their interaction affected his behavior?”

“I don’t know. Nothing is certain yet. I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything.”

“Maybe it’s because of Onaye,” Omu said. “I saw them last night by the stream. They were talking but I don’t know what. I was far away but she was crying.”

“She just lost her father. What do you think she’d be doing?” It seemed like she had more to say, then she shook her head batting away the thought. “What?”

“Forget.”

Ayọ̀bámi frowned. “Why?”

“He laughed,” she said. “You son laughed right after she placed her head on his shoulders.”

So that was how Ayọ̀bámi went home with a dampened spirit. She hated where her mind was going. Kunle started to stay home more often, he joined Toby at the market where he learned to shave heads. Onaye and Dubem would come by often to see him, and he would to theirs with sachet of milk and milo for them to drink. During this times, Ayọ̀bámi buried her father beside his own father, at their backyard overgrown with weeds. Kunle offered to cut them. And Ayọ̀bámi had watched him, whistle and dance away on the newly dug grave.

After the burial, Ayọ̀bámi pulled Dubem aside to check if he knew anything about his excitement. “I think he has gone insane,” he said in his deep and brooding voice. A thick lump glued to her chest.

“So you don’t know? You of all people.”

“Aunty Ayọ̀bámi. Nobody knows what goes on in that his head.”

Ayọ̀bámi frowned. “Maybe he just had too much sugar.”

Dubem paused. “Or he’s happy her father is dead.”

Lips caught in teeth, Ayọ̀bámi slapped his back, hard. “Shut up Dubem. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Ah Aunty.” He drew away, rubbing the side she hit. “I am just saying. It’s not like I meant it. Ah… your hand is too painful.”

Ayọ̀bámi let him leave grumbling to himself, and she wished someone slapped her like that. Dubem simply voiced a thought that pledged her since Omu told her Kunle smiled.

There Ayọ̀bámi made up her mind to learn about Oji before she went home. Not because she believe in possession… he son wasn’t possessed… he shouldn’t be possessed. And she knew the person to go to.

Mama Emeka opened up almost immediately. “Yes Oji was a bad man,” she told Ayọ̀bámi mixing rice with hands as licked her lips. “Long dada, scars on his lips, tall and dark. My mother told me exactly what he looked like.”

“So you think he looks like my son?” Ayọ̀bámi demanded, but her surprised outrage didn’t sound convincing enough, even to her own ears. Looking around she saw Onaye cradled by corner, eyes lost to the world. But there was no sign she wasn’t listening in.

“He does.” There was silence, then Mama Emeka placed her food down. “I didn’t see it myself so I blamed him for my son’s death.”

“But…”

Mama Emeka inclined her head. “He is innocent. It is Oji’s fault,” she said. “But not everyone sees it that way. I wish I can show you a picture, but we were never digital people in the eighties.”

“Tell me everything. I want to know,” she spoke calmly and sank down on the edge of the Onaye’s couch.

“The first time I ever heard this story, I was like five, so I might not remember every detail.” She glanced briefly at Onaye whose head had disappeared between her laps. “Oji was the chief priest before Uzor, and he was best friends with the medicine man then. Yes, Onaye’s grandfather.”

The moonlight touched her hawkish profile with silver. “They were like roped thieves, even tighter. It was either Oji and Onyeka, or Onyeka and Oji. No one really knows how they became friends, but we believe their stars were aligned and were destined by birth. They told each other everything, from their last meal, to their lustful desires with women they could never have. But it was fine, as long as the women were aware and consented to it.” She paused. They were all watching her now- Ayọ̀bámi, Onaye, Dubem. “She told me Oji always had this hidden desire. He was never satisfied with the women he could have, he wanted those he couldn’t have. He like a challenge, always like one. He would always watch from that his house. There was one time I passed there, when there was a pathway, it was a shortcut to the market before it the weeds took over. He would sit on his veranda and watch the young ladies pass by.”

Ayọ̀bámi made a little noise, a pained exhalation of breath, but Mama Emeka went on remorselessly.

“Yes, I mean the youngest of the youngest. Five, ten, fifteen-year old. I’m sure this rumor had gone around for a while.”

“I heard it,” Onaye said.

“I never did,” Ayọ̀bámi countered.

“Well he did. And it happened that it was a time children were facing yellow fever. Where Onyeka couldn’t handle pregnant women and the children at the same time, Oji decided to help out. He would invite them to him home, and make the parents stay outside until his was finished.”

“He raped them,” asked Ayọ̀bámi.

Mama Emeka nodded. “At first, nobody noticed. The children would always come out looking lost and refuse to eat for days. Until one who knew what sex and rape was, was able to tell her parents what had happened.”

“So she just came out and said it?” Onaye asked.

“People convinced her when she cried all day. It was until your grandfather spoke to her, she came out and said it. But that fool denied it even when the fire burned his skin. He swore with his last breath to make them pay.”

“Who?”

Mama Emeka shook her head. “Those who accused him. And now you see, people are just dying anyhow like chicken.” Then she chocked on her spit. “Even my son who didn’t do anything.” There were tears in her eyes, tiny beads at the corner but she wiped them off almost immediately.

“I refuse to believe my son is a vessel for revenge,” Ayọ̀bámi bit bitterly.

Mama Emeka exhaled. She tried to be patient with Ayọ̀bámi, she really did, considering the fact she was his mother, but she needed to see. “Open your eyes madam. Your foolery will get you nowhere.”

“Let’s say he is really possessed. What should we do?”

“Ah, no, I’m not doing anything. I just want to leave this village.”

“Will you run away if he was your son?”

“Biko, don’t talk like that.” She sniffed, picking her plate. “Better take your son and leave before the remaining villagers throw your son in a well.”

“You’re talking as if you don’t want to do it yourself.”

“I told you before your son is innocent but not everyone thinks that way. Our village is ruled by beliefs and I still think your abominable marriage brought this upon us. Have you heard, they are going to the king soon to plead to wipe the village from diseases? That included your family and Onaye.”

“Why her? Her father just died.”

“It’s like you don’t know her father caused the death of one pregnant woman when he was younger. And he married an outsider and gave birth to albino.” Mama Emeka scrunched her face as she looked between them.

“Heavens. What happened?”

“Ask me. I heard his father gave him plenty strokes of the cane,” she paused, then more quietly. “He died that day. They think he did it.”

“My god, Mama Emeka.”

“I witnessed this one koro koro. One minute he was lying by the well, then he announced his father slumped and hit his head.”

“Did anyone investigate?”

“Investigate kwa. There was evidence everywhere. How can someone die after flogging you?” she said, placing her plate down and stood.

“Are you not eating?”

“I’m not hungry again. This is too much bad omen for me.” She leaned against the couch, her blouse falling out of her wrapper. She was slimmer than Ayọ̀bámi remembered, cradling the pains of her lost child. To her, Mama Emeka was stronger than most women she’d ever seen. Ayọ̀bámi knew, she would have locked herself indoors for hours and possibly died from heat and starvation. Ayọ̀bámi wasn’t sure if she planned on having other children. “I better go before my husband starts looking.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Ayọ̀bámi. She knew her husband wanted her close by, for protection from herself. Grieving women were better with people around, that’s what they said, and that’s what people grew up to believe. We’ve spent years being told women were frail and weak. Men whispered in their ears they’d be nothing without them and they’d believe it, running to their husband’s beck and call.

“I told you to stay where I can see you,” Ayọ̀bámi heard him say. “Were you able to eat? Did you drink enough water?” And when she shook her head, he genuinely looked worried. “Why? Are you feeling sick somewhere?”

Then again, husbands could be sweet like an orange tooth, act like a child when their love is in distress. Ayọ̀bámi wished she was like the yet to be widowed Mama’s, whose beds were still warmed, heart still beating with love, and not the type she had for her son. Omu thought she could live without a man, but Ayọ̀bámi strongly believed it was impossible. At times, her eyes wondered to the muscular men shoveling sands into the gutter and wondered what it’d be like to fall in love again. She’d never been with a man before and after Kunle. The nuns were strict with their charsity rule and since it was an all-female institute, they barely saw the boys, muchless come in contact with them. It took leaving at eighteen to understand the true nature of sex- from a book and the words were awfully graphic.

