The Vanguard Book of Love Stories

Edited by

NONSO ANYANWU

With introduction by

Otosirieze Obi-Young

The Vanguard Book of Love Stories

EDITED BY NONSO ANYANWU

INTRODUCTION BY
OTOSIRIEZE OBI-YOUNG

First published online in 2019 by *Brittle Paper*.

Website: brittlepaper.com

Email: vanguardliteraryservices@yahoo.com. Twitter: @vlsbooks

+2340952461407

Editor: Nonso Anyanwu. Twitter: @nonsochi9.

Assistant Editor: Brigitte Poirson.

Cover design: Prince Jacon Osinachi. email: princejacon.osinachi@gmail.com.

Typeset: Nonso Anyanwu, Otosirieze Obi-Young.

CONTENTS

EDITOR'S NOTE

Since the inception of Vanguard Literary Services' Valentine's Day Anthology series in 2016—the first two releases being *Gossamer: Valentine Stories* (2016), with an introduction by Toni Kan, and *Love Stories from Africa* (2017), with an introduction by Helon Habila—we have attracted exceptional authors who later went on to achieve greater things in their writings. To mention a few: in 2017, Arinze Ifeakandu was shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Writing, and is studying for his MFA at the University of Iowa; in 2018, T.J. Benson's collection of short stories, *We Won't Fade into Darkness,* was published by Parresia, one of the biggest publishing houses in Nigeria; and in 2018 also, Otosirieze Obi-Young secured representation by David Godwin, one of the biggest literary agents in publishing. Furthermore, five contributors to *Love Stories from Africa* participated in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus Creative Writing Workshop last year.

The response to this year's call for submissions was enthusiastic—a validation of our commitment to presenting stories of a romantic Africa. For the first time, we have a collection of full short stories as well as the full incorporation of Vanguard Literary Services into the curation process. I like that each writer featured in this anthology comes with a style, an attitude, a vibrance—a voice I consider chewable—and they show how impossible it is to define love in less complex terms.

Despite the non-availability of sponsors, we have been able to tell these stories with the excellent partnership of *Brittle Paper* : thank you. I am grateful to

our amazing proof-reader and editor, Brigitte Poirson, and to all the writers that have contributed.

Cheers to you all!

Nonso Anyanwu,

March, 2019.

DO YOU FEEL ME?

INTRODUCTION

The most fascinating explorations of love succeed because they are layered: whether written outwards from the inside or inwards from the outside, they show us human beings on our own, in our social realities, then they show us tied to other human beings, in our emotional realities, then they show us for what we can be in this meeting: loving or beloved, fragile or strong, nurturing or selfish, protective or destructive. While, because of this lure of the layered, it is the grand portrayals of love that have long held our collective attention—James Baldwin's presentation of it as an impossible antidote to racism, Toni Morrison's treatment of its persistence as radical salvation, Michael Ondaatje's painting of it in indelible imagery, as examples—the other portrayals in which love is the accrual of small, everyday living, are also worthy of fascination: its writers succeed by simply letting love be love, writing it with no artistic anxiety to provide any layers. It is very much the point of writing, after all: telling it as it is.

Life is how it is, and most stories of life, when stripped down, become stories of love: of its presence or absence. In writing love, the understanding of this juxtaposition is key, because, in their physical and emotional transactions, the subjects of love are essentially asking each other: Do *you* feel *me*?

The seven stories here aren't simply about Valentine's Day Love, that brand of love manifest on or building up to a climactic day; the seven stories here are about the characters' journeys as human beings and how they are affected by the decisions they make about love. Some of them are straightforward tales of characters searching for and finding romance. In Howard M-B Maximus' clever presentation of love as a series of calculations, an aging mathematician dismisses

those who frown at his relationship with a student as "the absolute sign bending positive numbers: inconsequential." In Klara Kalu's second-person tale, a heterosexual romance buds during secondary school and blooms in university; when he is inside her, it "felt like your dick had been born there, grown there, went to school and had plenty of friends and would die there." In Ugochi Okafor's tour of a young woman's love life, we see a central moment in which an expectant "I love you" is replied with "I don't hate you."

The rest of the stories offer life-range perspectives. In Chukwuemeka Ogbonna's promising portrait of pain and survival, a man's love for a woman trembles in the shadows of his Biafran War memories, including his previous affection for a soldier. In Nonso Anyanwu's tale, a man sees another man in a bar and proceeds to share the heterosexual romances that define his life in unusual ways. In Halima Aliyu's story, a woman whose husband "had lost his mind only twice before" finds herself at the center of an unexpected rivalry right in her home. And in short, often clean, sentences, Ifeanyichukwu Peter Eze details a boy's journey to discovering sensuality and sexuality.

The tradition of Valentine's Day anthologies has been solidified by *The Vanguard Book of African Love Stories* series. The series' first anthology, *Gossamer: Valentine Stories* (2016), with an introduction by Toni Kan, set the precedent for the proliferation of independent anthologies on the African literary scene: anthologies curated by young creatives without institutional support and funding. It was followed by *Love Stories from Africa* (2017), with an introduction by Helon Habila. In the three years since the series' debut, independent anthologies have proliferated, freeing a generation most different in its recourse to confessionalism. At *Brittle Paper*, this is the eleventh such anthology we have published, following, in addition to the two mentioned above, the Art Naija Series' *Enter Naija: The Book of Places* (2016) and *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* (2017), 14's *We Are Flowers* (2017) and *The Inward Gaze* (2018), *A Mosaic of Torn*

Places (2017), the Afro Anthology Series' *Selves: An Afro Anthology of Creative Nonfiction* (2018), the 20.35 Africa collective's *20.35 Africa: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* (2018), and *Erotic Africa: The Sex Anthology* (2018). In many ways, they owe something to Vanguard Literary Services' Valentine's Day series.

Unlike the series' first two anthologies, featuring stories of 400 and 1,000 words respectively, *The Vanguard Book of African Love Stories* accommodates full short stories. More than instances of affection, we now have entire trajectories of characters who at every stage of life are embroiled in a struggle with love, their journeys steeped in social realities. In some, there is a sense of completeness.

Otosirieze Obi-Young,

March, 2019.

Solutions

HOWARD M-B MAXIMUS

He liked to romanticize Mathematics. He once asked his students if they'd ever seen anything as elegant as the integration sign. Its svelte gracefulness, its elongated torso and regal uprightness, like a special species in the family of S's that had been groomed to always stand up straight. To always walk tall.

After his wife died, Papa V. did not remarry, because he was mourning, because of his children and because he had woken up one warm evening, after a long siesta, to find that he was a graying old man to whom the mere idea of finding new love was laughable.

What was that thing the Holy Book said about new wine and old skin? Or was it old wine and new skin? What analogy could be more apt?

Whether or not he was in the classroom, Papa V. saw life in equations. Breaking it down into x and y. The same way the students of his former school had seen life in bread: "Please, how much is the new math pamphlet?"

"3,500frs, I think."

"What? 3,500frs? That is 35 loaves of bread right there. 35!"

Or.

"A minister was arrested yesterday for embezzling 3.2 billion francs CFA."

"What? 3.2 billion? Do you know how many loaves of bread that can buy?"

It was fascinating, this thinking, measuring life in the things one loved (or hated). He would think about this later, during a class assignment he would give his students.

If you asked him, Papa V. would tell you this about his marriage: it had been an interesting equation cut short, before all the parameters could align—a beautiful equation, even in its incompleteness. Sometimes, he wondered if he could get answers, forging ahead on his own. Will it be more beautiful in its completeness? Could it ever really be complete without a spouse? Wasn't there completeness in the death of a partner? If the number of numbers from 1 to 2 were so uncountable that math had to use the term *infinity*, could one really find all the answers one was looking for? What if he and his marriage were as insignificant as one of those numbers between 1 and 2 in a world made up of not 1 or 2 people, but of up to 7 billion people? So insignificant no one called them by name or even bothered to learn how they had come to be. Sometimes, he thought the world was a crazy place; often times, the world thought he was a crazy man.

On some days, math was a solid, exacting man who had his own methods; on other days, math was the methods. Math had come to them suddenly years ago, implementing himself in the equation of their marriage: Method of Elimination, and poof, his wife was gone like a pun snatched from a chessboard. Sometimes, he wondered how mathematical methods decided when to be masters and when to be slaves; how sometimes, they were tools he had the ultimate power to use in problem-solving or whatever; and how others, he and his were the tools that these methods used for kicks. Method of Substitution, for example, was within his reach and could work in this equation of his marriage. Substituting one wife for another and seeing what results it gives. He knew of men who had used the trial-and-error method, substituting the wife factor until they were satisfied with the answer. But whenever he thought about this, he would laugh at himself, because *substitution* was a method he could never get himself to try.

Once, he had come home from school to find Felicia, a seamstress in the neighborhood, in his living room. She was gorging on a bowl of corn-chaff his

daughter had served, as his son poured soft drink for her in a glass mug. He had been taken aback, wondering why there were too many eye conversations between them, why the chubby seamstress, pretty in her own rights, was overly smiling at him, talking about too many things, asking new questions when the old ones were still unanswered, contorting her face to expressions he could only read as constipated. It had taken him a while to realize that it was her idea of flirtation, his children were trying to set him up with Felicia, whom the entire neighborhood liked for her bubbliness, and pitied for her spinsterhood at forty.

In his room, when Felicia was gone, he had feigned ignorance and asked them what new clothes they were trying to have sewn.

"But Papa, you just left us there like that and came to your room," his daughter said.

He looked at her as if he couldn't believe the silliness of what she had meant to be a half question. "Don't worry Vanessa, next time I'll offer a sacrifice before leaving your presence," he said, and Vanessa chuckled.

"But Papa, what do you think of Aunty Felicia?" This time, it was Valerie, his son.

He looked at them both. It still stunned him every now and then how much his son looked like his late wife, how much his daughter looked like him. As if God had been feeling giggly and had decided to create an inside joke with his family. They stood before him, trying to eyeball his thoughts about Felicia out of him. He thought of dismissing them with easy, sarcastic wit, or shushing them with the sternness of a parent. But for some reason, he had not. They had had the conversation. How he had decided not to remarry because he did not want anyone to take their mother's place in their lives; to which his son had said, "in our lives or *your* life," and Papa V. had called his name in a warning tone, eyes ever so even, "Valerie!"

They explained to him how they were soon leaving for university, and wouldn't he get lonely, sleeping alone in that big house? He told them it was not

a big house and he knew they were leaving for university. He was paying the fees and renting their apartment. But even as he said this, he knew he would miss them in a terrible way.

"You should find someone, Papa," his son said, and paused, and when he opened his mouth to continue, Papa V. saw his late wife, "to be your companion, to take care of you, laugh with you, and all that good stuff."

"Well, okay," Papa V. said, but it was more because he wanted to rest, because he wanted their hearts to be at rest, rather than because he thought he would actually find someone. "Okay," he said again, pulling out a pair of jumper trousers from his wardrobe, "but not Felicia. Felicia was the one who sewed this for me. These trousers that are half my size." He was turning the trousers inside out as he spoke, as if there was more of it hidden somewhere within, and then he held it out to his children. "That woman doesn't even know her measurements."

Papa V. still had half dreams, half memories of his late wife. How she cooked while he set exam questions in his study, and she'd bring him little spoons of soup to taste.

"How many tablespoons of salt did you put in this soup?" he'd ask, and she would say, "a pinch."

"What do you mean, 'a pinch?' That measurement is quite inaccurate. So is a tablespoon of salt. Like the number of numbers between 1 and 2, you would never know the number of grains of salt in a tablespoon, and so we use wholes like 1, 2, tablespoon."

She would pause, "I put a pinch. Do you like it?"

"Yes, my dear," he would say, smiling. "It tastes really nice."

He liked how she challenged him in their mathematical arguments, instead of calling him crazy like the many girls and women he had met in his lifetime. He also remembered his conversation with her about children. How he wanted at least a boy and a girl, and how she had said she wasn't going through labor twice. How they had fought about it and decided that it was silly to fight about children

that weren't yet there in the first place; what if they ended up having none. How she and her body and God (and he, she had insisted) had calculated everything, set things in place to make everyone happy, that she had labored once, and in that one time, she had given him his boy and girl. He remembered how much he loved staring at her, the symmetry of her face: her lips and eyes and beauty marks. Like a mirror had been placed on the middle of her nose, so that one side reflected on the other. She was calculations—measurements, formulae—done right.

AFTER HIS WIFE died, Papa V. quit his job at the public school where he used to teach and joined an evening school closer to his home. The pay was much less, and the students were much older. On the first day of class that year, he asked everyone to write down who they were. It was an exercise he carried out every other term. At the end of class, he asked them to stay seated, as he pulled out the pieces of paper they had submitted.

