

I

JOS, DECEMBER 2008

I MUST LEAVE THIS CITY TODAY and come to you. My bags are packed and the empty rooms remind me that I should have left a week ago. Musa, my driver, has slept at the security guard's post every night since last Friday, waiting for me to wake him up at dawn so we can set out on time. But my bags still sit in the living room, gathering dust.

I have given most of what I acquired here – furniture, electronic devices, even house fittings – to the stylists who worked in my salon. So, every night for a week now, I've tossed about on this bed without a television to shorten my insomniac hours.

There's a house waiting for me in Ife, right outside the university where you and I first met. I imagine it now, a house not unlike this one, its many rooms designed to nurture a big family: man, wife and many children. I was supposed to leave a day after my hairdryers were taken down. The plan was to spend a week setting up my new salon and furnishing the house. I wanted my new life in place before seeing you again.

It's not that I've become attached to this place. I will not miss the few friends I made, the people who do not know the woman I was before I came here, the men who over the years have thought they were in love with me. Once I leave, I probably won't even remember the one who asked me to be his wife. Nobody here knows I'm still married to you. I only tell them a slice of the story: I was barren and my husband took another wife. No one has ever probed further, so I've never told them about my children.

I have wanted to leave since the three corpors in the National Youth Service programme were killed. I decided to shut down my salon and the jewellery shop before I even knew what I would do next, before the invitation to your father's funeral arrived like a map to show me the way. I have memorised the three young men's names and I know what each one studied at the university. My Olamide would have been about their age; she too would just have been leaving university about now. When I read about them, I think of her.

Akin, I often wonder if you think about her too.

Although sleep stays away, every night I shut my eyes and pieces of the life I left behind come back to me. I see the batik pillowcases in our bedroom, our neighbours and your family which, for a misguided period, I thought was also mine. I see you. Tonight I see the bedside lamp you gave me a few weeks after we got married. I could not sleep in the dark and you had nightmares if we left the fluorescent lights on. That lamp was your solution. You bought it without telling me you'd come up with a compromise, without asking me if I wanted a lamp. And as I stroked its bronze base and admired the tinted glass

panels that formed its shade, you asked me what I would take out of the building if our house was burning. I didn't think about it before saying, *our baby*, even though we did not have children yet. *Something*, you said, *not someone*. But you seemed a little hurt that, when I thought it was someone, I did not consider rescuing you.

I drag myself out of bed and change out of my nightgown. I will not waste another minute. The questions you must answer, the ones I've choked on for over a decade, quicken my steps as I grab my handbag and go into the living room.

There are seventeen bags here, ready to be carried into my car. I stare at the bags, recalling the contents of each one. If this house was on fire, what would I take? I have to think about this because the first thing that occurs to me is *nothing*. I choose the overnight bag I'd planned to bring with me for the funeral and a leather pouch filled with gold jewellery. Musa can bring the rest of the bags to me another time.

This is it then – fifteen years here and, though my house is not on fire, all I'm taking is a bag of gold and a change of clothes. The things that matter are inside me, locked up below my breast as though in a grave, a place of permanence, my coffin-like treasure chest.

I step outside. The air is freezing and the black sky is turning purple in the horizon as the sun ascends. Musa is leaning against the car, cleaning his teeth with a stick. He spits into a cup as I approach and puts the chewing stick in his breast pocket. He opens the car door, we exchange greetings and I climb into the back seat.

Musa switches on the car radio and searches for stations. He

settles for one that is starting the day's broadcast with a recording of the national anthem. The gateman waves goodbye as we drive out of the compound. The road stretches before us, shrouded in a darkness transitioning into dawn as it leads me back to you.

ILESA, 1985 ONWARDS

EVEN THEN, I COULD SENSE that they had come prepared for war. I could see them through the glass panes on the door. I could hear their chatter. They did not seem to notice that I had been standing on the other side of the door for almost a full minute. I wanted to leave them standing outside and go back upstairs to sleep. Maybe they would melt into pools of brown mud if they stayed long enough in the sun. Iya Martha's buttocks were so big that, if melted, they would have taken up all the space on the concrete steps that led up to our doorway.