Ayọ̀bámi wanted to be like Mama Ephraim who remarried after her husband died. It took her two years to come back into the market. Unlike Omu, her first husband was loyal and the love of her life. He was a police officer, so he was always on duty in the major cities and rarely at home, but when he came back, it felt like a white man landed bearing gifts. The whole village would watch Mama Ephraim cry hysterically as she hugged her husband with a deadly grip right infront of their house. They thought they were going to last, instead death had other plans. She ended up a surly mess and stayed indoors for eight months. Ayọ̀bámi heard she found her second husband in the market. He was a butcher, the type that sharpened his knives with other knives, and displayed to his customers his stylistic skill to chopping meat. Maybe she was whisked away by the performance. The story was famous amongst the women, but Ayọ̀bámi knew her story was not going to end like that. Kunle was giving her a scare of a lifetime. He was top priority.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine,” Mama Emeka’s voice floated back to her ears.

“Better look away before they say you are eying somebody’s husband.” Omu came up behind her in her black flay dress.

“I’m only watching,” laughed Ayọ̀bámi. “It’s not a problem.”

Omu made a scratchy sound from the back of her throat. “Wait till she catches you. You know any slight mistake, you will pay for it.”

“And how will I pay for it?”

“As if you don’t know.”

“I doubt they’d be anyone left who’d care about infidelity and adultly?” said Ayọ̀bámi.

“You know, sometimes I forget people are actually leaving.” She looked at the handful of guest scattered about munching their food. “Only that day everyone was trouping into Ndubisi house.”

Ayọ̀bámi pressed her lips together and nodded. “I’m telling you. I think they’re scared.”

“Who wouldn’t be? Almost everyone partook in Oji’s death.”

“But I thought it happened years ago.”

“I see you’ve heard the story. Yes, it did. A long time ago but our grandparents and parents played a part in the ceremony.”

Ayọ̀bámi paused. “Well. That’s odd. I remember you telling me you just came to the village.”

“I did, didn’t I?” she said. “I used to live here when I was little.”

“No wonder they didn’t banter you.”

Omu smiled. “Of course. They really despise people from strangers. There’s this belief of them coming to take lands. I know what you’re going to say. The elders fought for this land, and they’d rather prevent future problems.”

“But here they are running.”

“Fear is a very strong emotion,” she said as a loud crash came from the backyard. She sighed. “Let me go and take care of them before they break my plates.”

She picked up Mama Emeka’s plate, and whisked herself away from the living room.

A woman without problems, she thought. Even at her husband’s burial, she talked freely and opted to organize the rite instead of swimming in unshed tears. Ayọ̀bámi wished she was that carefree. Although Omu strongly believed in their abnominous superstitions, it seemed to have taken only a light smack on her.

#

Omu watched from the thicken shade as drunken men lean on muscular backs, their arms slacked across and heads bobbing. After she cleared the dishes and washed them clean, she hid from the crowd, her face covered by the shadows and body tucked closer to the bark- it was tiring hearing I’m sorry and accept my sympathies. It was also annoying having to smile through conversations that presented her less of a wife to Zoko.

Omu felt an unmistakable sensation of being watched. She pretended not to notice for a minute before casually running her eyes over the thinning crowd.

There was a tiny air released on the nape of her neck. She slapped it hard when she thought a tree fell from the trees.

“Do you think anyone knows?” a deep voice whispered to her ears.

She recognized the voice. “What are you doing here?” she asked pointed. “Are you tired of dancing on my husband’s grave?”

Kunle flopped down beside side and pulled on a weed around the tree root. Years ago, there had been no tree in the backyards. Those were one of the few things she remembered from her childhood. “For now. I thought you would maybe give me what I asked for.”

Omu shook her head. “I will not say anything.”

Kunle paused. “Given those years, you said more than you should have.”

“I don’t care,” she said. What she cared for was finding a way to rid the village from the abomination she caused. As much as she tired forgetting, the memories plaqued her like a murderous nightmare. She was young, too young to realize fear was merely an emotion and should not overshadow the truth. She hated herself for getting involved, she thought but at the time there was limited choice presented after he raped her. It felt like yesterday, up Unor Road, on the plain grass outside his house. When her eyes close to rest, she’d watch herself on her knees, her salty tears landing on her lips. She was screaming as he kissed her thin lips and she was allowing it; then he bent her over on all fours, watching her body move forward under his advances, his beefy hands covering her mouth to keep her quiet.

It wasn’t her fault, she kept telling herself that night, she was naïve. It was always best to respect adults when they called. It was what her parents taught her.

“Can you help me carry this to my house,” he had asked. Omu took the black sacks and motors, and led it to his home. A few hours later, she was naked on the ground, sand and grasses sticking to her back. A few days later, when he brought her soup-sop, he closed the door and forced her to lie.

The other victim pretended not to know she named the wrong person. Maybe he threatened them too maybe they were sacred for their life. If she’d known them at all, the situation would have ended differently.

Later she heard, the king wanted her to call on the culprit. And she had, under pressure and fear of her mother’s death.

“I will kill her,” he had said. “Better tell them what I tell you to say and leave quietly.”

And that was how she left Mmiri and years later, she battled a loveless marriage and the inability to birth a child. God punished her accordingly and she knew she deserved it.

She sighed. “You don’t have to kill everyone Oji,” she said because she was one of the many people who believed Kunle was indeed possessed. “Revenge will only destroy lives.”

“Then let it be destroyed,” he gritted his teeth without correcting her. “They destroyed mine.”

“Yes but they are all dead now.”

Then he stared at her, his dark eyes dancing in liquid. Kunle was sad, for years his name was dragged in mud because of her and wanted to take it out on those who wronged him. He wanted to be happy and he thought revenge was the right way to go.

“I mean him.” She gestured towards the body he occupied. “Let him go and come for me. I am who you want.”

“Ah! I will swear on the grave of my fathers I will but I cannot leave this body alone,” he said in a low, smooth voice. “Do you know how long I’ve tied?”

Hair on the back on her neck stood on ends as she took in the sneer on his lips. His eyes too. No human being had such eyes, they were midnight black and had a strange glittering surrounding him. It took a closer look for anyone realized there was something different about Kunle.

“So you want to find her first?”

He nodded slowly, and her panic shifted from herself to the children. “Only then will I leave him alone.”

“The village might burn him if they know. They already suspect.”

“Let them.”

“This is not your life. You are destroying someone else’s and you know that. All because of your stupid vengeance…”

“Try getting burnt from something you didn’t do. See if you will not want to make the culprits pay.”

“And you have. Leave the children alone. Please.”

Omu was suddenly on her knees. Her palms pressed together in front of her. It was too much. She was merely human, not possessed with a vengeful spirit. She could kill stab him in the chest with the fallen branches littering the ground, but she would only hurt Kunle and she wouldn’t want that. So she begged instead. Until her knees peeled, for every moment she saw him, she would plead on their behalf.

Kunle leaned forward, a hungry gleam in his strange eyes. She had the oddest impression he was thinking of the past. That he begged in the same way and it drove him mad when no one believed his words. She could never imagine feeling that way, when you’re driven by fear of death and betrayal of your best friend.

Onaye’s grandfather. He raped her but nobody knew it.

“Tell me,” Oji said. “Do you feel as I did? Do you feel the endless suffering I felt?”  
 Omu said nothing, just silent tears of her heart falling endlessly. Then she said, “I’m surprised you no longer have your memories.”

“Ah! You are changing the subject but I like it. I like it very much,” he said. “It seems that not every memory came back to me.”

“Tell me,” she whispered his question right back. “So you have no chance of finding out who or what the child looks like if I don’t say anything. And if you try to ask others it will confirm Kunle is possessed indeed.”

The littlest of hope bubbled inside her.

“Then.” Kunle set his animal like gaze on her, scrutinizing. She glanced down on her forearm, startled to see blood dripping on the grassy leaves, forming a small puddle. She’d been so distracted by fear, she hadn’t felt the burning and the fingernail stuck in her arm. “Very interesting. Such a person is willing to give her life to stave others. What happened to the one who cared only for herself?”