The first was by a dark, broad-chested middle-aged man who always sat on the front row, making the younger students who sat behind him, somehow look truant.

"I'm a businessman, I deal in cement importation."

The next was a woman the complexion of ripe papaya. She was generally timid, and always covered her book with her right arm as she wrote with her left, as though she was scribbling down some secret code to break into a safe.

"I am a married woman, a mother of four children, three boys and a girl."

At this, Papa V. stopped and asked if it wasn't interesting, the parameters by which we defined ourselves. Answering the question about who we are is like making "x" the subject of the formula in an equation whose parameters are solely dependent on us. Everyone chooses what defined them as a person. $X = y + 4z$, for example, was the woman's equation, where y = husband and z = child.

Later, when Papa V. said most of the women had family as the parameters to the equation of who they are, while the men had jobs and income, there was a roar in class, arguments, laughs, and the twenty-four-year old girl---the youngest in class—sitting by the cement importer man said that conclusion wasn't valid given the number of samples Papa V. had used. There was another roar. Another laughter. Her script was next, a coincidence that Papa V. would refuse to see as one when quoting it later, as he told the story of how he had noticed her. On the paper, she had written in a clear, roundish handwriting: "I am a student and I am x. Always searching for myself." Later, she would tell him she had heard someone make a statement like that, about how humans were always searching for things: x or themselves; she had heard it in a movie or book, or someplace she couldn't quite remember; she had loved it and used the statement *I am x* whenever she had the opportunity. Now though, to Papa V., reading this felt like a sign. He looked at her, stunned that someone he was seeing for the first time saw herself as something to be solved, an equation of sort. She was a problem he was going to like.

After class, when she walked up to him in her tight jeans and maroon blouse, telling him everyone thought his classes were the most fun mathematics class they had ever attended, he had started to imagine possible ways of solving her, starting with the Method of Substitution.

Her name was Lucy, and she started coming to him every day for help. They would talk about equations outside of the curriculum and she would help him grade the quiz scripts of the younger students. She told him her story: an orphan girl with a brother who was trying to make something of herself. No, she wasn't born destitute; her parents, when they were alive, had been civil servants who had sent her to school. She had been to 6, dismissed for insubordination, and truancy, and plain rudeness to staff. She told him how she wished she could say she was just misunderstood, but it was her, really, who had misunderstood her parents' intentions for her, thinking they were trying to force her to be who she wasn't, a

yes girl, when in fact, they just wanted the best for her—an education. They had died in a plane crash to the North. And it did take something to go for another to come. Her parents' death had brought to her a sense of who she wanted to be. And so here she was, managing to become that person with the little resources they had left her. Her brother had traveled to Dubai, she said, to look for himself too, maybe. She said and laughed, saying as she laughed, "not really, actually, it was money and not himself that he went to look for."

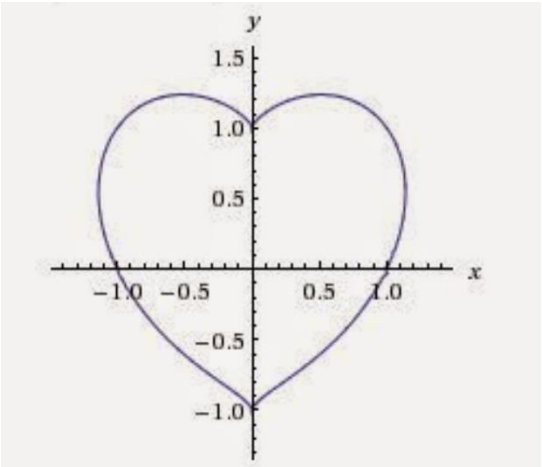
Papa V. joined her laughing.

At night he still had half dreams that started with his son telling him to get someone, that ended with the face of his late wife feeding him spoonfuls of soup.

One Teachers' Day, about two days after he had taught them Graphs, as the school shook with music, and beers exchanged hands with the swiftness of draught players, Papa V. slipped her an equation to solve. He had invited her to the party the staff had organized, saying since she helped him with grade papers, she might as well drink the drinks of teachers. She had left early, whispering to him how the younger staff did not like that she was there, and for good reasons, because even though they loved and respected him enough to complain, no one wanted to get drunk with their student. But there had been something that night even he could not explain, the slight holding of hands under the table, the slight eye contacts that seemed to carry mutual understanding, the random slight smiles, everything so slight and yet so heavy with meaning, with longing. He had imagined it was the grogginess from the drinking. Alcohol knew how to make a joke of its consumers, a fool of grown men. But that did not seem to matter much now. When he saw her off by the rowdy roundabout, where teachers from other schools had gathered, bottles in hand, tearing suya off their sticks, teaching passersby how to party, he had scribbled an equation in her palms, the way flirty girls in bars gave men their phone numbers in the American movies he had seen. He watched her look at her palm and then at him, as she rushed home, he

imagined her writing it down on a piece of paper before the ink melted from the sweat from her palms: $(y^2 + x^2 - 1)^3 - x^2 y^3 = 0$.

He imagined her curled on her reading table, unable to sleep until she had solved it. It was not an easy equation for someone like her to solve; he knew how much she was intimidated by equations with the cube sign. As he went home, he imagined her up for hours of intense focus, of flipping through text books, of scribbling and canceling and scribbling again, wondering if she'd get it right. The next morning, around the time that the cocks began to crow, she showed up carrying a paper with a graph that looked something like this:



He smiled when she gave it to him, proud that she had solved it correctly and embarrased that she had. A part of him had wanted the equation to remain unsolved, like knocking someone's door while wishing they were not around to open.

"No one ever made me stay up all night trying to figure out codes of their feelings." She paused and laughed. "Actually, everyone does that. But nobody ever told me they loved me with a graph."

"Lucy," he started to say, but before he could talk, he felt her lips against his, warm, full, and he was grateful, because he wouldn't have known what to say after *Lucy*.

"Your staff members would not find *this* funny."

"Well," he said this time, smiling, "my dear Lucy, the opinions of my fellow staff members are like the absolute sign binding positive numbers: inconsequential."

The twins were thrilled to hear this. At first, Vanessa thought Lucy was too young for him, but Valerie insisted young was what Papa V. needed, and so Vanessa agreed. They called everyday to talk about Lucy, but instead, Papa V. would go on and on about their studies, what courses they were not performing well at, pushing the topic away from Lucy, turning at things that would have them grumbling, until the calls became less frequent.

THE FIRST TIME Papa V. asked Lucy to spend the night, she shaved and brought coconut oil for massage. In Vanessa's bedroom—for he couldn't take Lucy to his matrimonial bed just yet—, they kissed and fondled each other for several minutes, she telling him how good he looked for a man his age, his body toned and his belly flat enough, and he pecking and necking and smacking and moaning, massaging and then more kissing, but when she was ready to receive him, Papa V. did not rise.

The next morning, Lucy fixed him breakfast before leaving, sweet potatoes with eggs and a small pot of tea, but Papa V. stared at the plate, too ashamed to eat it, so ashamed he emptied the plate in the bin. From the bin, the egg aroma filled the house like mockery, a sweet reminder of how bad last night had gone.

In school, Lucy acted like everything was normal, feisty as always, laughing in class, and Papa V. wondered what it was that she was really saying, when she told the cement importater man, in front of him, Papa V., that some equations were not as *hard* as they seemed.

The next time she came, she brought a pornographic movie that she made them watch. It could help with his situation, she told him and he tried not to be offended. He adjusted as she crept to his chest, playing with the hair that sprouted around his belly button. But Papa V. was too irritated by the fake-sounding moans, too disgusted by the act itself displaying from his daughter's TV, that he threw up, coating everywhere a slimy yellow, everywhere, including Lucy's shaved legs.

In the coming days, he would try all the things she wanted to try. On one night, she would be the queen and he would be the slave, going down on his knees, following her around the room; on another, she would be a celebrity and he would be a fan, and on another, she would be a naughty doctor and he would be a patient; but always, it ended in disappointing sighs, Papa V. rising a little, and then falling like a limp-stalked plant.

They fought about going to the hospital. It was humiliating, Papa V. had said, to go tell this kind of business to another person. "At your age, this shouldn't be uncommon," she told him, a weak consolation. But by the time Papa V. got around to accepting to see a doctor, Lucy came home one evening with a brownish, grainy powder she said she had gotten from two Hausa men, who had told her the powder could keep a man erect for hours. That night, Lucy served Papa V. with the powder, and as he chewed on it, she showered. By the time she got out of the bathroom, Papa V. was grabbing his thighs, screaming noiselessly, saying it was too painful, how the veins down there had popped out, pushing against the walls, that he felt like all the blood cells in his body are on a marathon to get there first, and he felt dizzy. He couldn't walk for hours, just laid there trying not to cry, breathing heavily, watching Lucy's fear, knowing he would never let her call anyone for help. It was her fault, Papa V. said, that she hadn't asked for the dosage. How could one be so careless with their measurements!

Papa V. then decided to stop trying the things that Lucy suggested, and then Lucy talked and talked about how she was just trying to help, and then as if all

the talk in her was finished, she started giving him the silent treatment. In school, they ignored each other, and at home, Papa V. would call Vanessa and Valerie to talk to them about their courses, and how he hoped they were not misbehaving on campus, and the calls would go on and on because he wanted to talk to someone, but could not really talk to them about it. It was then that he missed his late wife even more, and then he was unsure if it was his late wife he was really missing, or Lucy, or just companionship. The distance between them grew day after day, watered by their silence, until Papa V. went to class one day ready to pull his own side of the silence that stood between them like twine. But Lucy was not there. For a whole week, she would not be there. He would try her phone and it wouldn't ring. And he would fear that the worst had happened. She had finally left him.

Papa V.'s classes became dull and boring, typical of math classes. His students tiptoed around him now, afraid that he would snap and kick them out of class. He called a doctor he had heard was good with issues like that, spoke to his colleagues about it, said he was asking for one of his friends. He suspected though that they knew it was him. The doctor told him it happened sometimes when one was still dealing with a loss, when one had been celibate for a very long time. It was almost always in the mind, and in his case, it was coupled with his age. He wondered if he was trying to glue a mirror that was already shattered, one he had neglected when it was cracked.

The day it finally happened, Papa V. came to his room to find Lucy dressed in his late wife's clothes. She wore the same woody perfume his late wife wore. She would later tell him how Vanessa had come up with this when she had gone to their university to visit and that had come up.

"You bring up our sex life with my kids?" he'd ask, and she would tell him how desperate she was to make it work. Now, they were lying close to each other, overwhelmed by the fact that they had finally done it, when Papa started to apologize.

"But what are you sorry for?"

"That you had to pretend to be my late wife before I could…please don't leave me."

Lucy laughed. "I was teaching my neighbour's daughter and when I asked her 3 – 9, she said it cannot go. You have to borrow one to make 13 and then you get the answer."

"Yes," Papa V. laughed, unsure where she was going with it.

"I am not going anywhere. I'll borrow from your late wife if I have to, but this, our equation, I must solve."

You Bury Me

KLARA KALU

Ife mi,

Do you remember the first time you saved me? I was ten years old and my mom had sent me to buy Maggi when that troublesome group of teenage boys in our neighborhood stopped me. They tried to bully me and rob me off my money. You were eleven and we had never spoken to each other before then but I knew you because you attended my school and we took the same school bus. I never knew why we had not spoken to each other until then. We were the last people to get off the bus after school and the first to get on it every morning. I secretly thought Mr. Chikwem, the driver, had drawn up a rooster of who to shout at each morning. I got Tuesdays and Thursdays and you got Mondays and Wednesdays. Fridays were the surprise package days, depending on how generous Mr. Chikwem was feeling, I got the mornings and you got the evenings or one person got both of them.

"This girl, why do you like wasting my time every morning?" he would say. "Next time, I will leave you if you don't come out on time."

Then after school, it would be: "Is it going to take you 40 years to get out of this bus, ehn this boy? Does here resemble the Promised Land?" he would say. "With how slow you are, sometimes I wonder if you're a girl."

That day, you appeared out of nowhere to save me. Did I ever tell you that I didn't care what those boys thought of you? Personally, I thought you reminded me of Clark Kent when you peered intently through your glasses that day. And you know Super Man is my favorite super hero.

"Leave her alone," you said. I could hear a faint quiver in your voice.

Later, when you told me that at that moment, half of you wanted to run away and the other half wanted to pee on yourself, I didn't blame you.

"Oga James Bond," they taunted. "You want to carry her case on your head."

"Just leave her alone," you replied.

"Or what will happen?" they asked.