Iya Martha was one of my four mothers; she had been my father's oldest wife. The man who came with her was Baba Lola, Akin's uncle. They both hunched their backs against the sun and wore determined frowns that made their faces repulsive. Yet, as soon as I opened the door, their conversation stopped and they broke into smiles. I could guess the first words that would come out of the woman's mouth. I knew it would be some lavish show of a bond that had never existed between us.

‘Yejide, my precious daughter!’ Iya Martha grinned, cupping my cheeks with moist and fleshy hands.

I grinned back and knelt to greet them. ‘Welcome, welcome. God must have woken up thinking of me today-o. That is why you are all here,’ I said, bending in a semi-kneel again after they had come in and were seated in the sitting room.

They laughed.

‘Where is your husband? Do we meet him at home?’ Baba Lola asked, looking around the room as though I had stashed Akin under a chair.

‘Yes, sir, he is upstairs. I’ll go and call him after I serve your drinks. What should I prepare for food? Pounded yam?’

The man glanced at my stepmother as though, while rehearsing for the drama that was about to unfold, he had not read this part of their script.

Iya Martha shook her head from side to side. ‘We cannot eat. Get your husband. We have important things to discuss with the two of you.’

I smiled, left the sitting-room area and headed for the staircase. I thought I knew what ‘important things’ they had come to discuss. A number of my in-laws had been in our home previously to discuss the same issue. A discussion consisted of them talking and me listening while on my knees. At those times, Akin pretended to listen and jot notes while writing his to-do list for the next day. No one in the series of delegations could read or write and they were all in awe of those who could. They were impressed that Akin wrote down their words. And sometimes, if he stopped writing, the person speaking at the time would complain that Akin was disrespecting him or her by not

noting anything down. My husband often planned his entire week during such visits, while I got terrible cramps in my legs.

The visits irritated Akin and he wanted to tell his relatives to mind their own business, but I would not allow it. The long discussions did give me leg cramps, but at least they made me feel I was part of his family. Until that afternoon, no one in my family had paid me that kind of visit since I'd got married.

As I went up the stairs, I knew that Iya Martha's presence meant some new point was about to be made. I did not need their advice. My home was fine without the important things they had to say. I did not want to hear Baba Lola's hoarse voice being forced out in between coughs or see another flash of Iya Martha's teeth.

I believed I had heard it all already anyway and I was sure my husband would feel the same way. I was surprised to find Akin awake. He worked six days a week and slept through most Sundays. But he was pacing the floor when I entered our room.

'You knew they would come today?' I searched his face for the familiar mix of horror and irritation that it wore any time a special delegation came visiting.

'They are here?' He stood still and clasped his hands behind his head. No horror, no irritation. The room began to feel stuffy.

'You knew they were coming? You didn't tell me?'

'Let's just go downstairs.' He walked out of the room.

'Akin, what is going on? What is happening?' I called after him.

I sat down on the bed, held my head in my hands and tried to breathe. I stayed that way until I heard Akin's voice calling me. I went to join him in the sitting room downstairs. I wore

a smile, not a big one that showed teeth, just a small lift at the corners of my mouth. The kind that said, *Even though you old people know nothing about my marriage, I am delighted, no, ecstatic, to hear all the important things you have to say about it. After all, I am a good wife.*

I did not notice her at first, even though she was perched on the edge of Iya Martha's chair. She was fair, pale yellow like the inside of an unripe mango. Her thin lips were covered with blood-red lipstick.

I leaned towards my husband. His body felt stiff and he did not put his arms around me and pull me close. I tried to figure out where the yellow woman had come from, wondering for a wild minute if Iya Martha had kept her hidden under her wrapper when she came in.

'Our wife, our people say that when a man has a possession and it becomes two he does not become angry, right?' Baba Lola said.

I nodded and smiled.