“I have changed.”

“Hmm.”

He shoved his hand into his pockets. “Don’t worry. I’ll find her myself. And make her grandfather, and father turn in their graves. Then we will fight when I meet them in hell.”

His tone was flat. She wondered if she made everything worse.

She was prepared to die at the end. In fact she wasn’t scared if the thunder struck her dead the next day. Omu could make Onaye leave by getting her married like her father originally did, but it would only raise suspicions and besides, she wasn’t ready to leave Kunle behind. Onaye was inlove with him, she saw it that day at the stream. But would she help him or run away like a coward like everyone did.

She swallowed a thick spittle, unsure if death was the most painful happening.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Do you know what the funny thing about this story is? Kunle was a good pretender. He didn’t understand half of what Omu said under the tree, he simply played along to torment her. And by doing that, he got into her head and unveiled buried secrets.

Kunle enjoyed the way she trembled at his face. That was how he wanted everyone else to be at his mercy. Then he can do things freely and easily.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

KUNLE

When Tobi and Fati stormed into my room, they were not prepared to find me butt naked under the bed. I know them being in my room meant my mother had allowed them, or they so much sneaked their way in.

I was in no position to receive anyone, muchless two children who called Onaye and I names since we wiggled out of our mother’s womb. I wondered why they came, especially now, when I fantically searched for my towel. The room was cluttered with my things; an unhealthy number of pencils, books and my school bag I’d thrown against the wall in anger.

The siblings were static by the door and I heard Fati whisper to Tobi without taking her questioning gaze off me. She always made it a point to make you uncomfortable, because she was never ashamed. I stood upright as I wrapped the towel around my body, and Tobi was the one who looked a tad bit sorry. I’d drawn the curtain but Fati opened it. She looked at me again, before pulling her brother to sit on the bed.

“So,” she said, tilting her head so her braids moved to one side. “What is wrong with you?” Her brother nudged her but she ignored it.

I blinked at the brightness. “Nothing.”

“You’re lying,” said Fati, making a face. She crossed her legs, securing her knees with her hands. “You killed them, didn’t you. That’s why you’re sick. You are sick because of guilt.”

I drew back with a frown. I hated them being in my personal space, in my room and thinking they knew about me. “Are you not afraid?” I asked. “If you really think I killed them, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Did you?” Fati pushed herself forward.

It seemed like answers was something they were looking for.

“I don’t think you killed them,” Tobi said in a small voice as though he was not sure of the words coming out of his mouth.

“What?” I said.

Tobi shrugged. “I think its bad luck following you. That why your house needs to be cleaned.”

I looked from one of them to the other.

“We came with holy salt the church had given to us,” Tobi added. Then he dropped the bowl of salt on the table.

“Everyone is talking about you,” his sister said. “They’re saying you are a spirit now. Ekwensu.”

“And here you are entering my room,” I snapped.

Fati shrugged. “There is also a chance that you were a victim to this like the rest of us,” she said. “That’s why we need you to tell us the truth.”

“As if you will believe me,” I said. I didn’t know why their new attitude was ticking me off.

Tobi stood and threw his hand on my shoulders. “Just look us in the eye and say it,” he said. “If you really didn’t do it, we can find a way to cleanse your home.”

I scoffed in annoyance.

“Don’t you want all these nonsense around you to finish?” Fati asked. “Don’t you want to be happy?”

I was taken aback by her words. I did infact wanted to be happy. That was all I ever wanted, but I understood happiness was a luxery for people like me. People like me fought for it, battled for it until our last breath.

“No. You people are not planning to help me,” I raised my voice and shook off Tobi’s hand. “They sent you abi? So that I will incriminate myself abi?”

“If you didn’t do it, you didn’t do it.”

“What if I really did kill them. Pushed them into the gutter and strangled them.”

For the first time, Fati’s strong façade cracked. “Stop it,” she warned. “I swear, no one sent us here.”

I stared them straight in the eyes. “I know you people.”

“Kunle rest jor. We have changed,” said Tobi. “We are no longer little children.”

“Just get out,” I told them, voice harder than ever. And when they didn’t leave, my voice rose above the carpenters’ hammer knocking in wood outside. Soon, the siblings scurried out of my room like squirrels running from a predator.

They wanted me to bare myself open to them, wanted me to expose who I was on the inside. I wish I handled Adaku the same way. The petite lady I met the day my mother and I returned from Ife. She was nothing special, just someone I rested myself on to elinquish the nothingness I felt. The day she saw me, she didn’t react the same way others did- looking at me with shock, distaste and sometimes calling out insults. It could have been because I had enough money to spare for her time. Some people were like that – pretending to like you just for monetary gain. The girl didn’t look older than twenty-three, had spaghetti legs and neck, windpiped voice and chatted with it for hours, but this didn’t stop me from taking her to bed. Forest actually, where the grass was green and when the day was dark.

My mother always said that letting people close to you meant they would know you inside and out. I didn’t understand her, not until one night when we laid on the grown covered in moss and sand.

“I think you have a beautiful skin,” she said, and traced her hand around my chest. I touched her fingers and guided them.

“This is not your first time,” I noted, and Adaku nodded without saying anything. Then we fell into a comfortable silence.

“Are you from this villa?” she asked. “I’ve not seen your type before.”

It took a while for me to answer. I didn’t know if I wanted to tell her incase it destroyed the relationship we already had. With her I could be myself. I was not trying to gain any sought of approval.

I told her who I was.

She stood up slowly and stepped in front of me, tilting her head as she exhaled. The moonlight fell over her breasts and I could sense a wave of panic come over her. She was judging me. Her eyes danced everywhere, nose flared and hands wiggled uncontrollably. I sat up and my fingers brushed against hers, my head buzzing with panic. She blew down air from her lips, looking at me with careful blankness. I realized how her hand moved backwards, the subtle forward movement of her chest. I knew before she’d done it that she was going to hit me. And when it came like cane, my head reeled sideways.

“You dirty thing,” she spat and then, actually pat on my face. “You want me to carry curse abi?”

I didn’t stop her when she reached for shorts and whipped them on my body, hard. I looked up at her and I saw her watching me with distaste, as her hands continued to wipe my body red. She reminded me of a vulture who’d lost its chickens.

Wasn’t it weird how a lot of people get to judge you based on your background. I agreed, my father was far older than my mother and maybe they were at fault, but taunting the children dimished hopes and dreams. And they needed to be stopped.

After a few minutes she pulled away, breathing heavily. She was still naked. I watched mutter as she wore her clothes and tied her hair, then reach for her bag I hung on the branches.

“Don’t tell anyone we did anything,” she said. “I need my customers to keep coming. Do you hear me?” Then walked away without waiting for a reply. I stared at her back and in a heartbeat, I was alone again, the emptiness creeping back, the crickets crying and the reminder of where I stood in the society. I laughed. I couldn’t help it – this was what my life had resulted to. Everything had stopped making sense a long time ago. I laid back down on the grass, and let the mosquitos whisper sweetness into my ears. At least they genuinely speak to me and enjoyed the taste of my blood without prejudice.

Then I thought, Onaye must never fill this emptiness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I gave up on my father and his ways a long time ago. He was convinced there was something wrong with me and sometimes I knew I scared him.

I told Omu this as she patted down my back as I cried myself to sleep and to the next day.

“I think you should go out and get some air. Sitting inside this house will only make you sick.” Her voice rang out softly with disproval. “Go and see your friends.”

It was hard to pretend everything was normal. I now understood why Mama Emeka easily blamed Kunle for her son’s death- it was easier to blame others than wallow in the in-between, searching for answers that might never surface. I wasn’t sure my decision; it’s been days since he died, and I hadn’t spoken to anyone except Omu. When I stepped foot outside, the air was suffocating. Only when I stepped foot on Ayọ̀bámi’s veranda did I finally release a breath.