Ten minutes later, we walked home together with a cut on your lip, broken glasses and without the money for Maggi. I remember I cried louder than you as we walked home even though you were the one hurt and you kept telling me sorry. We became close friends that day.

When my mother asked what happened, I told her we had been attacked by armed robbers and you beat them up and rescued me even though we lost the money and sustained minor injuries.

"This girl, you will not kill me," she said, shaking her head. Then she proceeded to give us a long lecture on safety while she cleaned your cuts with Methylated Spirit. You looked like you wanted to cry but I was watching you. You didn't cry. That night, I heard my mother praying against spiritual forces that wanted to harm her daughter.

Remember we attended the same secondary school because I refused to eat for two days until my mother agreed to enroll me in your school? Even though you spent most days after school at my place, that one year apart wasn't just the same without you. Even Mr. Chikwem missed you, sometimes he would start shouting at you then midway, and he would remember that you were not there anymore.

My mother who didn't fully understand the concept of stubborn children and hunger strikes thought I was going mad.

"What is this one again this girl?" she asked. "There is no madness on both your father's side and my side."

I wasn't really hungry because you kept sneaking food to me when you came over, but my mother didn't know. She didn't want her child, no matter how crazy she was, to die of starvation. Sometimes we missed Mr. Chikwem. The new school bus driver didn't treat us special and he barely knew our names but we were together so it didn't matter.

In SS3, you became a prefect. You walked into my class one day when the teachers were having a meeting and ordered that Sandra girl that was the assistant class monitor to write names of noise makers. She wrote my name down even though I never uttered a word. Maybe I uttered one word, or a few sentences or an entire conversation but that girl was just jealous of me. Later, when you walked in with your friends and started flogging each person she called out, you froze when she got to my name. I got up slowly and looked straight into your eyes. The class suddenly became mute, the mumbles—*this guy don mess up, I go show am*, and, *I didn't even make noise and she wrote my name*—were no longer heard. Even the ones who were crying stopped crying; the pain they felt seemed to have disappeared miraculously. Your friends watched you keenly. You had told me on several occasions that they teased you because of me and said I had used juju on you because of how soft you were around me. Most people at school thought we were dating. Today was the day they were all waiting for. I could hear their whispers.

"En no go fit flog am," Amadi, the boy who never wore socks to school, said. I knew Amadi, I didn't like him. He had once written love letters to me and then gone ahead and told everyone I was the one who wrote him the letters.

"No be true, this one don hook am," Kenneth replied. "Let's bet, two hundred naira, he will flog her." Kenneth was cool; he didn't look down on me, like others who were a class above me did.

"Deal, I don chop your money."

I wanted Kenneth to win.

When I got to where you were standing, you looked like you wanted the ground to open up and swallow you.

"Did you make noise?" you asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Stretch out your hand."

You gulped down saliva, as though nervous. You raised the cane high, hesitated for a second then brought it down with force on my hand. Six times. I could see each stroke was harder for you; it didn't stop me from not speaking to you for a week. I didn't cry then, I cried later when you tried to apologize on our way home. I started talking to you after you fought with your friend who had said my breasts were dropping. Then I had to take you home and make up a story for my mom while she treated your cuts with Methylated Spirit.

Remember when we found out we loved each other? We had gotten into different universities and I decided to come visit you at your school. Then I met the girl you said you were dating and I almost died of jealousy. Ginika with the big butt and I didn't have butt or even enough boobs to make up for the lack of butt. I was taller than her at least, if that counted for something. I hated her the minute she spoke to me the first time.

"Hello, you're the girl he's always talking about," she said with an accent I think fake.

The girl, you said? Dude, I am his entire life. Why won't he talk about me?

As we walked to a bar with a few of your friends and her, I seethed in anger as I watched her drape her arms around and lean on you like she couldn't walk on her own. Your friends took turns trying to talk to me but I was too busy wondering about why women couldn't learn to be strong and independent and walk on their own. What made it worse was when she kept on taking sips of your drink at the bar even though she had hers and stroking your cheek.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I got up and kissed you in front of her and your friends. You looked shocked at first, and tried to pull away. Then

surprisingly, you started to kiss me back. Everyone seemed to disappear and become irrelevant as we walked out of the bar. Well, she was screaming your name and crying, but I blocked it out and pulled you away. We didn't say anything on the way back home; we just held hands and leaned on each other. We were the last people to get off the bus because we didn't feel like letting go. The bus driver said something that reminded us of Mr. Chikwem and we exchanged knowing looks and laughed. I laughed louder than you when you asked, "so does this mean we are dating?" I answered, "no, we just became brother and sister."

The first time we had sex was nothing like we imagined. We had spent weeks talking about it, building up to the moment. None of us had practical knowledge and it was not like I could walk up to my mother and ask her how it was done. We spent weeks googling what went in where, weeks chatting with each other on WhatsApp, sharing our new discoveres, and proclaiming our anticipation.

Babes, I miss you so much. I can't wait for this weekend. 17:45

Me too. I can hardly wait to see your big head. 17:45

That's not the only thing you can't wait to see ;-). 17:46

Shurrup my friend before I change my mind. 17:47

Sorry ma, Commander-in-chief of my heart. 17:47

Ehe, I overheard my roommates talking about that thing. They were saying it's easier when lube is used so I thought maybe we should get that. 17:50

Oh, okay. I'll ask around for that. 17:52

Maybe because we had planned everything blind sighted, we couldn't see all the ways in which it would fail. We were both nervous; your hands shook as you tried to unclasp my bra, it took you five minutes. We had turned off the lights, so we hit our heads a few times as we tried to kiss, and in the end, we still didn't know what to put in where so we ended up turning the lights back on. There was pain even though you slid in slowly, I had read about it so I knew there would be

pain. I tried to adjust but before I was fully adjusted, you came. We never talked about it after it was over and for a while we never brought up sex.

The next time it happened, we didn't plan it. I had come over for the weekend and we had a fight over something I don't remember now. We spent an entire day not talking to each other. I remember laughing loudly whenever I received a text notification and you kept glancing at me. You were the one who came to apologize, always the soft one. I was tired of fighting and my phone had gone off so I curled up on the bed and held the pillow. You laid beside me and wrapped your hands around me and everything felt right again.

It started with soft kisses that became longer and harder. Your hands were on my laps first; you raised my skirt up and traced my stretch marks back to my ass. Shivers ran down my spine as your hands moved upwards into my top. I got goosebumps when you squeezed my breasts slowly kneading my nipples. I still get goosebumps thinking about it now. I didn't know when my clothes came off or yours; I just know that I wanted you more than I ever had at that moment. You slid into me slowly, teasing me. I almost started begging. When all of you went in, it didn't feel unusual like before, it felt like your dick had been born there, grown there, went to school and had plenty friends there and would die there. You moved slowly at first then I wanted more, much more.

"More," I whispered.

"Louder," you replied.

"More," I said, this time louder.

"Beg," you replied. I could sense your smile in the darkness; this was a new part of you I was discovering. A part I craved for.

"More please. Babes. Harder. Please," I said, almost whimpering in need. Then you gave me everything. One word. Oblivion.

It was half an hour before we fell apart, spent. I found another part of you that night, a part that became one of my favorites. This time we talked about it;

it was you who brought it up often and on adding your own details. It somehow made you more of a man; I realised you also found a part of yourself that night.

The day you asked me to marry you was just another day of the week, I had woken up that morning expecting nothing out of the usual. For you, the ring you had been carrying about for three months just kept getting heavier and heavier each day. I should have noticed with the way you were giving me long stares and the frequent side glances anytime we were alone together. We were taking a walk down your street that evening when the rain started suddenly. We ran towards your house and then decided we were already drenched so we started kidding around under the rain. I was laughing loud at something you said, trying to get the rain water into my mouth; I didn't see you kneel or bring out the ring. I was laughing at something you said and trying to get rain water in my mouth. I didn't see you kneel or bring out the ring. I looked down and found you kneeling on one foot, smiling sheepishly and asking me to marry you, your eyes blinking of raindrops. That was the first time "Yes" meant everything to me. You didn't know I cried. The rain covered up for me. I didn't know you did too until you told me later. We both got bad cases of cold the next day.

On our wedding day, you had Ya'aburnee inscribed on our rings because it was our favorite phrase. It was an Arabic phrase. It meant, "You bury me." We literally lived for each other. When I told my mother that we were getting married, she had only looked up from the book she was holding, showing no surprise at all.

"It's about time," she said. "I thought you people would be waiting until after my funeral."

I looked at her, this woman who had introduced me to her friends' sons, single church pastors, and men from my village.

"Ehe, why are you looking at me like that?" she asked. "Please I like peach and purple for the asoebi. We need to start shopping."

"But Mom, the other men you kept introducing me to nko?" I asked.

"Just backup plans," she said. "I always knew it was him. Now we have to pick a date and a venue. I know you have not thought about all these ones. A wedding is not a child's birthday party."

I'll never forget your vows.

"I would say I wish I never die but death is inevitable, so I wish you outlive me, you bury me," you said. "Because the pain will be unbearable if I live a day without you."

"You are my love, my life," you continued. "No one else comes before you and no one can come after you. A lot of people search for this, what we have and they never find. I know what I have. I have you. You hold me together. Always and forever."

I told you I felt exactly the same way during the wedding reception and you said I looked like sun shine. We held hands as we watched the women from my mother's association drag wedding Jollof and souvenirs in their peach and purple. My mom sat at the center in delight. It was almost clear that she assumed the party was for her. You laughed louder than me as we drove to the airport because you told me you wanted six children and I told you to start to consider getting a second wife.

Today, we are on adjacent hospital beds. Our heartbeats are in sync as shown on the machines. I am awake but I am not. Consciousness comes and goes. I do not know how long we have been here. My mother is outside with some pastors from her church. I can faintly hear them rebuking some evil forces. My mother is cursing the drunk driver who slammed into our car on our way back from honeymoon.

"If anything happens to my children, I will kill that devil myself," she screams. It is the first time I realize you have been in her life almost as long as you have been in mine. Long enough to be her child.

The last memory I have of you is a happy one. We are singing along to Maroon 5's "Girls Like You" playing on the radio station, while using an empty

plastic of water as a microphone. It is almost Cardi B's rap part and I am getting ready to give a performance of a lifetime. Your smile is wider than your face and light is hitting you at all the right angles. You look like an angel and then suddenly, darkness.

Something smells like roses. It is dark and hovering. I am almost scared. I feel your presence and I know I am safe. As our hearts slowly stop beating and panic rises in the hospital, I feel at peace. We hold hands in silence as we float to the sky. Ya'aburnee. We bury each other. How did you think I could live a day without you?

You Called Me Beautiful

UGOCHI OKAFOR

There was a time in your life when you believed that you were clairvoyant. You needed to be. It would explain why your mother revered every word that you spoke and prayed in a strange tongue every morning because of your dreams. You were named Uhammiri, the shining beauty of the waters, ten months after your grandmother arrived at your home in Mgbidi and left with your mother to Oguta for conception prayers. You daydreamed about how Mma, your mother, had got you from a place that only existed deep within the sea, where mystical creatures lived. You never foresaw your first heartbreak. If you had, perhaps Mma's prayers would have rewritten the tragedy before you arrived at Taraba state for your service year. Or NneNne, your grandmother, would have in turn taken you to Oguta for immunity prayers. Your ignorance of the impending doom became the reason why your heart dissolved in your stomach when Ikenna—in his arrogance—said, "I don't hate you."

YOUR SOLES TREADED on Taraba's lands with suspicion. The North shared no similarities with the East. The sun yawned with its mouth opened wide and the clouds frowned often. While you longed for a plate of *Oha soup* and *akpu*, the food supervisor in camp instructed the cooks to dice *okra* and stir *tuwo* in the big metallic pots. "That will be lunch for today," she announced. Your stomach cried out soon and met the loo for comfort. The Hausa-speaking kids that were available as errand persons charged you for being Igbo, rather than for the clothes you gave out to be laundered. You began to miss home; your family, friends and your peace of mind.

In the early hours of the morning when your wobbling legs were forced to partake in drills at the parade ground, you watched the fog play hide-and-seek with the mountains until the sun's presence ended the game. You described its topography as cunning, even the weather. Its scenery was as beautiful and enchanting, too. Ikenna called you "beautiful" during the second week in camp. The slyness of the word from his lips! You had loosened your braids the previous night and after struggling to comb your spongy hair, you managed to fit it into a bun-like style. But if you had paid more attention to the compliments that most of your platoon members regaled you with that day, you would have had your doubts about Ikenna's catchy remark.