'Well, our wife, this is your new wife. It is one child that calls another one into this world. Who knows, the king in heaven may answer your prayers because of this wife. Once she gets pregnant and has a child, we are sure you will have one too,' Baba Lola said.

Iya Martha nodded her agreement. 'Yejide, my daughter, we have thought about and slept on this issue many times, your husband's people and me. And your other mothers.'

I shut my eyes. I was about to wake up from the trance. When I opened my eyes, the mango-yellow woman was still there, a little blurry but still there. I was dazed.

I had expected them to talk about my childlessness. I was armed with millions of smiles. Apologetic smiles, pity-me smiles, I-look-unto-God smiles – name all the fake smiles needed to get through an afternoon with a group of people who claim to want the best for you while poking at your open sore with a stick – and I had them ready. I was ready to listen to them tell me I must do something about my situation. I expected to hear about a new pastor I could visit; a new mountain where I could go to pray; or an old herbalist in a remote village or town whom I could consult. I was armed with smiles for my lips, an appropriate sheen of tears for my eyes and sniffles for my nose. I was prepared to lock up my hairdressing salon throughout the coming week and go in search of a miracle with my mother-in-law in tow. What I was not expecting was another smiling woman in the room, a yellow woman with a blood-red mouth who grinned like a new bride.

I wished my mother-in-law were there. She was the only woman I had ever called *Moomi*. I visited her more often than her son did. She had watched while my fresh perm was washed off into a flowing river by a priest whose theory was that I had been cursed by my mother before she died, minutes after giving birth to me. Moomi was there with me when I sat on a prayer mat for three days, chanting words that I didn't understand over and over until I fainted on the third day, cutting short what should have been a seven-day fast and vigil.

While I recovered in a ward at Wesley Guild Hospital, she held my hand and asked me to pray for strength. A good mother's life is hard, she said, a woman can be a bad wife but she must not be a bad mother. Moomi told me that before asking

God to give me a child, I must ask for the grace to be able to suffer for that child. She said I wasn't ready to be a mother yet if I was fainting after three days of fasting.

I realised then that she had not fainted on the third day because she had probably gone on that kind of fast several times to appease God on behalf of her children. In that moment, the lines etched around Moomi's eyes and mouth became sinister, they began to mean more to me than signs of old age. I was torn. I wanted to be this thing that I never had. I wanted to be a mother, to have my eyes shine with secret joys and wisdom like Moomi's. Yet all her talk about suffering was terrifying.

'Her age is not even close to yours,' Iya Martha leaned forward in her seat. 'Because they appreciate you, Yejide, your husband's people know your value. They told me that they recognise that you are a good wife in your husband's house.'

Baba Lola cleared his throat. 'Yejide, I as a person, I want to praise you. I want to appreciate your efforts to make sure that our son leaves a child behind when he dies. This is why we know that you will not take this new wife like a rival. Her name is Funmilayo and we know, we trust, that you will take her as your younger sister.'

'Your friend,' Iya Martha said.

'Your daughter,' Baba Lola said.

Iya Martha tapped Funmi on the back. '*Oya*, you go and greet your *iyale*.'

I shuddered when Iya Martha referred to me as Funmi's *iyale*. The word crackled in my ears, *iyale* – *first* wife. It was a verdict that marked me as not woman enough for my husband.

Funmi came to sit beside me on the couch.

Baba Lola shook his head. ‘Funmi, kneel down. Twenty years after the train has started its journey, it will always meet the land ahead of it. Yejide is ahead of you in every way in this house.’

Funmi knelt down, placed her hands on my knees and smiled. My hands itched to slap the smile off her face.

I turned to look Akin in the eyes, hoping that somehow he was not part of the ambush. His gaze held mine in a silent plea. My already-stiff smile slipped. Rage closed its flaming hands around my heart. There was a pounding in my head, right between my eyes.

‘Akin, you knew this?’ I spoke in English, shutting out the two elders who spoke only Yoruba.