“My dear.” She hugged me, held me tight like a mother would. My hands just fell beside me. “How do you feel?” Those words sounded like they shouldn’t be said. I almost gave a snarky reply but she shook her head, and grabbed my hand instead, rubbing it gently with her thumb.

“Is Kunle home?”

“I sent him to fetch water,” she said, looking behind me. “He should be home soon.” I expected her to tell me he’d run off somewhere unknown again. Omu was right, he was getting better.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded with a smile and gestured toward the open door. “Come in and wait for him. I have tea.” Ayọ̀bámi stepped aside letting a whiff of her coconut perfume settle under my nostrils. “I went to the market the other day and…”

“Maybe another time,” I told her. “I’ll go to the stream and besides I need the fresh air.”

“Yes, yes. You really do.” Her brows scrunched in worry and I let it be the last expression I saw as my feet drifted away.

August break came early in July; the air was dry and sharp as I walked down the route to the stream. The overgrown grasses blocked the path, so I pushed them aside to avoid the itchy one getting on my skin and moved faster incase snakes hid underneath.

From a distance, Kunle crouched by the bank, leg spread out on stones, making him look like a human spider as he scooped water into his bucket. I closed the space between up, coming up behind him.

Kunle turned and I stared. There was a new cut on his lip, and his hair was put in two all back braids. His eyes were lighter in the sun, and he looked nothing like the troubled child I knew him to be. Although he looked nothing like his mother, I could see the usual glimmer lurking anytime she asked me to stay for tea.

“Hi,” I said and he rose, leaving the bucket on one of the stones.

“What are you doing here?” he asked and his voice was a glittering memory of my best friend. Seeing him fluttered hope. He looked like he was happy.

“Strolling?” I shrugged. “It’s been long since the air was this clear.” Hopefully he’d notice my lie and comfort me instead. And he did. His chest rose and wrapped his arms around me. They were wet with water, but with them I felt warm and safer than I’d been in year.

“You should be at home.” He brushed his cheek against mine.

“And do what?” I said and my voice was heavy. “Everything there reminds me of him. The good and the bad times.”

Kunle released me and extended his arm just enough for me to see his face. “What do you want to do?”

My eyes wandered, taking in the large trees, untamed weeds surrounding us. There were barely any signs of wind, other than the tree leaves clapping slightly against one another. “I want to stay here. I don’t want to think.”

He exhaled heavily and nodded. “But we have to be careful,” he said. “There is a reason nobody hangs out by the stream.”

I smiled. “I know.”

“You have to sha wait for me to take this bucket home.” He picked the bucket with a grunt and I help him place it on his head. I marveled at his ability to hold with his head; many of us preferred wrapping towels, blankets and rags. As I waited, a tight knot of anxiety crept up my shoulder blades. My father’s death has kept me from thinking straight for days, and I forgot being with Kunle, the real Kunle would be the first time in a while. Of course, we worked together setting up my store, but we haven’t spent time together like our secondary school days. I knew the reason my throat felt stiff- of course I knew- but to admit in my mourning was more than I could handle. So, I soaked my legs in the stream to let the coldness keep me from running away.

“I thought you would change your mind,” he told me, sitting beside me.

“I didn’t think I had the ability to,” I said, watching him scoot closer.

At first the silence was calming, simply just us watching the waters cut between the stones, and up to the bank. Once a fish jumped to catch a glimpse of our world, he turned. “I’m sorry I didn’t come see you when I heard the news.” He said. “I just thought you needed to be alone.”

My teeth caught my lips.   
 When I didn’t answer, I felt his stare boring slithering holes in my skin. “How could someone be so cruel? I heard he died the same way Small Emeka did.”

“Not entirely. I could barely recognize him since he had been in the gutter for days. He was… his face was very ripe.”

Kunle put a hand on my shoulder and the other one wiped under my eyes. I hadn’t realized I was crying. “Take it easy.”

I sucked in a quick cup of air, my heart thudding against my rib cage. My eyes found its way to his face, and it was tilted, eyes bags lacking its usual bruised shadows, and I knew he was getting better indeed. We didn’t move.

“Kunle,” I said. “You look different.”

Kunle smiled. “I know. There was something I always wanted to do, and I did it and I’m glad the results were positive.”

“Okay,” I said. “And… your lip?” I should have pretended I didn’t see it. That this moment was supposed to be about me and not him. He ran his slowly tongue on the new cut without breaking his gaze. “Do you want to look like cave man?”

He laughed. “Do you even know what cave men look like?”

“No. But I assume they look haggard.”

“So, you think the cut makes me look haggard, or just the lip looks haggard?” The way he spoke made me seem as though I’d been staring at his lips the whole time.

I waved a hand, embarrassed knocking down the hand on my shoulder. “No o. That is not what I meant. It’s just that you have a cut already and I… Abeg don’t worry.” I tried turning my attention somewhere else, away from the smirk forming on his lips. “Just forget it. I was just curious.” Thankfully, he withdrew the hand on my face and relaxed them behind him.

“Is there anything new with you?” Kunle asked, whipping his legs in the water. “Other than the fact you father just died.” I flinched and he mouthed, “sorry.”

There was something different about him in an instant, and he didn’t seem apologetic for bringing up my father’s death. In fact, he had brought it up more times than he should have. The corners of his lips were titled slightly upwards and for a moment I thought I was sitting beside a different person. Instead it felt like a stranger had come to take his place in a finger snap. Maybe it was because the sun was setting.

“There’s nothing new,” I said. He should have known mourning came with stillness.

Kunle tilted and scrunched his brows too tight. Like he didn’t know what I was talking about. “What are you doing here?”

I frowned. There was an additional thickness in his voice I didn’t like. “What is wrong with you?” I asked him. He huffed and looked away, shifting further away from me. I felt a pang in my chest. “Kunle. Did I do something wrong?”

“The fact that we are here together is wrong.” He splashed against the water, harshly and let droplets fall on my laps. “I will not tell you to leave but don’t try to talk to me.” He looked me and his eyes knew hatred. “You all are the same.”

“You know nothing you’ve said makes sense.” My words were weak on my tongue.

Kunle laughed bitterly. “I am all that makes sense. We’ve enjoyed an unbalanced life for so long…”

I let him talk without listening. He was blabbering and Kunle never blabbered, that was Dubem’s heavenly gift. The stream was now uncomfortable and heavy. He wasn’t taking to me; I knew that when he called out his own name. I was wrong, Kunle wasn’t Kunle. I closed my eyes briefly and opened them to meet the eyes I’m used to.

“I didn’t mean those words,” he said and trailed off.

“For once, can you be honest for once in your life?” I told him. “It’s obvious you’re sick.”

“Well, maybe it’s not something I can share. You might judge me like the rest.”

“Kunle…”

“You thought I killed Small Emeka.” A corner of his mouth twisted. “My mother told me you came with my bracelet. I would have doubted myself too.” Everyday I’d hated myself for thinking he was capable for hurting another child. I should have known my best friend better.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I wish my emotions hadn’t gotten the best of me.”

“I don’t blame you,” Kunle replied. “Beside there is always some truth in rumors.”

“Don’t say that.”

He sighed and looked at me. “So much you don’t know is happening and there is little I can do to control the bad ones.”

I was ashamed. I’d come to help myself unload my heavy heart, forget the painful memories and spend the time with Kunle. Instead I made him feel bad about himself. “I’m stupid.” I said. “I shouldn’t have disturbed you.” I pushed myself up.

“Wait.” He jumped up and blocked my path “Why are you leaving? I already told you I don’t blame you.”

I didn’t look up. It was easier to cry if I was looking at the ground, the army of ants marching with pieces of food. “I don’t want to be the one to make you feel worse. I stayed away from you because I felt so ashamed of myself for ever thinking you did it. For not seeing you even after I heard you had come back.”

“And you were right to have stayed away.”

I shook my head. “For the promise we made when were little. I was wrong. I played the silent game and it was a wrong time to play it.”

He was silent for a moment. “Can I tell you a secret?” he asked.

“Is it one of the many you are keeping from me?”