WHENEVER YOU WERE asked to bare your thoughts on love, you were quick to respond, "It is a touchy subject." At 19, your close friends who heard that rehearsed line felt pity for you. This feeling was communicated through the consoling pats you got on your back during such moments; the ridiculous number of romantic movies you were dragged to see at the cinema; your introduction to dating apps like Hangout and Tinder; and the "Tag a Single Friend" posts that Facebook subjected your eyes to via its notifications. You would have complained if you were given a chance to, but your words were borrowed from your mouth by your friends. You were left speechless.

In your third year at IMSU, your best friend began to date. Kachi did not show her prize to you, she only offered a description of her achievement, "He is loaded. His father is a Consultant at FMC, Owerri." You would have paid less attention to her love life if Kachi had been someone else, but her regular outings, gifts and tears bothered you.

"Why are you still with him, or don't you have sense?" you scolded her in Igbo one of those evenings she returned to your hostel tipsy, crying into your pillow. "I love him!" she said, like a confession. That did not sound right to your

ears, so you stared at Kachi in confusion. Was the plan not to spend his money? Why did she buy his love instead?

BROTHER OSITA, THE Sunday school coordinator, told the teen choristers not to participate in the PYC love feast that was organized by the youths. He gave a warning every February, every year: "The only season for show of love should be during Christmas. What is Valentine's Day that you will come to church to dance, eat, drink and share gifts? All these youth programs encourage boyfriend and girlfriend in the church. It is a sin!"

He had a speech defect. His words, spoken in Igbo, sounded like a joke. You all laughed while you chorused, "Brother Osita, we have heard!" Then you left him and his mumblings in the Children's Hall where choir rehearsals were held on Tuesdays and Fridays. You ministered songs in this holy sanctuary every Sunday with your malicious lips to young children, fellow teenagers, Sunday School teachers and coordinators. You were all devoted hypocrites who raised unholy hands to God. The wars that were fought among the females on Saturdays, during and after Girls' Guide meetings with the Vicar's wife, could have earned you girls spots in Satan's fiery abyss.

Mezie had been your first boyfriend. He was the secretary of the Parish Youth Committee. You were 17 years old, an undergraduate in your second year. He had approached you on your way home that Saturday after the Girls' Guide meeting. It was in February, a week before the love feast.

"Ami, why were those girls fighting?" he said, starting the conversation in Igbo, referencing to the chaos at the Children's Hall some minutes ago. You told him about the quarrel between Somtochukwu and the five witches: Chioma and her four closest friends. Mezie offered to walk you home and on the love feast day, the girls knew that you were dating.

MAMA YARD, THE Vicar's wife, took you girls to Owerri for workshops sometimes. You met teens from other churches under the Anglican Communion, and during short breaks, romantic stories were shared among the new friends. Adaora was the only one who had tales you liked to listen to. She was skinny, small-breasted, tall and light-skinned. From Anambra State. She lived with her parents and three younger brothers at Orji in Owerri. She wore expensive perfumes, which must have been the magic that drew guys to her, or so you thought. You were both 15-year-olds and recent graduates of high school. When you told her about Brother Osita and his seeming dislike for *love-lovers-love activities,* she laughed and laughed and had tears laughing down her cheeks.

"Is he married?"

"No."

"Does he have a girlfriend?"

"I am not even sure," you replied in Igbo, laughing with tears laughing down your cheeks too.

YEARS LATER, WHEN you reminisced about your teenage years, about Adaora—who got married while you were away at NYSC camp in July—about Brother Osita and Mama Yard, you pictured Mama Yard admonishing you girls on love and marriage, two topics that made you all giggle and mention the names of everyone's male crush aloud. It was one of the reasons some girls fought afterwards. You imagined her face smiling up at Adaora, her lips saying, "This is the fulfillment of my greatest wish for my girls: that you marry young and be fruitful." Brother Osita did not find love as early as the 20-year-old Adaora. He got married at forty-one years of age, amidst the joyful cries of expectant well-wishers and once-distraught relations. You remembered what Ijeoma—Mama Yard's favourite person and president of the Girls' Guide—said while the choristers sat to eat after the ministration at the wedding, "Brother Osita did not marry for love."

AT THE NYSC camp, you announced to the pairs of eyes blinking like owls on a sunny day. "Hello, I am Ami, and I love medical doctors!"

The perplexity registered on their faces made you extend your right hand for handshakes. They seemed shocked, too shocked to utter a word. You walked away. That was the first time you had professed love to anyone—not one but the two dazed doctors that Ochanya had told you were super cute, rich and looked single—and it had not gone as planned. You felt awful. Not in the way you had felt when Chikwenye boasted that Obika, your childhood crush, was going to be her *Valentine* during the PYC Valentine's Day program at age sixteen; and you had not cried when the gift he exchanged with her had been the *Balila* perfume you desired. In the end, your heart did your bidding: it crushed the love inside of you. It must have become unruly overnight: you kept seeing them, the doctors, laughing at your confession.

"WHY DID THE tortoise's shell lose its beauty?" Aunty Agnes asked a group of eight-year-olds who were still trying to grasp the morals in the folktale she read out to them. The story was entitled, "How The Tortoise's Shell Became Rough" and was illustrated in the English textbooks they stared at.

"Nobody knows? Have I been wasting my time?" Aunty Agnes said.

"He was greedy," a small voice spoke, saving the class from the whips.

You scolded yourself. Like the tortoise, you had been greedy—for attention, for the smiles of the two doctors, for love while in camp. And it had backfired.

You would not have known that on the second day in camp you blurted out those words you now thought silly. Your profession of undying love to medical doctors, before doctors Ikenna and Emeka, was the beginning of a dramatic twist in your life.

FATE MADE YOU cross paths again with Ikenna. You had collapsed during the afternoon parade and rushed to the camp clinic for medical attention. He attended to you professionally, fighting hard not to touch you in a sensual way. By the time you had a fit in the clinic, the asthma in you letting loose, Ikenna decided that you would be his primary assignment. And then. The rumor soon spread to your platoon members that Ami and Ikenna were dating. You liked Ikenna during the four days you spent in the camp clinic. Even Emeka, his friend, was kind to you, too. So you decided to not be greedy (just stick with Ikenna and love him).

On Friday, during lunch break, you left the clinic to Maami Market to get fried noodles and a bottle of soft drink. Sugar helped to make you hyperactive and confident. You needed to say the words right, unashamed, to Ikenna. When you met him alone at the doctors' resting room, you seized the moment. During the conversation, you digressed. You said, "Ikenna, I love you." His eyes looked indifferent this time. "I don't hate you," he replied. Your heart was exiled to the deepest part of your stomach and remained there. You managed a smile and told him, "No hard feelings."

The Unremembered Story

NONSO ANYANWU

Sorry to disturb you, my guy. Most afternoons, during lunch breaks, when you brag to other workers about being an ex-convict, I ask myself if, really, you had gone through hell as you always claimed, because you would have known that there are stories that need not be remembered. From your numerous stories, you had just been convicted of illegal entry into one European country for the third time and were put in a posh-like cell for some days before being deported back to Nigeria. Listen, my guy, let me tell you. Prison cells in Nigeria are nothing like the ones you've been to; they are hot and smelly with urine and shit and sweat and spits and rotten foods and unwashed skins and mouths and sperm. The three weeks I spent in that condition, when I was charged for murdering a thirteen year old girl, was long enough to keep me quiet for life.

Ah! Why this look on your face, your eyes wide open. Don't be in a hurry to judge me, my friend. One of the things I realised then was that not every prisoner is guilty as charged.

Prison life was upside-down for me. Unreal things happen during the day, and at night, I see real things happen. One of the unreal things was one afternoon our prison door yawned open with two stiff-faced warders calling the full name of our friend from a thick-cover booklet and asking him to step out and follow them. After a few minutes we heard four gunshots from a distance. There was another instance when a prisoner, whom I heard had spent five years in solitary confinement, had gone crazy and started bashing his head continuously against the wall until he ran out of life. Real things were just memories. Nightly images of Alicia teasing me that I looked younger than twenty-seven; that I'm fine-

looking, even though my bald head forces me to shave clean all the time; that I'm not supposed to be very fair like women. Real things were her sweet laughter and those funky sounds she made each time we made love.

Sometimes these memories came and stayed like unwanted guests. Sometimes they were the only sanities we needed to fight against our insanities. These daily and nightly routine leaves a kind of quietness in one that is so absolute. Like the year after I finished my NYSC. Months when I got no feedback from all the firms I had submitted my CV to.

My guy, those where long, quiet, days and nights when almost everything unsettled me. Then I decided to pack my bag and leave every form of familiarity because one does not stay in a place when watching a masquerade. It had to be Abuja because I knew some friends whose relatives had gone and returned to start up very fine buildings in the village. Only my sister saw me when I was leaving. Tell mom that I will be back soon, I told my sister, clutching my Ghana-must-go. Tell her I took the money under her pillow. She stared at me like I was a spirit, couldn't say anything. I had a little cash on me and a friend's address in my pocket. I had met this friend at the NYSC camp, so close we had been that he gave me a card containing an address and a phone number: Just call me with this number whenever you get to Abuja, he had said. But my friend was not where he said he would be when I arrived Abuja one dull November morning, and his number remained unreachable until I angrily threw away the card.

My friend, you look tensed. Ha! Just calm down. Today's Friday, and it's Jumat time. We are done for the day, except for those who are working overtime. I wouldn't have been in this bar with you, all alone, if I haven't chosen to tell you my story. I have watched you most Fridays like this, after every worker had left, drinking two or three or more bottles of beer. On those occasions, I used to ask myself: instead of self-inflicting agonies on your mind, why not occupy it with doing overtime? After all, if you were to be in Europe, you would not only pay

your bills with overtime, but you would live by it. For that reason alone, I still thank God for Nigeria. No place like home.

Hey, you. Yes, you! More drinks, please! Yes, two bottles!

My friend, I suggest you sip gradually because you'll be doing more of that later. And don't sit like someone confessing before a priest, relax yourself. You'll be my paddy after this conversation. Or what do you think? Oh, yes.

Is this the city you were born in? Hmm, then you must be used to noise and stuffy traffic. This is my first time in Lagos; I only came here early this year, after Abuja failed me. Have you ever been to Abuja? OK, but you have to know where the nation's money is being controlled from. Abuja is the only place I know that shows that Nigeria is working. Everyone looked comfortable. The flashy cars and dreamlike houses and carpet grasses and healthy flowers gave me a solid hope that one day, I will live in one of those exotic mansions. Abuja is the centre of the nation. For a few hours, when I arrived, I was at the centre of the centre. Unlike in Port Harcourt, the place of my birth, where I came from, Abuja had no stuffy traffic, no hawkers, no beggars shouting on the street to attract passersby.

Because I couldn't afford to rent a single room apartment in the centre of the centre, I went to one of those small shanty towns at the edge, in a face-me-I-face-you compound populated by settlers of different origins. There, people flatter themselves that they live in Abuja. Sunshine was fierce, but people didn't mind—they hustled with their sweat drenched faces and clothes. I bought a study desk and a standing fan and a portable CD-player and 16-inch TV and two cooking pots and a stove, and plates and spoons. I had a thick rug on the floor. I had a mattress large enough to contain two people. My room was not that full; at a glance, one could see everything.

I applied for a teaching job in a good private secondary school in the centre of the centre. A school owned and controlled by a young beautiful lady whose

office had an air of grandeur that made me feel somewhat timid when I walked in for an interview, who spoke so softly as if she lacked the energy to speak up, whose intimidating stare made me maintain an impression of not being intimidated, whose name was Alicia Ajayi, and who would later become my lover.

HA! MY FRIEND. C'mon, don't suppress your smile. How about some pieces of fried meat to go with the beer? Waiter!

Let me tell you about Ifunanya, another important girl in my life. I was in the compound the morning Aunty Gloria brought Ifunanya from the village. Her beauty became unbearable by the day. I refused to see her as that small girl who called me Brother Rufus—who rushed to grab my briefcase when I returned from work, who I sent to Mallam Aliyu's provision store, who sat on the rugged floor of my room on Saturdays, legs folded, watching *African Magic*—but as a beauty.

How old are you? I asked Ifunanya the day we were watching a comedy show and she was laughing uncontrollably as she always did: leaning on me when I got hold of her shoulders and kissed her ears.

It tickles! She said in laughter.

I'm sorry, I said, my eyes locked into hers. She looked away playfully and said her age was thirteen. I did not believe her because she did not look thirteen; she was too big to be thirteen. I could not believe her age until the day she died in my room.