Akin said nothing; he scratched the bridge of his nose with a forefinger.

I looked around the room for something to focus on. The white lace curtains with blue trimmings, the grey couch, the matching rug that had a coffee stain that I had been trying to remove for over a year. The stain was too far off-centre to be covered by the table, too far from the edge to be concealed by the armchairs. Funmi wore a beige dress, the same shade as the coffee stain, the same shade as the blouse that I wore. Her hands were just below my knees, wrapped around my bare legs. I could not look past her hands, past the long billowy sleeves of her dress. I could not look at her face.

‘Yejide, pull her close.’

I was not sure who had just spoken. My head was hot, heating up, close to boiling point. Anyone could have said those words – Iya Martha, Baba Lola, God. I did not care.

I turned to my husband again. ‘Akin, you knew about this?’

You knew and could not tell me. You knew? You bloody bastard. After everything! You wretched bastard!

Akin caught my hand before it landed on his cheek.

It was not the outrage in Iya Martha's scream that stopped my words. It was the tender way Akin's thumb stroked my palm. I looked away from his eyes.

'What is she saying?' Baba Lola asked the new wife for an interpretation.

'Yejide, please,' Akin squeezed my hand.

'She says he is a bastard,' Funmi translated in a whisper, as though the words were too hot and heavy for her mouth.

Iya Martha screamed and covered her face with her hands. I was not fooled by her display. I knew she was gloating inside. I was sure she would spend weeks repeating what she had seen to my father's other wives.

'You must not abuse your husband, this child. No matter how things appear, he is still your husband. What more do you want him to do for you? Is it not because of you that he has found a flat for Funmi to stay in when he has a big duplex right here?' Iya Martha looked around the sitting room, spreading her palms to point out the big duplex in case I had missed her reference to the house for which I paid half of the rent every month. 'You, this Yejide. You must be grateful to your husband.'

Iya Martha had stopped talking, but her mouth still hung open. If one moved close enough, that mouth oozed an unbearable stench, like stale urine. Baba Lola had chosen a seat that was a safe distance from her.

I knew I was supposed to kneel down, bow my head like a schoolgirl being punished and say I was sorry for insulting my

husband and his mother in one breath. They would have accepted my excuses – I could have said it was the devil, the weather, or that my new braids were too tight, made my head ache and forced me to disrespect my husband in front of them. My whole body was clenched like an arthritic hand and I just could not force it to make shapes that it did not want to make. So for the first time, I ignored an in-law's displeasure and stood up when I was expected to kneel. I felt taller as I rose to my full height.

'I will prepare the food,' I said, refusing to ask them again what they wanted to eat. Now that they had introduced Funmi, it was acceptable for Baba Lola and Iya Martha to have a meal. I was not ready to cook a separate meal for each person, so I served them what I wanted. I gave them bean pottage. I mixed the three-day-old beans I had been planning to throw in the bin with the freshly cooked pottage. Even though I was sure they would notice that the mixture tasted a little bad, I counted on the guilt Baba Lola was masking with outrage at my behaviour and the glee Iya Martha was hiding beneath her displays of dismay to keep them eating. In order to help the food down their throats, I knelt down to apologise to the two of them. Iya Martha smiled and said she would have refused to eat if I had gone on behaving like a street child. I apologised again and hugged the yellow woman for good measure; she smelled like coconut oil and vanilla. I drank from a bottle of malt as I watched them eat. I was disappointed that Akin refused to eat anything.

When they complained that they would have preferred pounded yam with vegetable stew and dry fish, I ignored Akin's look. On some other day I would have gone back to the kitchen to pound yam. That afternoon, I wanted to tell them to get up

and pound the yam if they really wanted pounded yam. I swallowed the words burning in my throat with gulps of malt and told them I could not pound because I had sprained my hand the day before.

‘But you didn’t say that when we first got here,’ Iya Martha scratched her chin. ‘You yourself offered to give us pounded yam.’