“Come.” I saw his legs move passed me, over to the stone we once occupied. I followed him and we sat down, closer this time. It was always like this; me following him and him leading. Then he told me. He told me about the first time he visited a small, dark place with dancing bodies high on substance, his course mate had taken him there to unwind from their freshman exams. And how the same classmate grinded and pushed on the lower part of his body, and how he wondered why that part tingled, begging him to take her back to his room. And the moments that lead to the other and the ones that came before they got to his room, kissing and groping the parts our village elders forbid us to see until veils and wedding bells rang. And what she said after they’d done it, how he felt after they’d done it and what he did after they’d done it.

“It was not what I expected,” he said to me, looking passed the water. To the moments he spent with her.

I hated it.

It was my turn to remain silent. I didn’t know what to say. The way he causally spoke about his desire seemed like we were talking about last night’s dinner. “Why are you telling me?” I asked, finally. “This is not something you should share.”

“I think I needed to.”

I scoffed, still not looked at him. “How am I supposed to interpret this? You telling me has nothing to do with the last five minutes.”

Kunle’s voice was distant. My thoughts were across the state, in those moments I didn’t share with him. “Maybe I want you to know that I thought of you while the bed squeaked.”

I kept quiet.

“While you didn’t want me, I wanted you.” His voice is shadowed in contempt now; he was angry. “Being called possessed may be bad but it’s nothing compared to being alone. Forget I even said this one sef because we were always alone and you know what that feeling is like. Even after you ran from me on graduation day, my heart fell out. It seemed I had done something wrong.” His voice came closer but I kept my eyes away. “Why do you think I beat up Small Emeka like that? Why do you think I argued with everyone who called you names? You come here for comfort, but you forget I needed comfort. I know I said I didn’t blame you, but I’m human. We feel pain.”

I pushed him. I pushed him so hard, then I heard a loud splash. I was selfish, I’ve beaten myself up for it for years but hearing it come from someone else hit differently. I tuned to face him; his eyes were hard and mixed with surprise. His bottom was dip into the water, wet splashes dotting his blue t-shirt. I bent, cupping a handful of water and throwing it on his face. I thought about leaving, I could forget coming to the stream, but I knew this was what we needed; both of us knew we needed closure. We’d been working on egg shells, pretending the villagers and his disease were our only problem.

“That day you told me you liked somebody.”

“You were too dumb to see it was you I liked,” he spat. “Better go before I say things I shouldn’t say.”

Kunle knew pain most of his life, but I planned on smoothing it out. I was going to make him talk, I was going to comfort and heal him like he did when we were younger. I was going to fight whatever changed him, but that’d be later. For now, I was on his lap, my hands were wrapped around his neck, my lips flat on his. I was scared his anger wouldn’t let him respond. I sighed when his lips moved against mine. Then we kissed so hard that our teeth knocked on impact.

We separated for breath and continued like the way I imagined, slow and gentle, pleading for more. Closer, he smelt like morning dew, like iron and grass and because we were in the water, the air smelt like fish.

Soon his hands rested gently on my chest, pushing me away. Our eyes were locked, mating with desire and his swirling with panic. And he wrenched his face away.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” he said more to himself.

His voice was shaking. And I wanted to bury myself under the sun out of embarrassment. I should have known he didn’t feel the same way anymore.

I tried climbing out of his lap but his hands kept me in place. So, I stayed still, looking down at him, waiting for him to decide. I wanted to continue, I wanted to kiss him till dawn. How strong can one’s feelings be? I couldn’t think of anything, because my mind was on him and him alone.

Nothing happened for two minutes. Kunle was thinking, his thoughts lost in a bag of hay, and faraway even for me to catch. I grabbed his chin, and pressed my head on his, hoping he’d come back to me. He closed his eyes tightly, leaning into my hand, into me until we were submerged once more, only this time our lips were apart. To me, this was better. Somehow, I felt I was slipping into his being, sharing his fears and aliments and a strong pleading to be understood.

“Tell me,” I whispered. I had no idea what I wanted him to tell me, more secrets maybe but he nodded like he knew what I wanted.

“They are right,” he said, and withdrew his face to stare me in the eye. “Sometimes it’s me and other times it isn’t me.”

He swallowed and wiped his face with his hands, dragging his skin down. “Can I tell you this another time?”

“You are just going to chicken out,” I said. “Tell me.”

“Okay. Fine.” He swallowed again, even deeper than the last. The next time his spoke, his voice was quiet like the soundless wind. “I may have done terrible things. I may have pushed killed Emeka down the gutters but it was never my intention to kill him.” He paused to see how I’d react, but I didn’t say anything and listened to the rest of the story.

For some reason, I laughed in my mourning. I couldn’t tell if he was joking or serious, but his face was stern, more than it was moments ago. When the villagers forced him to drink the concussion in hopes of finding Small Emeka’s killer and it didn’t kill him, I thought ‘yes, they got the wrong person’. Now I knew not to trust anything related to native magic.

I stared and asked, “The prostitutes?”

“They called me Ajor Madu.”

“My father?” I shocked on my saliva.’

“Deep down, you know everyone of them reaped what they sowed,” he said. “You wished for it, remember?”

“But I never expected you to…”

“I will continue to protect us, so that we are no longer treated as bottom pot. Please Onaye, understand me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KUNLE

I know Onaye better than she knew herself. When I told her about the things I had done, I knew she would not have the heart to push me away. She was weak, and she needed someone like me to keep her going

The day after our moment by the stream, she came to me and asked a question I never thought she would have asked. “Are you going to kill anyone else?”

When I told her ‘No’, she kissed me. She was gentle as I felt her tears wetting my cheeks, gentle as her body quivered on my skin. She was scared, I knew it.

Even though she hadn’t said it, the kiss protruded her fears and uncertainties about being with me. To ease her a little, I told her a story, an old folktale I heard the parents tell their children.

“A long time ago in a land, there was a little boy named Omo. His mother died when he was a little boy. It was a very sad period for him and his father. His father loved his wife so much, she was caring and always supported Omo.

As the days past, Omo’s father became more and more difficult for him to take care of Omo. He had to take care of his farm too. It was not easy at all. And so, one day he decided to take another woman as his wife, to look after Omo while he worked. Omo’s step mother was very kind to him at first, she would cook, clean the house, wash the clothes and take really good care of Omo. She treated him like her own son until she had her own child, she everything changed. She became very mean and would beat Omo for every little mistake. She blamed him for his mother’s death, and this made Omo very sad. She gave him very little food and he wore only torn clothes. His father could do very little to help, because he was always away at the farm. He felt so much pity for his son and each time he scolded his wife for maltreating Omo, she would spank Omo even harder when her husband returned to the farm.

A few years later, Omo and her father died of a strange sickness. And his life became even more misearable. He did all the chores and ate little food. He would only eat after his step brother had eaten, and whatever was left, would be given to him. Whenever Omo was sad, he would go to where his parents were buried and cry so hard. He always called out to them to come and take him.

Despite all of this, Omo was a very kind and obedient boy. He loved to help people and would always make people smile even when himself was sad. Everyone loved him.

One day, his stepmother gave him some bean balls to sell in the local market. He was on his way to the market when a frail and very old woman stopped him and said, “my son, would you help me. I am very weak and old and I am hungry too. I have no money to buy some food. But if you give me your bean balls to eat, I will surely reward you with a special seed.”

Omo knew he would be in so much trouble if he returned home without money. But he felt so much pity for the old woman. So, he gave the old woman all of her bean balls he had. The old woman was very happy. She searched her tattered bag and took out a seed and offered it to Omo who instantly refused to accept the reward. Then she said; “Please my son. Do not refuse this. It is not a reward for what you have done, it is just a gift from an old woman to any good boy. Whenever you are sad, my son, hold this seed in your hand and put it very close to your chest.”

Omo collected it and started back home. He walked a little distance and looked back, but he did not see the old woman. He wondered where the old the woman had gone to as he continued his journey. When he got home, the stepmother saw him from a distance and thought to herself; “That was fast. I may have to make another batch of Akara so he can go one more time.”

Just then, Omo began to explain to her what had happened and all hell was let loose. The woman spanked him so hard, and told him never to come into the house until he had the money for the bean balls.