THE WAY YOU'RE staring at me is really frightening. What's running through your mind? Anyway, I don't blame you because I would carry same startled look if I had just heard what you have heard. Now that the meat has arrived, I hope

you are enjoying yourself. Lagos women can spice up meat and fry them deeply. I'm sure we will want more as the story goes on. So, as I was saying, at my place of work, to other staff, I was this smart-looking teacher who, instead of picking up a good-paying air-conditioned office job, had settled for an 'ordinary' teaching job. I first noticed how greatly Alicia was feared and respected by other staff whose qualifications wouldn't be less than college graduates. There was this quick adjustment whenever Alicia walked into the staff room, and this irritated me. I noticed a calm smile on her face whenever she talked to me. During meetings, she specially asked for my opinions.

Our affair started the day she invited me to have lunch with her. Some evenings after work, she drove me home in her Honda Element. Sometimes I wondered what had attracted Alicia to me. We spent quality time in places meant for lovers, yet she had not said the words, 'I love you.' I was loving her. It was like an unspoken agreement not to say it to each other. I remembered the first time we made love, in my room, after she had dropped me at my house. I invited her to come in. At first, there was this shyness, then later she said she felt safe with me. When she begged me to make her pregnant, I had assumed it out of sexual excitement, but I would soon realize why she had said it.

Yes, of course, she invited me to her house. That was one week later. She said she wanted me to meet her parents.

Well, she lived in the centre of the centre, an area full of exotic houses alike, standing magnificently tall. A tree-lined street where young, attractive, girls walked in miniskirts with shopping bags in their hands. Alicia's house was painted orange and ash. Unlike other houses, there was no gateman. She said I should ring her when I reached the gate with the bold inscription: NO.15. Someone opened the gate, a lady with the polite face of housekeepers, and led me into the house. The house was like one of those big houses they used in movies. Alicia told me that it was only she, her younger brother, her parents and the

housekeeper who lived there. The lady led me upstairs, passing two parlours and several rooms.

Alicia welcomed me with a pleasant smile that would have become a hug if I had shown interest. She was wearing a light purple gown that stopped just above her knees. She looked so delicate, like someone who was born never to suffer. She led me into her apartment. Her enlarged picture and a fine large painting of Madonna and child were the only hangings on the wall of her parlour. Brown leather sofas in a semicircle, a Plasma screen on the wall, a bookshelf in a corner, crammed with books and a closed Apple laptop. She went in and came out with a bottle of wine and two glasses; we clicked our glasses, toasted for long life. She showed me into her room, a very spacious room. A study desk with an *hp* laptop and a portable printer by the side, and another shelf full of books. We talked about her life. She said she would like to move out of her parent's house, to stay on her own in a small flat, a place far from her parents who wouldn't stop disturbing her with issues of bringing home the right man. I'm just twenty-four, she said, sounding like someone who had stayed a long time with this worry. There was another quietness that made us look deep into each other's eyes for a moment, that made me realise that she had curious eyes. I saw my reflection in their brightness. There was also this feeling that possessed me, a feeling I cannot explain. I drew closer and closer to her, and she adjusted for a soft kiss on my lips. I ran my hands over the smoothness of her hands up to her neck. She was running temperature. Then I removed my hands and stopped kissing. I looked away. She stood up, adjusted her clothes and said her parents were waiting to see me downstairs.

My guy, seeing her parents alone, the elegance in their casual look, the way they spoke softly, gave me a painful impression that the difference between the rich and the poor was absolutely unbearable. Alicia resembled her mother: light skin and long hair and legs. I was served goat meat pepper-soup and agidi, and

we ate in silence until her father asked how I was coping with my job. I responded that I was managing fine. You know, he started, there's this problem with fresh graduates wanting high-paying jobs instead of managing on the ones that come their way. I suddenly felt embarrassed, but I still maintained my calm smile when I responded, I can assure you, Sir, things have not been that bad trying to manage whatever I earn for the month. He cleared his throat and said, I was surprised when Alicia told me you have worked for her for close to three years now, and you are Igbo. You Igbos are full of pride, but you seem different. Yes Dad, Rufus is different; he's from a humble background, Alicia said. Meanwhile, my guy, I was somewhat confused, not knowing what to say. The father turned to the daughter and said, My dear, an average Igbo man is humble when he has a pursuit. I looked at Alicia's mother, she was deeply concentrating on her meal, and then I turned to her father and said, I truly love your daughter. There was a sudden silence that made me doubt the sincerity of what I had just said. And no one said anything again until we finished eating. Her father later invited me to the tennis court, but I declined.

Why did I declined? I wasn't much into tennis. Also, I was silently angry with him. Alicia walked me to the gate. I'm sorry for that, she said, Dad can be silly at times. It's okay, I said, maybe he's talking based on his personal experience with a few Igbos. Alicia did not say anything. Take care of yourself, I said and left. She was still standing by the gate, staring at me blankly when I turned to see if she had entered the compound.

That's rich people for you. As I sat in the back of the taxi, I couldn't help but think that her father had behaved that way because I had not mentioned any important person as my relative. Perhaps he was unimpressed with his daughter for bringing home a nobody for lunch, maybe I was not what they expected.

That night, I saw Alicia in my dream; we were swimming in a pool, laughing loudly, then suddenly I began to drown, I couldn't call out for help, I was just

staring at Alicia who was laughing at me from a corner. I woke up with a force, and there was a knock on the door. It was Ifunanya. She was standing by the door, her left hand holding the curtain. Good morning, Brother Rufus, she greeted, smiling, No one saw you yesterday. Yes, I was busy at the office, I said. I asked her to come in. No, she said, I'm washing plates. I just came to greet you, see you later. She smiled away. That smile extended to my face. I had started loving Ifunanya since I noticed her shining beauty.

WE HAD BEEN together one Saturday evening, Ifunanya and I, watching films, when a knock came at the door. Alicia walked in before any response, with a straight face, ignoring Ifunanya's greeting. Rufus, who's this girl? She almost shouted. Ifunanya quickly stood up and ran out of the house. You shouldn't have been that rude, I said to Alicia, she's my next door neighbour; she comes to kill time with the TV. Alicia raised her eyebrow, held me and kissed my lips. I did not respond. Then she said, I'm a jealous lover. My love for you can make me do crazy things. Later during lovemaking, she brought the issue of making her pregnant; she said she meant it. She said I should bring wine to her father. She said all sort of things about our future. But I told her that I needed some time to think.

I didn't tell you that there was this particular day, three months after my first visit to Alicia's house, she had collapse in her office one afternoon and was rushed to a clinic not too far from the school. I had stayed with her all day, at her home, after she was discharged. The next day, I was at Alicia's, knocking at the gate for more than one hour until her father opened. I told him that Alicia's phone was switched off. He stood for a moment as if to inspect me before letting me in. Come in, he said. Come with me. He led me to his study, an empty room, save a portrait of himself, standing on a portable fridge. Sit down, he gestured towards the leather sofa. I really appreciate your closeness with my daughter, he said, but

I have a little worry in me. He opened the fridge and brought out a wine and two glasses. He filled the glasses. Still holding the glass he had handed me, I asked, What might that be sir? He sighed. Has Alicia told you everything about her? That she has terminal illness? That she might not live above twenty-eight or thirty? I felt a terrible shock in me; I wanted to shout at him to SHUT UP. But I only stared at him numbly. Then he finally said in a low stern voice, She's sick, and you know, I won't take things lightly with anyone who hurts my daughter.

YOUR DRINK IS getting hot, my friend. I noticed you haven't been drinking. Beer intoxicates more when served hot. Let that nice guy bring us more drinks and fried meat. Why? You have reached your limit? Oh, I see. You were asking why I didn't marry Alicia since I told her father I love her. Well, I thought marrying her would be caging myself for eternity and living under the orders of her powerful father. I must confess—with Alicia, life became so easy. My greater happiness came when she increased my salary by four hundred percent. I sent money to my mother and sister, for the first time. Weeks later I went to visit them. My mother hugged me tightly, her eyes heavy with tears. She looked well, but frail. She said she wished my dad was alive to see what his son had become. My sister looked more mature; she said she would soon get married. They were happy to see me. Mother prepared a delicious stew which we ate with rice that evening. They asked how I coped in Abuja, with the differences from Port Harcourt. I told them that I stayed in a small populated town where things were so cheap. I stayed with them for two days and when I was leaving, mother was crying. She always hated when I left; that's partly why I sneaked out of the house when I left them before. She was still shedding tears when I waved goodbye at the airport lounge. That was the last time I saw my mother and sister. But I hope to see them this December.

THROUGH THE VERSIONS of my story which had spread virulently and made headlines, I'm sure my mother and sister must have heard that I would end up being be killed by hanging. I wondered why they didn't come to see me in prison. Journalists rushed me whenever I went to court, with same question: Why did you kill that small girl? I wished I had the answer to that question.

It's so unreal to believe that Ifunanya is no more. The same questions still run through my thoughts: What was the cause of her death? A strange voodoo from her village? Or was it Alicia who had first described herself as being a jealous lover? Could it be that that meat-pie was poisoned? But I had watched Alicia, from our table, as she walked to the stall to buy it. Was it only that meat-pie that was poisoned? There was no record of stomach aches from other customers that day. I still ask myself these same questions.

Ifunanya's death was so deceptive. I thought it was just a stomach ache. If I had known, I would have rushed her to the hospital, at least saved her from dying before her time, instead of the *sorry* I kept saying when she coughed out blood this way and that way, when she fell, wringing, her eyes rolling and the balls out as if threatening to pop out from their sockets.

I was soaked with sweat, my legs were shaky. I felt light when her legs finally straightened, when she sighed and became still.

Neighbours gathered, murmuring and hissing: How could this beautiful girl go just like that? Aunty Gloria cried and cursed me, swearing never to let me go free. I was saying something, but my words were stutter.

A girl ate the meat-pie you gave her and suddenly died, and you're here claiming innocence? The policeman yelled at me in the torture room. He then advised me to forget about this case, that the autopsy result said she died of food poison.

YOU MEAN ALICIA? The last time I saw her was before I was transferred from the police cell to prison, shortly before the court case began. She was in a black gown that touched her flat slippers. She looked depressed, like someone who was mourning. Her eyes were misty when she said she had a miscarriage for her three month old pregnancy. The news brought tears to my eyes. I know you didn't kill that girl, she cried softly. How did you know? I asked. But she didn't answer. I stood up and walked away, knowing that my death day was at hand.

The hearing started and was going on, revealing more reasons why I must face the death penalty. A day to the final judgment, the day I was to be condemned, the prison door yawned open with two warders holding a hardcover notebook and calling my full name to come out and follow them. At the reception, aunty Gloria's eyes were damp. You are free to go, she said, I forgive you. For everything, I forgive you. I felt tears in my eyes. I thought it was unreal because it was daytime, because the night that came before that day, I saw Ifunanya standing in front of me with extended arms.

If I left Abuja immediately? Yes, I signed an undertaking never to be seen anywhere close to aunty Gloria. I left that day with lost hopes. I left Abuja just the way I came, with my Ghana Must Go bag clutched at my side.

My friend, as you can see. Overtime workers have closed; see them going home with their tired bones. The bar is cleaning up. It's been a great time with you, my guy. I wish you a nice weekend. I hope my story hasn't frightened you in any way? We are now friends, I believe. Good! Exchanging phone numbers won't be a bad way of parting. Much respect to you too, my guy, it was your story that impelled me to tell you mine, and to remind you that there are some stories that need not be remembered.

The Anatomy of My Existence

IFEANYICHUKWU PETER EZE

1.

I like Papa, the thin strip of hair that adorns his upper lip, his eyes that stare like they are boring holes into something, his sweat-bathed body, the eagerness of his hands and feet, his veins standing in defiance and endurance, the grunt of his tiredness, his silent obedience in the thicket of rebukes, sneer, and laughter. I want him. I want to be his flesh.

And Mama, I cherish her unassuming face, and her hair standing in thin stalks of blacks. She says no and walks away. I want her to be where she can have her voice. Clear. I want her voice. I want her skin.

2.

OF MY PARENTS' oneness I become an embryo, then a foetus dwelling in a pear-shaped space inside Mama. The space expands. I grow, become bigger. I kick when I am happy. Mama is happy. Papa listens, and traces me with his hands. I don't know what he is talking about when he says, It's going to be a boy. Their voices are echoes spinning in my space. I am getting bigger. The space is shrinking. I want more space.

My stay ends in a protest—a rebellious cry, not against the hot Northern sunshine, but this sojourn of nine months. A joyous outpour of gratitude and acceptance greets me. But louder, I cry until I begin to feel comfortable again, pampered with the elixir from Mama's breast, and snuggled in her arms.

3.

THEN I AM the first child. Where does a baby come from? Mama's belly grows, a sibling comes after nine months, and the belly lessens. We celebrate. Another

comes, and another. Mama cries when her belly grows and lessens, and no sibling comes. We don't celebrate. I will have them, five siblings.