‘She must have forgotten about the sprain. She was really in pain yesterday. I even considered taking her to the hospital,’ Akin said, backing up my fairly obvious lie.

They shovelled the beans into their mouths like starving children, advising me to get the hand checked at the hospital. It was only Funmi who squeezed her mouth around the first mouthful of beans and looked at me with suspicion. Our eyes met and she smiled a wide red-rimmed smile.

After I cleared away the empty plates, Baba Lola explained that he had not been sure how long the visit would last, so he had not bothered to make any arrangements for the cab driver who had dropped them off to come back and pick them up. He assumed, the way relatives often do, that Akin would take responsibility for getting them back home.

Soon it was time for Akin to drop everyone off. As I saw them to his car, Akin jiggled his keys in his trouser pocket and asked if everyone was fine with the route he intended to take. He wanted to drop Baba Lola off on Ilaje Street and then drive Iya Martha all the way to Ife. I noticed that he did not say anything about where Funmi lived. After Iya Martha said the route my husband picked was the best option, Akin unlocked the car doors and got into the driver’s seat.

I stifled the urge to pull out Funmi's *jheri* curls because she slipped into the front seat beside my husband and pushed the small cushion I always kept there to the floor. I clenched my fists as Akin drove away, leaving me alone in the cloud of dust he had raised.



'What did you feed them?' Akin shouted.

'Bridegroom, welcome back,' I said. I had just finished eating my dinner. I picked up the plates and headed for the kitchen.

'You know they all have diarrhoea now? I had to park by a bush for them to shit. A bush!' he said, following me into the kitchen.

'What is so unheard of about that? Do your relatives have toilets in their homes? Don't they shit in bushes and on dung-hills?' I yelled, slamming the plates in the metal sink. The sound of cracking china was followed by silence. One of the plates had cracked in the middle. I ran my finger over the broken surface. I felt it pierce me. My blood stained the jagged space in trickles.

'Yejide, try and understand. You know I am not going to hurt you,' he said.

'What language are you speaking? Hausa or Chinese? Me, I don't understand you. Start speaking something I understand, Mr Bridegroom.'

'Stop calling me that.'

'I will call you what I want. At least you are still my husband. Ah, but maybe you are not my husband again. Did I miss that news too? Should I switch on the radio or is it on television?'

In the newspaper?’ I dumped the broken plate into the plastic dustbin that stood beside the sink. I turned to face him.

His forehead glistened with beads of sweat that ran down his cheeks and gathered at his chin. He was tapping a foot to some furious beat in his head. The muscles in his face moved to that same beat as he clenched and unclenched his jaw. ‘You called me a bastard in front of my uncle. You disrespected me.’

The anger in his voice shook me, outraged me. I had thought his vibrating body meant he was nervous – it usually did. I had hoped it meant he felt sorry, guilty. ‘You brought a new wife into this house and you are angry? When did you marry her? Last year? Last month? When did you plan to tell me? Eh? You this—’

‘Don’t say it, woman, don’t say that word. You need a padlock on your mouth.’

‘Well, since I don’t have that, I will say it, you bloody—’

His hand covered my mouth. ‘OK, I’m sorry. I was in a difficult situation. You know I won’t cheat on you, Yejide. You know I can’t, I can’t do that. I promise.’ He laughed. It was a broken, pathetic sound.

I prised his hand away from my face. He held on to my hand, rubbing his palm against mine. I wanted to weep.

‘You have another wife, you paid her bride price and prostrated in front of her family. I think you are already cheating.’

He placed my palm over his heart; it was beating fast. ‘This is not cheating on you; I don’t have a new wife. Trust me, it’s for the best. My mother won’t pressure you for children any more,’ he whispered.

‘Nonsense and rubbish.’ I snatched my hand away and walked out of the kitchen.

'If it makes you feel better, Funmi couldn't make it into the bush fast enough. She soiled her dress.'

I did not feel better. I would not feel better for a very long time. Already, I was coming undone, like a hastily tied scarf coming loose, on the ground before the owner is aware of it.