Omo went to his usual spot, the place where his parents laid to rest, to cry. He cried and cried and cried, the tears flowed so freely. Then he remembered the seed the old woman had given him. He brought it out of his pocket, and held it in his hands very close to his heart, hoping it would stop him from crying. But this didn’t help at all. Instead, he cried even harder, that the tears poured out heavily and touched the seed. Immediately, the seed began to transform, and Omo saw himself in a big and beautiful house filled with so many beautiful and expensive things. He was so happy, that even though he lost his parents, he lived very peacefully and happy life ever after.”

When I finished, I couldn’t help comparing myself to Omo. We were both unfortunate children, but he didn’t have the balls to defend himself. Afterall, it was just a story and stories didn’t happen in real life. In real life, you have to make the changes yourself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ONAYE

I was scared for Kunle and I was scared for myself. I didn’t tell him straight to his face that I thought he was being selfish and stupid.

He tells me he cares for me. That’s why he did those awful things to the villagers. To him, it was justice but to me, he was like the mongrels imposing their ideologies in our heads. He let the people make him bad, let them saturate his head with the wrong things. Mama was right, we are to close our ears to vicious voices. But I didn’t tell him this, infact, I let him kiss me whole, ravage my body under his cotton bedsheet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

KUNLE

Here is one of my favorite memories with Onaye. We are naked in her bedroom. The women were having a meeting in the village square, so every child was home alone or either at their friend’s house. With Onaye lying with her head on my lap, and me sitting still back to wall, it didn’t bother me Dubem hadn’t stopped by. Sometimes, she would roll to her stomach and back, reading off a card, a payer the priest gave her to my deaf ears.

“Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil,” she says.

“I’m not possessed by the devil!”

She pauses and looks up to my face. “It’s what the prayer says,” she tells me in that way where I know she’s slightly worried.

She asks, “Are you sure you don’t want to come to church?”

I shake my head and she sighs. She continues reading the prayer.

“Since when did you become one of those devoted believers,” I tell her.

“Anything to bring back the Kunle I know,” she said. “This one you say you sleep outside, on the floor, don’t you think something maybe wrong with you?”

“I remember very well the events from the past week. I sleep and wake up in my bed.”

She pauses again and rolls to sit facing me. “Are you serious?”

“Maybe I am me again.” I wait for her smile, the one that lights up her face but it never comes. “Do you know what this means?” I ask her.

“People can disappear to make bigger plans,” she says. “Are you sure you don’t want to go for deliverance?”

“There is nothing to deliever.”

Onaye sucks her teeth and scratches a portion of her forehead. “The priest is leaving the country tomorrow. The pastor will leave next week. Soon the flies will pack their bags.”

“I always thought the religious are strong willed.”

“They are still humans…” Onaye shrugs, lets the sentence die off.

“What about you?” I ask her. “Will you leave me?”

My best friend looks at me with genuine interest, letting that smile slowly appear on her lips. “Who will stay with you if I leave? I mean we have to make sure Oji is gone for good.”

“You are something iyamo mi,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “Did you learn that one in Ife? Only you will use that kind of word in this village.”

I smile at her. “Is this how you thank me?”

“Thank you for what,” she huffs. “Abeg shift.” She pushes my leg enough to spread them apart.

“As if you don’t like it.” I wiggle my eyebrows and she slaps my knees.

Then her eyes sweeps over our surrounding, trying her best to avoid my face eyes and I knew she was going over what we’d done minutes ago in her mind. The mingling breath, lewd sounds under the bed sheet now forgotten on the floor. Her lips were stuck between her teeth, and her gaze swiftly touching me.

“What are you thinking about?” I say wiggling by brows a second time.

“None of your business,” she replies and lays down between my naked legs, reading off the card once more. This time she starts from the beginning and this time I listens to every word. I smiles silently, wishing we’d be like this forever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

NARRATOR

Have you ever seen a Yoruba woman run mad before? I haven’t but I witnessed something close to it when Kunle went missing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

NARRATOR

Omu loved drama.

She’d been visiting houses since she was little. She knew the right way to hide so nobody would see her listening to the adults talk. Even when children were strictly adviced to stay home or play with their friends, she would sneak her way to the windows to listen. All the children knew her type of person because she tells them the things she hears. They called her Amebo, and whenever she was caught, the other children intervened and there was no more trouble.

The children in the 1950s were a pack, as anyone who troubled one, troubled the other. The children would storm into the farms, openly steal the ripe fruits and vegetables. Omu liked them though. They were children but knew what they wanted and how to get it. They reminded her of her father when he was still alive. The man who ravaged the village after Oji forced her to his bed. People said he stained her and their words drove her out of Mmiri until now.

Her husband, Zoko reminded her of the children when he took her with him. They’ve been married for two years, but they had no children which never became a problem. Nobody blamed her for her infertility which had become an issue for her previous husband, Chisom. He blamed her for tying her womb and cursing their marriage. But with Zoko, she never felt pressured.

“I think I have enough children already,” he had told her. “Who know what I’ll have next.”

Omu was greatful for this. She always dreamed of a man who let a woman breathe, not forcing ideologies on her. And she didn’t mind he already had a child, didn’t mind she stayed with them. She spent her time sitting outside, watching people walk by since she was mostly alone. Zoko loved the forest, always visiting for his medicinal herbs and only stayed home two times in a week to tend to his patients. Omu didn’t have a problem with this, in all honesty, she never saw herself building a family with this man. They wanted different things. She knew their marriage was just to give each other comfort, that there was someone willing to listen to your story, someone there to lend a shoulder to cry on.

Once, after their marriage one of the village women came to their house to warn her about her husband. That his wife tied her womb and cursed her own. Of course, she knew this wasn’t true, but it still struck her a little that she was going to die without children.

“Do you think we should start trying for children? People will start thinking different kind of things.”

“You dey fear sha. Forget them. Let them talk.”

That was the end of the matter. He turned over in their bed and pulled his wrapper to cover himself, pretending to fall asleep. She sat there for a few minutes and eventually laid down to fall asleep. When she told Ayobami, who she had grown close to, and she sighed.

“After what happened with his first wife, I am not surprised,” she said. “Just leave him be and besides how do you expect to have children when you can’t.” Omu was convinced after this to look for something else.

Omu stopped asking Zoko for a chance at children, and they kept to their businesses. When watching people became too boring for her, she went back to her old ways of searching for interesting things.

She joined the women’s association, where women dished out marital problems they should have kept at home. Omu thought that, if you become one with a person and promise to go through life together, the problems you face should not be let out in the open. Yes, she knew her mouth was like the river, pouring out words without ceasing but she knew when to shut up.

Omu started to look at the men- not with intent, just a lazy wondering about their own gatherings in the palm wine joints. There was a man, Kosichukwu who ran a small shack across the junction from where the tiled roads ended. Everyone knew him for selling fresh palm wine. His shop was always filled with husbands clamouring their way to have a taste. Omu has only been there once, when she too needed something refreshing to trickle her throat. She wouldn’t call herself a drunk because she preferred to take a sip.

The day she went for that drink, the most of the men had stumbled their way home. It was just a sprinkle of heads, here and there. Kosichukwu was by the door; a very handsome person, that man. He had clear skin, a nice smile and dressed well. Omu wondered what it would be like to marry someone like him? It wasn’t like Zoko was ugly. He just wasn’t as appealing to the eyes.

That day she went for that drink, she heard the men talk and then she knew they too had their faults. They spoke about their wives as though they hated them, complaining about their whines and contant need to be pampered. Then they spoke about their children and somehow, Kunle’s name came out of their anus. Kosichukwu simply smoked his cigar in the corner, staring blankly at his ground.

One evening, when she strolled passed Kosichukwu stall, she saw him struggle with a big brown keg. She offered to help him out, which gave her enough excuse to get him alone. There, in the back corner of the store, they rolled the keg to a stop. And then, he admired her strength and touched her arm to feel her muscles. She giggled. It was ticklish. That night, Zoko returned and snuck into bed like silence. He tried to reach out in the dark of their bed and tugged her to him, but she wasn’t in the mood. She was thinking about a certain man who smelt like sweet tree.