I am five, six or seven, or thereabout, I like fine things, fine girls too. My primary school class has them, fair and dark. Slim and plump. I want them. In my reverie, I marry them all. We live in a big house, eat, play, laugh, kiss and fondle on flat chests.

Back from school, I fling my bag under the twelve-inch spring bed, and run off, scampering and basking under the blazing eyes of the sky, joining a play of the round leather, making an interception, running past two, sliding the round thing through the legs of another, my left foot positioning the rolling object to my right so that it swings effortlessly. Bello's dive is fruitless. I am punching the air as they do on screen, for having put two past him. But I don't hear Mama's until my right ear strains from the pull, and my body drags behind her.

The cloths are still on the line, and the dry okra needs to be pounded, Mama's voice laments, confronting me in Igbo. I rattle some Hausa. Mama pounds her knuckle on my head. My face is a grin of pain, and I swallow the scream that is about to come out. "If I hear kpim," Mama says, her words are thunders. I swallow it hard. "You can't speak Igbo anymore, ehh*?"* We enter our house. I don't look at Papa so that his stare doesn't add another hole in me. He will ask me to write an essay, and answer comprehension questions. And there are mathematical exercises which he has pasted on the wall for me by the door, for me to see each time I walk in or out. I must see them even if I don't want to.

At school, my class teacher writes "Ibo." She says the Igbo are one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The other two are Hausa and Yoruba. The Igbo are the third largest. They occupy the eastern part of the country. She also says there are those called Wawa among the "Ibos." My family belongs to that classification. So when I miss my sums, she calls me a Wawa Ibo. The way she says it tells me she means counterfeit Igbo. But Mama says it is "Igbo." We are

Igbos. She emphasises the "gb." I don't tell her about my teacher, about Wawa Ibo or Wawa Igbo.

Wawa Ibo. Wawa Igbo. It rings in my head. I don't want to be asked if I'm Igbo or Ibo. I don't want to be in the position to say I am from Enugu, which still breeds the question, "From where in Enugu State?" Nsukka. No. I don't want. Kabiru is comfortable not to ask. We don't question whether to converse in Hausa or not.

We are playing Whots. It's his turn. He slams two cards. His eyes are holding mine. Last card, he says. I blink. I check the cards. The one on top is a triangle. The one below is a square. Their numbers are three and four. His lips spread wide without parting. When they do, slices of cackles burst out. I caught you, I say, calling him, Wawa Kawai. Macuci. Fool. Cheat.

His picks at his beardless chin as if to weed off hairs that have refused to grow. His eyes sparkle, grazing the area between my legs, through the tear in my shorts.

"What?" I snap at him, closing my legs.

"Nothing. When it is erect, do you feel like pissing?" He says, dragging his body closer to mine, his eyes smiling in my face.

"Maybe. But I don't know."

His hand glides down my groin. "Let's try. When you feel anything, you can piss into my nyash."

I slap his hands away and shoot him a stare.

"I heard my elder brother and his friend talk about that," he says. "They even talk about how to play between the legs of a girl, using your tongue or your finger."

4.

I CAN ONLY pick something from the shelf or hang clothes on the line by standing on my toes. Kabiru enjoys laughing at me. He is my age mate but he can see the centre of my head. But that is not the issue. Papa is worried that I am thin

and short. And Tina, our neighbour's daughter, no longer bathes herself in the open, in our big compound. It's three times a day, and she now wears colourful dresses too.

"But her breasts are not like the ones I see on my brother's magazines," Kabiru is saying.

"So you peep on her?"

"No. I was coming out from the toilet the other day. She was in the bathroom, and the door was open."

5.

THEN I AM names: Gajere—Short. Tsoho—Old. Wawa Ibo. But I am aware of my Self or beginning to. My nakedness is a ceremony I attend to, under the watch of my eyes. Alone. My voice is growing deep and deeper, tufts of hair on my body sprout here and there, except my face, no beards like Papa's. Plain.

A female presence is a contour of feelings about me, engulfing me in clouds of sensations. The first catch in sight is an accident. Tina must not catch me looking at her "behind" when the lines of her panties glare at me from under her dress, or admiring her cleavage or where it leads to when she doubles over a washbowl of clothes under a lather of white by the tap. No. I must not allow it the second time. Else she will swallow me with her eyes. Attractive. Sexy. I say with the mouth of my mind, it glides down my body where it bobs between my legs but blank on my straight face.

That's a sin. We chant from our catechism booklet, caressed by the evening breeze, in the shades of trees. Our voices rise and build tents of echoes that meet the vertical nods of Father Mark, the parish priest. Sin is to offend my God in thoughts, words, deeds and omission. Who is God? God is our loving father, the maker of heaven and earth. Can we see God? No, for God is a spirit. Why did God make you? God made me to know him, to love him, to serve him in this world, and to be happy with him forever.

6.

FOURTEEN IS A siren of arousals in me. I muffle them under the rug of discipline. It crawls out at night like Nicodemus when my resistance sleeps, in the tunnel of my boredom, in the pit of my loneliness to fill the spaces of emptiness. No. No way. I should not have such feeling. I must have a pure heart. But I'm in need of a touch. Just a touch. I want to hold a hand and squeeze, lean my head on some shoulder, give myself away to the warmth of a hug. I want to speak and be listened to. No, I must not. I shield myself with forced indifference. That way, I will not fall into the trap of desire. Temptation.

I don't speak about it. Not even to Mama. What will I tell her? That my thing feels like getting into a swamp? Or that I am attracted to Tina? Or what? That I feel feelings? And Papa? No. He must not hear. It's unspeakable.

In my head, a gaggle of laughter and jeer meet to conspire against me. Shut up, I say. My voice shouts in my head. It bangs. I am dizzy, blank. I'm speaking to Mama but she is not listening because my voice is hiding inside me. I am still speaking when Mama's voice tugs at me to wakefulness, and I rush to the kitchen to get the plates washed, aware of Mama's eyes behind me.

When Papa and Mama were like me, how did they do it? No. Papa didn't feel this way. He was busy fending for his Mama. That is how it should be. He is a strong man. Strong men are masters of such things. So I am trying to be a master like Papa. That's why I am a boy. Papa's boy. Have I forgotten? And I am happy when they say I take after him – eyes, broad nose, and lips. And Mama? She must have kept herself till marriage took her virginity.

At the dinner table, my eyes are dancing on Papa's profile. They rest on his pencil moustache. His mouth opens and collects a lump of eba from his hand, and his throat makes space for the slide. I want to say something to Papa. My mouth opens, and the word runs away like it is running away from the ball of eba sloping down my own throat, and hiding somewhere where it whines wordlessly.

What do I want to tell Papa? Table manners, Don't speak at the table, my teacher says.

But Papa and Mama, I don't hear them talk these things, even when they do their early morning or late night talk which comes off like whisperings garnished with hearty chuckles. Their voices trail my waking. I am trundling on the tide of expectation. He is going to be a priest, Papa is saying, sitting cross-legged in his rocking chair. A priest? Mama retorts. Yes, don't you see*?* says Papa. I don't see anything. Let's leave it to God to decide, Mama says.

I let myself into Papa's vision as I soap myself in the bathroom. I am Papa's boy, after all, a priest resplendent in immaculate robe, celebrating a high mass, singing the Eucharist, spreading my hands to my sides like wings spraying effusive grace and blessings in the fashion of Father Mark.

You'll make a good priest, Kabiru says, splashing water from the bucket between us. What will you use that thing between your legs for? Maybe that's why it's slightly bent like the knife of mai suya. Mine is straight like the ones in my brother's magazine.

At night, in bed, I straighten the fellow between my legs and lie on my belly. In the morning it wears back to its curve.

7.

IN THE PARLOUR, a soap opera is running on the TV. A man and woman are talking. They are holding hands. Their bodies are inching, their faces close. Papa shifts in his chair. It squeaks. He scratches his thigh. Mama looks his way. Me, I throw my glance to the ground. The persons on screen are still talking, now in whispers. There is a pause, then an advert. Mama sends me to get her a glass of water.

Curiosity marries me to the invite, to watch a video or not, on my mobile. Download. I watch. A man's face is covered like a secret. A woman is bare like an access free football field, moaning and yearning for more of the man's fill

between her legs. Images gyrate in my head, fleeting like quick instances of memory. I'm burning restlessly. Faces and bodies steam in me. We are naked and thrusting into space, with each pleasure a face in the measure of our friendship. The feeling dies like it never existed. The faces and bodies fade. I am calm. I breathe normal. It is a dream, and I wake up.

8.

LAST YEAR IN college is a weight sitting on my groin. Final exam is approaching like a monster in the horizon. Maths class is a podium for doom's prophecy. On the threshold of desire is a cocoon of reluctance: If you want to leave singlehood, it has to be for someone special. Sex, yes, but not just with anybody. After sex then what? My mind is a river of doubts. Fear is swimming in it. Rejection catches and feeds on it.

I like a girl. No, not Tina. I don't see much of her these days. Even when I do, she is either leaving or coming. She leaves in the evening and comes back in the morning. Her tastes come in Mercedes, BMWs, Jeeps, and Land Cruisers. Her mother doesn't have to care since her daughter's goings and comings bring food.

The girls I like until college runs away in memory's company. Didi's almond eyes glitter even when she is not laughing in our boring Maths class, her hair sits on her head like a black hood, she prattles without seize, drives the class on laughing sprees as though to defer the fear of the coming final exam, and she always has the better result. Sada's chiselled slimness is fidgety in her white shirt and blue skirt that seem to tire her, and her high-heeled sandals give her the catwalk swag. Kate's lips rarely part when she smiles—and she smiles only in literature class. Always, she is reading romance novels in the guise of attending to her notebooks. And she wonders what I need a romance novel for.

9.

IN THE FAÇADE of rest, the garbage room at work pulses with our chat. Mara is my colleague at work. I see her eyes leap in their sockets. And I feel myself bask in the smoothness of her words. Her aching joints invite me to massage them. Me? Yes, you. My hands, tentative at first, meet no resistance, nibble around her, press and drill their fingers into her flesh, freeing them of stiffness. I am awed by the softness of her body, warm, and smooth like water. Her relief is a spark on her face and a hardness rearing its head down there.

Our hands decide to play. Hers fidget with my belt. I don't see my hands travel under her clothes to find what's there, or feel my lips rest on the tiny bulge of flesh in the centre of her belly until a groan of pleasure escapes her. We stop. We should not go further. What are we doing? Our eyes catch our stare hiding our shame behind our blinks as though to acknowledge a heavy knocking on the door.

But, my heart is thumping within the walls of my chest. Papa's unwavering eyes are holding me still like when I have not put a comma in the right place, or a full stop to end a sentence, or when I'm yet to find the X in an equation. Mama's voice is a silent rebuke. You know your siblings are looking up to you?

Mouths curve in mock surprises when they salute me with competing wonderment.

You are a virgin?

Not even a first kiss?

No girlfriend?

No?

How come about that?

Life is short.

What are you waiting for?

Enjoy it.

Come on.

Is Papa's silence keeping me? Where is Mama's voice? I want her voice, the one that speaks out with boldness, the one that ended her first marriage. I don't want to keep speaking and banging myself in my head. I want to be listened to. I mean, I want to say I am horny, and say it loud. I want to say "fuck." I want to say it without having a noose of guilt around my mind. I don't want it to hang on the tip of my mouth, heavy like some load of shame, and then clogged down in my throat like some rot.

10.

KATE'S HANDS FIT into mine as if they are purposely created for them. She squeezes. I squeeze. We swing the entwined fold between us as we walk. Playfully. Leaves crack under our feet. We stop under a mango tree. Her eyes hold mine. Between our faces, our breaths collide. My heart shreds into bits of thumping.

"Kate, I love you," my mouth stutters.

"I love you too, Chris," she says. "But you kept me waiting."

We laugh.

The evening breeze seeps through the trees and fans our bodies. Warm and naked. Entwined in boundless lock. Leaves cackle underneath, drenched with our pleasure. The ones above, canopies of lush green, descend to carpet the ground. For us. Happily. Ripe mangoes dance. Birds chirp across, and the fading light of the sinking sun winks at us through the spaces in the trees. Delight.

I awake, blinking at the sight on the threshold. How long has Mama been here? She walks over and sits on the bed with me.

11.

AWAY FROM TWENTIES, into the early years of another decade, taller than most who have called me Gajere, the Wawa thing bothers me. Didi adorns her Facebook page with photos of a boy and a girl. There is another of a man smiling too. On her wall, sailing on sea of friends, Sada paints the exploits of her fashion

outfit. Kate is championing a campaign of building libraries in communities. Mara displays her ring of being taken. I'm still susceptible to the visitations of this other feeling, but taking pride in its presence, leaving myself bare to it. Shouldn't I move on with my life?

Until Yesterday

GIDEON CHUKWUEMEKA OGBONNA

You lived in Enugu with Agatha in an old house with brown peeling paints and roof browned by time, beside Okpara Square pine forest. The house was a place of antiques: your rusty Dane gun, leaking roof, grenades, a cracked sculpture of *Ogbunigwe*, the typewriter in your room. Until yesterday, you heard same sounds every night. Quaking sounds of shelling and grenades and aircrafts. They lurked within you, these sounds. Every night, it seemed like they barged through the rustle of leaves, past the louvres of your windows, and into your ears. You wondered if Agatha heard them too.

Until yesterday, you saw images of Yemi on some nights. He always wore a white T-shirt sullied with blood, torn in many places. You had never told Agatha about Yemi even though both of you shared stories every other day. Stories before the war. Stories after the war. Stories that sounded the same to you—about men and women busying themselves as traders or teachers or clerks in the industrial cities of Lagos or Owerri or Kano, then suddenly fleeing to anywhere there was rumour of safety, cramping all of their lives in buses and car boots. But you never talked about Yemi. His name was heavy on your tongue. Not until yesterday.

Agatha noticed the change in you yesterday. You barely spoke to her, you were lost in thoughts, your food grew cold, you said nothing to her; told her you were fine. Yesterday, you decided you would tell Agatha about Yemi from the strident pitter-patter of your typewriter where you would stamp memories on white pages.

The books in the man's hands thudded to the ground with an echo that pierced the silence of the state library just as I was entering the library that Saturday. I helped him gather the books, not out of kindness per se, but because I was thought that I'd seen a ferocious reader like myself. A tall man with skin the colour of chestnut and vertical tribal marks tattooed on his face. He told me his name was Yemi—a name I considered too bland, too common; not exotic like my Okide.

He was a teacher like me in one of the secondary schools in Kaduna, but while he taught Mathematics, I read books like An African Night's Entertainment *to students, teaching them concepts I barely understood, concepts like love and vengeance, willing them to unlock the stories in their bodies, as I sometimes did with mine when I wrote poems which ended up as crumpled balls of paper in my candlelit room surrounded by the towering shadows of books.*

BEFORE YESTERDAY, YOUR day usually started by 5.30am. You woke to Agatha's clapping, her Igbo songs serenading her God with her singsong voice. You always wondered why she gave herself to prayers, rendering devotion to an unknown God. You expected her to know better, to do better. There she was, a victim of a war constructed by white men, yet every morning she celebrated their God. For you, it was double defeat—losing her kin, losing her God.

You would walk out of the room—a red wooly cap on your head and a gourd of palm wine in your hand—and step outside into the cold, dewy earth of Enugu. You would head to the pine forest and nestle on a tree trunk. You would offer libations sitting on the carpet of brown grass which covered the entirety of the forest. You believed the assemblage of trees towering straight to the skies like ladders to heaven carried your prayers to Chukwu Okike.

But today, you didn't go to the forest, you prayed with Agatha. She looked at you with bewilderment and smiled. She held your hands and thanked the God who had delivered you from *darkness*. You wished for a while that her God actually delivered you from this *darkness* she talked about. Instead you had been plunged, since yesterday, into a well where you felt many things at the same time—peace, fear, happiness, melancholy.

Agatha ended the prayers at the time dawn stretched itself fully into the brightness of morning, spilling life once again into the city. You dusted your knees and lumbered to your room where you sat before your typewriter and stared into space.

When Yemi started visiting my house often, I questioned many things. I questioned the sparkles like a thousand tiny stars in his eyes anytime he looked at me, his unwillingness to leave even when the night grew old with deep darkness, the warmth I felt—like a melting of my innards—anytime he visited.

The answer I sought came one evening when we went to a clubhouse to unwind and detoxify our bodies with disco music. The music possessed me with a headiness, and I stamped my feet to its rhythm, the rotating lights of the clubhouse hitting my eyes. I no longer saw Yemi. I thought he was dancing somewhere, drenching his throat with beer. But when a lady danced towards me and wriggled her butt on my groin, when I lost myself in the consequent reverie and we, instinctively, leaned for a kiss, I saw Yemi materialize out of the alternating darkness and pulled the lady away from me. Shafts of light hit Yemi and the packets of rage on his face flashed back and forth before my eyes. He dragged me outside the clubhouse where the moon hung with a grey blur.

"What's wrong, Yemi?" I asked.

He stood before me and planted his lips on mine. His tongue, salty like tears, was buttery with desire. I enjoyed the mix, the desire oozing from his body. And mine. I enjoyed this feeling of being wanted, being needed. Then he pulled back, sniffing.

"Are you too blind to see, Okide?" he asked, turned back and walked into the darkness.

YOU MET AGATHA at the time you were trying to fit your life into normalcy again after the war. She was an administrator in a secondary school in Enugu where you sought for a job. That morning, distracted by the groans of the ceiling fan, you stood in her office packed with files that held dusts. She fastened her gaze on you, her pear-shaped eyes shaded with eye pencil, as she listened to you.

"I taught literature before the war," you said.

"Can you teach it now?" she asked.

"Of course."

"You know," she began, "literature then and literature now aren't the same. Now we have stories that try to mirror the war. Would you teach these stories without emotions seeing that you were part of *the* war? I see this dullness in your eyes, a sadness I have seen before. Will teaching this subject be safe for you, Mr. Okide?"

You didn't answer. You got up to leave, and she said, "you will teach the SS2 classes English and the SS3 classes Literature."

You nodded and left.

Agatha had an interest in your classes. She frequently leaned by the window of your class, watching you with a tenderness that made your leg wobbly, that made you stammer before your students. And when you received a perfumed note from a student with the words, *Will you go out with me tonight? Love, Agatha*, you knew she wasn't only interested in your teaching.

You went with her that night to a restaurant that entertained customers with pepper soup and highlife music. Agatha had this carefreeness to her that surprised you, and that you found attractive. It was in the way she drank her beer from the bottle, in the way she shook her head to the music, in the way she ate meat with her fingers.

"I thought only men drink beer," you said.

"Aren't you a man, so what's with the Fanta?" she said between mouthfuls.

"Choice. Preference."

"So you know."

"Yes, I do. But it is rare seeing a woman embrace all of her choices, her desires."

"Maybe."

"Is that why you came to me, instead of the other way round?"

"Are you trying to shame me or make me apologetic?"

"I'm sorry if you feel that way. I'm only thrilled by your personality."

"Well, I won't be apologetic or ashamed. Would you be ashamed picking gold from the dirt?"

"Hmmm . . . Are you saying I am gold? Gold from dirt?"

"I am saying you are an embittered sweet thing. Let me in."

And you tried. You tried to open up all of yourself to her. You tried for years especially when you married her. And you thought you succeeded. Not until yesterday when you saw the need to sit before your typewriter.

After the night at the clubhouse, Yemi drove to my house before the break of dawn.

"You didn't sleep?" I asked.

"I didn't. I couldn't," he said, then added, "I am sorry for last night."

I was silent because I didn't know what he was apologizing for; whether for pulling me roughly out of the clubhouse or for the kiss. I didn't tell him that I couldn't sleep too. I didn't tell him that the events of the previous night conflated confusion and desires in my heart. How could I want something I didn't understand?

"Can we go for a walk?" he asked.

Two of us walked in silence through a bush path leading to Kaduna River, with the grasses sprinkling on our feet dews they had collected during the night. By the time we arrived at the river, the sun was ascending slowly from the horizon.

"This is what you do to me," he said, pointing to the river smeared with the sun's orange hue.

"What?"

"You paint my life with colours like the rainbow, Okide."

I felt blood rise to my cheeks. "I don't understand what I feel, but I know you do something to me too. The feeling is alien."

"You've never loved a man before?"

"I have never loved before. I have never thought to accommodate the feeling."

"Would you want to now?"

I nodded like a new bride.

"With me?" Yemi smiled.

I kissed him.

But that was before the pogroms of 1966; before that Friday evening when both of us shopped at the market and heard the rumbles of many feet seeking safety; before the air was filled with smoke and shouts and blood and machetes grating the ground, proclaiming their appetite for death; before the Igbos were betrayed by their intonation and hence slaughtered; before Yemi never left my hand, determined to keep me safe; before he hid me in his car boot and luckily escaped the young Hausa men that blocked the streets with the little Hausa he mustered; before he took me to the bus park that night and gave me a neckpiece and a kiss for keepsakes; before I left Kaduna to Enugu and never saw Yemi again.

ONE DAY, A student asked you, "Sir, if people were so troubled by the war especially in Biafra, how come there wasn't a birth gap between 1968 and 1970?"

You didn't have an answer for the student, but you understood the logic of the question. All emotion and energy in the time of war should have been channeled into safety and survival, however, you didn't think that war had the *total* ability to overpower love or sex. It was an inexplicable thing.

It was like the story Agatha told you. Two Nigerian bomber planes had flown into her village. She and Ugo, her boyfriend ran into the bunker where they felt the earth above them tremble as explosions uprooted trees and shattered glasses. Soon the planes weren't heard, but a piercing wail followed. Someone had died. In the bunker, she had cried too even though she didn't know who had died. She and Ugo had been too afraid to climb out to check. That night, she clutched unto Ugo for safety and warmth, then found his lips with hers. When his member found his way into her, it was as if they both found refuge in their bodies; exfoliating all their fears with pleasure. That night she felt something

planted in her. Something that found its way out of her in huge clumps of blood the evening Ugo died, a shrapnel lodging in his heart.

That was what you never understood—this power of desire. You never understood this power even as you fought side by side with soldiers who didn't waste the unenviable opportunity to rape women; ripping their dignity with thrusts of anger, vengeance and lust. That was why you never berated the Nigerian troops for fighting unfairly—bombing markets, raping pregnant women, ripping foetuses off wombs—because, for you, Biafran soldiers were neither better nor empathetic belligerents. What they lacked was power, privilege.

And power in any form left one with only *one* choice; a unilateral thought. It was the power of what you felt yesterday that made you fasten a paper to your typewriter and continued writing.

I was part of the Abagana ambush. One of the major successes recorded by the Biafran troops. Major Uchendu had told me and six hundred and ninety-nine other soldiers to lie in ambush in a forest near Abagana. While we crouched under the grasses, our nostrils filled with the smell of ordure, I didn't know if the heat that itched beneath my clothes was from the scalding sun or from being tensed. But we all, disguised as grasses, waited in silence for the federal troops. Soon we heard the vehicles and armoured cars approaching, their presence being announced with dust and exhaust smoke.

Then the air was rent with explosions as our Ogbunigwe missiles found their way to a tanker truck carrying gasoline. We all stared at the sight of victory—a domino effect of fire and agony. Many of the Nigerian soldiers were not spared. And those who escaped the fire were stunned like zombies, and wandered into neighbouring villages where villagers caught and hacked them into many gory pieces.

After this victory that took place within one and half hours, we went from dead soldier to dead soldier, taking their rifles, searching their pockets for ammunitions. Some of the soldiers were still breathing, their breaths soft as whispers. One of such soldiers had the face of Yemi, but I couldn't confirm; wasn't bold enough to. I couldn't be seen frolicking with the enemy.

BEFORE YOU GOT married**,** Agatha always told you that your eyes reminded her of Ugo.

"I don't know if it was the war, but his eyes were always dull and distant as if he wanted something beyond his reach, as if he saw something I didn't see," she said, trying to steady her voice. "That was why when I saw you that day in my office, I felt my Ugo was back. And I decided to wring the sadness out of his eyes. Something I failed to do before."

And she worked at it but never understood why although you fed fat on her delicacies, you only replied her love notes—her words painting you in picturesque metaphors—which she left in your lesson notes with the words, *Thank you for loving me, A.* She never understood why your member, on some nights, always found its way out of the warmness of her passion like a failed transplant; she never understood why you still asked her to marry you. But you understood why she accepted. Love for her was taking, keeping, responsibility—*doing* anything for what she *wanted.*

YOU ATTENDED A banquet organized in honour of war veterans. The governor had said it was a meeting to bury spite and stereotypes. You were impressed with your memory when you still recognized veterans you fought alongside with, even with faces crumpled by time and their head covered with white like mildew. There was Udobia from Uyo who walked with a limp; Bassey from Calabar who was blinded in one eye by a bullet; Akuabia from Agbor who still spoke pidgin in that inflected tone peculiar to southerners; Chibundu from Onitsha who had hairs sprouting from the base of his fingers; Nweze from Nsukka who used a wheelchair; Joe from Owerri that had a lithe body with veins sticking like wires from his fair, hairy arms. They were all gathered to mulch their histories with jokes and jibes and food and wine. The state and federal leaders still said that there was none vanquished. That you were all victors; worthy actors

and custodians of history. These statements throbbed your ears and soured your tongue with bile. Soon names were called for plaques and monetary gifts. Each of you were called.