Zoko left again the next morning and Omu gave him an earful before he departed.   
 “You know there is a daughter and a wife waiting for you in this village abi? Very soon someone would think you died inside the forest.”

Omu was seething in anger and the only person that came to her mind was palmwine seller down the road, with a coarse voice and bulgy arms he never hid. Omu had woken up from a dream with him beside her one of those nights. She looked for him with style anytime she passed by, hoping to catch his eye but she never saw him. Instead, a farmer was chatting away with his son whose hands were covered in soil. He was letting him wash his hands under the running tap.

“It is always good to wash after yourself,” the farmer was saying. “Men like us are not allowed to be sick.” He turned the tap to increase the water pressure and washed his son’s hands.

The boy shot him a nasty look but the man was to engrossed in his lesson to notice. Kunle walked passed the shop carrying two heavy looking chairs. Beads of sweat decorated his face, his lips turned into his mouth. He walked passed without sparing a glance. The farmer noticed him and moved his son closer to him. When Kunle disappeared in the distance, the farmer tsked. “People like him will never be able to wash himself clean.”

“Are you saying he is already sick?” his son asked. “He doesn’t look sick to me.”

The farmer gave a contemptuous glance. “Did I ever tell you sickness must show on your face first?”

The son looked at where Kunle disappeared. “As healthy like that? Papa please, that boy is strong enough to lift a cow.”

“Which cow? Did you see it?”

The boy sighed. “Papa just rest. That boy is not sick. Didn’t you see him?”

The farmer was thinking hard how to convince his fifteen year old. “Have I ever told you about a sickness that gets attached to you when you’re born? They are the kinds parents cause.” He snapped his fingers. “Some children are bound to be punished for their parents sins.’

The man’s son looked at him like he spoke nonsense. “Papa, just tell me you don’t know.” Then the farmer turned off the running tap and both of them entered the stall as he continued to convinvce his son.

In the week that followed Zoko’s death, she saw Kunle and Onaye together. Deep down she wanted to tell her to stay away from him, but who was she to say so?

In the recent weeks, Omu felt increadly lonely. Even though Ayobami was there to keep her company, the woman was always distant in her thoughts, worrying about her only child. Eventually, she found herself in Kosichukwu’s home cutting up vegetables for Oha soup. His little brother lived with him, helping him take care of the shop when he was away. She had stayed over once, telling the palm wine owner she was too scared to be alone in an empty house, even though she didn’t know if Onaye would sleep out or not. They hadn’t slept together, had only chatted about everything and nothings. Omu knew the neighbours would talk, but she didn’t care.

There were times she would bring some tomatoes from the farm she had started to grow, and both of them would laugh at her lazy attempt to chop them up for stew. Somehow, Kosichukwu was better at doing those things; he would grip the butt of it and press the blade through it. Omu enjoyed watching him cook and deep down she knew she was falling for him.

Omu felt she was getting somewhere with him – she wasn’t sure exactly where but she looked forward to it. She was helping him move a keg to his shop, enjoying the little conversations when the first screams started coming down the road. As Kosichukwu and his brother stood in front of his ship, peering down the street, sounds filtered towards them slowly. First it was the cries and the alarming scream. Some of his customers left their drinks unfinished and ran towards the ruckus.

Kosichukwu looked worried. “It like they found another body,” he said. “Should we go?”

“Are you not scared?” Omu asked.

“That what happened. Maybe its even someone we know.”

“Tufiakwa. God forbid it.” Omu snapped her fingers over her head.

“Calm down,” he said. “That why we should go and see so that we don’t hear the bad news from people.”

When Omu didn’t say anything, Kosichukwu ran across the road and took a stick under the trees. He came back and jammed the door to his shop and told his brother to return home. “Let’s go,” he said, as he held her hands and took her with him. Kosichukwu didn’t look scared and Omu tried her best to match his energy.

“I wonder who died,” he said.

“Stop it. We don’t know that yet,” she firmly said. “It may be some kind of animals.”

Kosichukwu shook his head. “I don’t know why these things are just happening. This village used to be so quiet that people used to beg for something to happen.”

Omu shot him a look. “God has finally answered their prayers.”

“Not in the way we want jor. This one is just punishment. Maybe someone, somewhere cursed this land.”

Omu shook her head. “Don’t tell me you are one of those supersiticious people.”

“Who isn’t,” he said. “We all believe there is a reason of everything happening in this world.”

Omu didn’t say anything again and let the wind blow passed her face. In just a few minutes since the first screms, she could see from a distance the scene had deteorated into chaos. The road was filled with frantic people. One of them was cleaning his eyes with handkerchief, stared at the wet mess in his hand and then locked eyes with Omu for a moment before shaking his head. Omu swallowed hard and released her hand from Kosichukwu’s hold. She was filled with fear and sensed something may have truly happened to someone she knew. The people were giving her way as she moved closer to the body. When she saw Onaye crouched by her father, a wave of emotion came over her. She was filled with guilt and shame for having been with another man without thinking of her own husband for days. She wondered if he had fallen out of his bicycle. But she knew he travelled miles on it, that he was attached to his bicycle like a glue and being such as experienced driver, there was no way he would carelessly fall out. That meant someone had pushed him off of it and he had fallen into the gutter. His face was swollen and body was eating out by putrefaction and scavenging creatures.

That night, Omu could not sleep and somehow, she found herself strolling the streets in the night when everyone was fast asleep. Kosichukwu was sitting on his varanda when she go there. He gave her a small, unsure smile and he embraced her. “Do you want to come inside?” he asked. He led her into his house, into his bed and into herself.

We don’t know how Kunle knew, but he did. He found out Omu loved another man and sought to punished her because he didn’t want Onaye to be hurt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

NARRATOR

Ayọ̀bámi paraded the town in her underwear when Kunle went missing, a long bone white shimi, high above her knees on bare foot gripping the sand. Onaye had gone searching the houses now occupied with emptiness and dust, but Ayọ̀bámi remained on the street screaming her sons name, like a parasite burning in flames. She thought he had gone out like he usually would. In her years, she knew what it meant when a room was destroyed beyond repair and trickles of blood stained the bedsheets.

She called Onaye – Omu was out in the market - to help her understand the blood curdling sight and instantly she knew something was wrong by the look on her faces. “Is it his blood?” Onaye asked quietly, but Ayọ̀bámi took offence and struck her on the cheek. Deep down, she asked the same question and when someone else said it out loud, she felt the need to turn on her defenses. Accepting it meant, Kunle was in trouble. She could lose her son like she did her husband.

The day before they found Kunle, no one seemed to know where Onaye went. Mama Emeka hired boys from the other village, promising them money in return to find them. They returned with body wrapped in palm fronds, holding it steadily in their arms. When they arrived, the sun was setting as though it was sacred to witness the scene. Ayọ̀bámi watched them from her veranda. She bit down her lips until blood pooled from them, as they dropped the body gently on the ground. Being too scared to see, she called Omu over and she came limp-running like an injured deer escaping a nest of lions. She was bruised; cut lip, swollen legs and discoloration on the skin above her breast.

Seeing the body, Ayọ̀bámi sank to the ground slowly, her hands gripping her neck, her eyes closed tightly. She heard the heavy thud of Omu’s body, the cries from a familiar voice approaching and the gently smack of their slippers.

After her heart stopped thumping against her rib cage, she opened her eyes and stared at her son. “Onaye? What happened to him?”

Onaye didn’t raise her eyes from Ayọ̀bámi’s body and ran her hand down his face.

“Mama,” she cried and it was the first time in a while, Ayobami watched her cry. And it was agonizing to watch. Then she told Ayọ̀bámi how he died.

CHAPTER THIRTY

NARRATOR

On the day Kunle died, Onaye found him in Oji’s house. “Kunle. Are you inside?”

Cursing, Kunle made sure the door was locked, but the door reaked with old age, so it didn’t take long for Onaye to kick it open.

She watched him calmly. “I have been calling you.”

Kunle wiped his hand on his face. Today of all days. “Go away.”

“Kunle wetin dey worry you? Everybody is looking for you.”

Kunle stared at her, then tried walking out of the house but she stepped infront of him, blocking the exit. “Onaye, better let me go o.”

“No,” she said sternly. “Where do you want to go? What are you running away from?” Then she looked at the cut on his wrist and her face wavered. Her eyebrows did that twitching thing, where they go up and down with her eyes. “Did you do that to yourself?”

Kunle wanted to shout at her, to tell her to leave but he was to selfish and too weak whenever she was around. Even in the siguation he was in, his feelings grew and he thought he should see her face. Let him drown her features. He wasn’t able to look away. He gently held her hands and looked in her eyes - they were dark orbes swimming in liquid.

“Tell me. I want to know what is happening Kunle.”

“Why,” he muttered. “This will all be over soon.”

“What will?” She stared for a minute and gasped the next. His palms felt empty when she snatched her hands away. “Are you thinking…”

“I want to finish everything.”

“Finish what? Please tell me, so I know how to help you.”

“There is no need,” he told her.

She glared at him. “Why is it that you always keep things from me?”

“That is the only way you will be safe.”

“Stop it.” Her face settled into coldness. “I don’t need protection. You can argue all you want but I won’t move an inch until you tell me what is going on.”

“You won’t understand.”

“Kunle please. Tell me biko. Let us solve this together,” she said, her voice strained.

Kunle sighed and collapsed on the wall. He stared at the grasses behind her, they were already as tall as her.

“Have you ever heard of the story of Oji? The true one I mean. It’s like the folktales you love, just that this one happened in real life.”

“Jesus Christ Kunle,” she screamed. “Stop changing the subject.”

“They say he got what he deserved why some believe someone did it to him. I mean, he didn’t rape those children, someone else did.”

Onaye sighed and combed her braids backwards with her fingers. He could tell she was frustrated, but he continued talking because he needed her to see his point. “It wouldn’t have happened if one of the children didn’t come out to lie.”

“And so. Oji is dead, he is gone,” she played along. “I know that story. It’s in the past.”

“But what would you do if you find the child who lied? What would you do if people found out she was your stepmother?”

Kunle watched her face morph into pure shock. “You’re lying,” she said calmly.

Just then, a whimper came from the corner of the house. “You can ask Omu herself ,” he told her and she moved closer to where the sound came from. She squinted to see better in the darkness and soon Kunle heard a loud gasp. She stepped back, her hands covering her mouth and tears flowing down her cheek.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked without shifting her gaze off the petite woman on the floor wrapped in ropes. Her cheek was bruised from the many times he slapped and kicked her face.

Kunle groaned and clutched his head. He felt nothing. No. He felt emptiness and a sprinkle of delight because everything was going to be over soon. “If I allow her stay, people will know and they will treat you worse than before,” Kunle said. “Just imagine they find out. You will not be able to open your shop, do what you love. People will just know you as the daughter of a woman who was soiled as a child.”

Then, she turned to him with tears running down her face. “Please I’m begging you.”

“This is for the best.”

“But it is my life! You don’t get to choose what happens in it.”

“I do. You mother made me promise her to always keep you safe.” He grabbed her arm and started to drag her outside. “You must go.”

She pulled away and pushed with enough strength to make him stagger. “And what? You want to kill her like the others?”

Kunle screamed. “You have to go now! Leave me be Onaye.”

“I will not let you destroy yourself more than you already have. I am no longer that weak child in the beginning. I may not be strong physically but I can make life decisions on my own. So, I’m telling you that you don’t have to waste your life looking out for me.” When she said it, her eyes were hard. You have suffered enough.”

Then Kunle picked handful of stones and ran and everything happened so fast. Onaye didn’t know how she pushed him outside. Onaye was startled when she heard him scream and stumble down the small staircase out-front. She saw his head bash into the last step leaving a gash of blood on the edge. She saw his neck twist and body fall limp.

Onaye screamed.

She ran and knelt beside him, his head on my laps. “Kunle.” She shook him with enough vigour to wake up a sleeping country. “Wake up please. Open your eyes. Abeg. Chimo.” There was blood everywhere; her hands, her skirt… she even saw red. Panic shot through her. Onaye looked around searching of anybody within close range. That was when the boys came and took Kunle away.

After the news spread to the remaining people in the village, Onaye and Ayobami were the only ones left. Seeing Kunle’s body was too much for Omu that’s she left in shame and self-blame.

I watched these memories flutter like wind on ashes and I wonder to myself if things would have turned out differently if Onaye hadn’t pushed him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ONAYE (2021)

After the priest prayed over Ayobami’s grave (the one we dug for days), and watched her casket embrace the soil, Dubem and I waved the others as they left the grounds. Then, the two of us went to Kunle’s grave for the first time in a while to celebrate his birthday. There was no overgrown weed, debris surrounding the premises – it was clean like the time he was buried. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen his name written out on the stone; Our loving son, Kunle. There was something sad about seeing a young life wasted. I bet he would have smacked me for thinking this way and corrected that he did something he would never be ashamed of. Looking back those years, I finally understand.

Instead of crying like I usually would, I stood, staring at the cracks on the ground and the bouquet of fresh yellow lily flowers Dubem placed. He said it’s for people to know someone important stayed there and is being cared for by living people. I probably wouldn’t have put it or maybe chosen a less attracting colour like green. Then I’ll get to imagine what life would have been like if he blended with the crowd like I did. Reimagine the decisions and imagine the opposite of them.

The atmosphere was moist, dew clinging on the overgrown grasses, and the head of the grave stone. We finally squatted next to the grave, my legs folded across each other. I started to work on the knot loose on my bracelet – the one he left for me. Dubem had given it to me just before Ayobami’s burial and instantly, I knew what it meant. It was his gift to me and I wore it. The delicate rope chain strayed pretty on my wrist, the mixture of colours was well belended which told me time was given to its creation.

It took me a few minutes to undo the bracelet with the application of some teeth and then I kissed it and placed it gently on the wreath. Beside it was a heap of sand created by those everyday black ants. Watching them dismantle the limbs of dead insects was one of our favourite hobbies.

Dubem enjoyed poking a hole in the heap of sand to allow more ant families come out help the workers. And when his plan failed, he’d say they were asleep, or he’d be convinced they deliberately didn’t want to help out. There were times we dropped pieces of food for them; grains of rice, garri and spots of soup to get a taste of what humans ate. Eventually we grew up and made plans for more important things. But Kunle found time to leave out more food for them. He was a nice boy, that one.

I felt a tear fall down my face. I quickly wiped it off. I noticed Dubem watch my movement but he said nothing.

Never did I want our story to end this way and I used my life to blame and punish myself. Maybe it was finally time to move on from him but saying goodbye was somehow, we literally grew up together. Everything would have stayed okay if things stayed the way they were. If he hadn’t needed to start changing the perception of others on us and trying to remove the threats in my life. How did he expect to survive in a community filled with superstitious people?

“Kunle did not die because of you,” Dubem finally said. “He already made the decision.”

Did he? Or the boy simply wanted us to live together somewhere where we could breathe.

EPILOGUE

Now you know why Mmiri became a ghost town. And I leave it to you to choose if this story had a happy ending.

I have watched in the world more stories like this one. I have attended the feast of disasters and wars.

But then there are other moments that distract me.

There are the faces of the ones who are pained, like the children in this story. They wore sores, wores of the place they were born. You didn’t need maps to trace backgrounds when the faces trace the path to their pain.

I was at the brim of tears when Kunle’s soul floated to my skin. His face no longer wore anguish, it was solemn like peace. His eyes were closed when we met, but opened later on our way to the black gate. Unlike the others, he did not scream, or tear at my invisible skin, his eyes were fixed at nothing.

I wanted to tell the young boy many things. That the people he left behind will miss him, that Onaye will always be surrounded by the people she loves, that she will not tell people about his secret for a long time. I wanted to tell him all these but I didn’t say anything.

I think I wanted him to forget and move on.

LAST WORDS FROM THE NARRATOR: I honestly think people should not exist.