When you heard your name, you remained on your seat for a while, then stood up and walked out of the hall, past the army of security at the door, past the journalists waiting for an interview, past the hypocrisy of the government who held a reconciliatory banquet for war veterans who didn't receive their pensions. You walked into the streets of Enugu, shielding your eyes from the sun as you waited for a bus. That was when you heard your name from an unmistakable voice.

Although age had sculpted wrinkles into his face, you could still make out Yemi's features; the vertical tribal marks, the tiny lips that punctuated his face, the bushy brows that fringed his eyes.

"So it is truly you," he broke the silence.

"So it is you," you replied.

He nodded and ran to hug you. His tears warmed your shoulders.

"We have a lot to catch up on Okide." He looked at you, his eyes saying everything he wanted. And you understood.

You remained silent. How come he never forgot you all these years, even when for you, memories of him had become like a flickering candle fighting to stay.

"Here is my number." He squeezed a paper into your hand. "I will be in Enugu until tomorrow waiting for your call, waiting for you. We can be good together again," he said and went back into the hall.

TODAY, YOU WATCHED Agatha's hands tremble as she planted in the garden. You knew she was doing more than burying seeds beneath the earth; she was burying emotions too—sadness, anger, hurt. You knew she had read your notes about Yemi.

"Did you ever love me?" she said, squishing an earthworm.

"Will you ever forgive me, Agatha?" you said, willing her to look at you.

"Who benefits from forgiveness? The offender or the one hurt?"

"Both."

"No. Forgiveness is a selfish demand. A partial thing. What it does is to put the offender at peace and leave the hurt person with guilt. Guilt for holding onto hurt. You only need *forgiveness* to put your mind at peace, Okide."

This truth seared your tongue into silence.

"So answer me, did you ever love me?" she said again.

"Love is like seeds. It can be planted into many hearts, just that some seeds grow taller than others," you said.

"Or they could all grow the same." She looked up at you for the first time, her eyes full of water and hope. "I understand your conflict. But the love you have for me is enough, and you shouldn't give it up. Why do away with my love and go for Yemi's when you can have both?"

Your eyes widened with shock and delight. "I can have both?"

"Yes. Why harvest only from a plant when you can have the whole farm?"

She resumed planting as if she knew her words had unburdened you. With relief coursing through you, you dialed Yemi's number. He told you love should be boundless. For him, what was important was having the gift of you even if you were also a gift for and to Agatha who you watched glow under the golden yellow of the evening sun as she buried *only* corn seeds.

Shifting Sands

HALIMA ALIYU

1.

The beauty of her name was in the curl of his lips when he pronounced it. Like a dimpled cheek, the skin around his mouth would indent, the first syllable of the name, falling off like a whisper in the wind, gathering momentum as gravity pulled it down.

"Zahrah!"

But before he learnt to say her name with such precision, before even he knew to direct his intense gaze at her face when he spoke to her, it was his eyes that said all that was in his heart. He looked at her with such a deep longing that she would stop whatever she was doing at the moment and go to him.

"My love," she would say as she cupped his face in her palms. "My dearest beloved."

Alas, we are getting ahead of ourselves here. Let's go back to the beginning; to a time when someone else was the centre of her life, a time when she didn't know there could be loves greater than others.

ZAHRAH ALLOWED HERSELF to be wooed in the right manner. She allowed the little little pockets of feelings blossom in her belly and rise to wrap itself around her heart. She fell in love.

First, Yasir used words to turn her head around. Standing before him in front of the girls' hostel, she would stare up at the curve of his lips as they formed words and wonder what else they could do. She would look into his brown eyes as they stared with earnest attention at her face and she would wish he would close the distance between them just a little bit more. And then, when he laughed, her breath would hitch up in her throat and she would have to look away for fear that he could see through her silky hijab to the hammering in her chest. And then, as she crawled beneath the blanket on her bed, she would try to remember all

that he said, and it would all be a blur, a sweet feverish blur that made her squirm in delight.

The first time he held her hand, they were sitting in his car. Though she could not remember what they were talking about now, but she vividly recalled the exact moment he placed his palm on hers and picked up her small hand in his large one. She remembered the coolness of his skin, like a damp towel on a burning forehead, the relief that followed such sweetness and then the fear: what if he pulled me close for a kiss? Would I let him? Would I push him away?

All these thoughts ran through her mind in the space of a millisecond. And then she relaxed. He was no longer looking at her. Instead, he was concentrating on the lines in her palm. Then he began to trace them with the tip of his finger, and she could not stop the gasp that escaped her lips.

"Relax," he said with a smile, though his deep voice had become gruff with emotion and his eyes blazed as she had never seen them before. "I am only fascinated with the smoothness of your skin and how soft your hand is. By Allah, it is as though you do not expose it even to sunlight." He placed her hand back on her thigh. It was only then that Zahrah began to breathe again.

When he did not come to visit her for the next two weeks, she suffered through it in silence. She blamed herself for letting things get that far, and alternatively, she sighed as the pleasure of the moment overwhelmed her. But she had been brought up right, and denying her emotions was a trait she learned young. So she did not call him. Or send him a text. And when she lost her temper and was unkind to her roommate, she would quickly reassess the situation, apologise and leave the room, finding solace in reading novels in the farthest corner of the school library.

He called her then, and came to visit. At first, she worked hard in front of the mirror, practicing her detached face. She wanted to sound bored and uninterested. She walked casually from one end of the room to the other, and

realised that if she spoke slow, if she walked slow, if she did everything in slow motion, it would give the idea of someone who could not be bothered.

When the call came in the evening, she jumped up, startled. She walked slowly, up until she reached outside and saw his car parked under a mango tree in front of the hostel. She had forgotten everything she had practiced. Her legs moved of their own accord, carrying her jubilantly across the courtyard. Her smile stretched her face in its intensity and she could not stop the pounding in her heart.

He was smiling too. When he saw her, he broke into a short run, as though he was going to sweep her off her feet in a large embrace. Then he stopped, looked down at his feet, and shook his head. They stood, giving each other that look of uncertainty. She clasped her hands in front of her like a little schoolgirl, hopped from one foot to another, and smiled shyly. His grin was large and unashamed and when he pronounced her name, it was the voice of a thirsty man finally finding relief in a refreshing drink.

Later, as they sat in the quiet of his car, he explained how he couldn't be in her presence without doing much more than hold her hand. He apologised for his long absence. He told her he needed to detox her from his system. At the word, detox, they both looked at each other and laughed. And soon found their faces drawing close to the other.

The next time he stayed away, she understood. But it did not make the nostalgia any easier to bear. Before long, she could no longer concentrate in class, or understand what she read afterwards. Her appetite suffered and her roommate became worried. When she found herself in the corner of the school library, wearing headphones and distracting herself with hours and hours of movies, she knew she was at the end of her wits.

And just as she believed that her heart would burst with unconfirmed emotions, she got a call from home. It was her father.

2.

IT WAS IN the sigh of his breath when he lay sated on the bed, a lazy smile playing across his face as he fiddled with her breast. It was in the incomprehensible gurgle he made in his throat when he suckled her. At such times, she would sigh. She would smile thinking of how hopeless he would be without her.

He had lost his mind only twice before. The first time, she had rushed a neighbour's child to the hospital to treat a broken arm. The young mother was too hysterical to be useful. One look at her baby's dangling forearm, and she would lose control and begin to wail and flail about.

"Look after him for me," she said to the woman, jutting her chin in the direction of her room as she cradled the crying baby and headed out.

When she returned, he wouldn't stop screaming at her. The scream seemed to say, you left me, you abandoned me. How dare you leave me? And when she tried to approach him, he screamed louder. She learnt that day how much she meant to him, for in his anguish, she saw the naked affection he held for her and his fear of losing her. And in her guilt of having hurt him, her heart buoyed with joy.

PEOPLE SAID THAT brides looked their best on their wedding days. No one explained that this was made possible because love was the secret ingredient; that it shone through from their hearts to their faces and lit up their eyes like a full moon in the middle of the month of Ramadhan. Zahrah's joy threatened to break her ribcage. Every time she imagined that she would be left alone with Yasir in the same house, just the two of them, and that he would approach her and not stop, she would be seized by a fainting spell.

The only reason that dampened her swell of emotions was that she would be leaving home for a faraway place. Yasir had gotten a job in another town so many hours from home and she did not know how to cope with that. But he had explained; he had told her about the dangers of family interference, especially the extended family that should have no business in the matter to begin with. And

she had smiled; anything that would allow her to spend more time with Yasir and Yasir alone was welcome to her.

WHEN THE BABY arrived, well-wishers assumed that the cycle was complete; the family now whole. And Zahrah thought so too. Every time she looked at Yasir, her heart would swell, and she would feel its heaviness in her chest, a weight so deliciously sweet, she could taste it on her tongue. Then she would turn to look at the baby, and her heart would literally burst into tiny butterflies that turned her tummy warm. She did not know that the human heart could have such a great capacity to accommodate love, for she loved them both, more than life itself.

Yasir looked at the baby like something he had to tolerate. When they were in the same room, he kept his distance and when Zahrah placed the baby on his thigh, asking for a few minutes to fix something, he would frown and turn his head to the side. She didn't immediately notice this; her love was such that everything outside of that circle remained blurred and distant, except this was happening within her beautiful circle.

The first time Zahrah suspected something was amiss, the baby had been crying for exactly one minute, and though Yasir was in the sitting-room, he didn't move to pick him up. She knew this because she counted the seconds, every millisecond of time she spent away from her baby, as she rushed to set the table before he woke up from his nap.

"Baby dear, please help me with my love. I think he just wants to feel a human presence beside him, he would soon go back to sleep. Just stand by the cot and tap him gently." She called from the kitchen, thinking it was possible that Yasir was too engrossed in the sport news he was reading on his phone to hear the cries. It would be months later before she realised she was already aware of the animosity between the two; that subconsciously, she knew Yasir would never pick up the baby of his free will.

When nothing changed, she washed and dried her hands, then hurried into the room. Yasir shut his eyes the moment he heard her footsteps approaching, but that was not before she saw him, lying face up on the three-sitter with his leg dangling off the chair, it wasn't quick enough that she didn't see as he dropped the still bright screen of the phone over his belly, as he tried to settle his breathing into a calm rhythm, not quick enough that she didn't see him lie to her. And that was what hurt more; her Yasir would lie, rather than touch his own child.

On that day, they had a full blown out fight. Zahrah forgot her place as a northern woman, she forgot to keep her voice small and calm, she forgot to keep her eyes low and compliant, and she forgot all her mother taught her.

That day, she got several doses of shock. She was shocked to find out Yasir had a temper. She was shocked to know he could be violent. She was most shocked that Yasir hated his son. When she was done shouting, he had risen from the chair and came to stand before her; then he had begun to talk, slow at first, then building momentum, until he was screaming even louder than she had.

He talked about not being ready to share his affection for her, he spoke of the long nights he had suffered lying alone because she was with the child. At this point, Yasir pointed a bony finger in the direction of the room. All Zahrah saw, were the accusations behind that pointing finger. 'You just said baby and my love in the same sentence. I don't know who that is anymore. Do you even know the difference? Or is there no difference?' He spat at her.

Yasir talked about how she looked and how shrunken her skin was, pasted to her bones. He took her forearms in his hands and shook her. He asked her when the last time was that she looked in a mirror; whether she knew 'that wretched thing' was sucking her dry, if she had seen the sunken look of her eyes, and his grip tightened, hurting her.

Her whimper brought it all to an end. He looked first at his fingers wrapped around her arms, then to the stricken look on her face, and he pried his hands

off her and backed away like a man who had been shot. That day, Yasir did not return home and Zahrah did not call him.

He returned in the morning, and made an effort. He apologised to her. He carried the baby all day, and fed him from the bottle. He attempted to change his diapers. And it looked like everything was going to work out, until the baby decided otherwise. He began to shriek every time Yasir picked him up. It got so bad that if he so much as approached him, the child would begin to bawl. His face would turn crimson and his fists would clench like someone in extreme pain.

That was when Yasir gave up. He began to stay out late and later. And even when he worried that she would complain about his absence, Zahrah would only serve his food and go to bed. Then they stopped talking. She would murmur to the baby and coo into its face when he was around. But one day, Yasir returned unexpectedly and heard her excited chatter filled with mirth. He hurried in, thinking they had a visitor and hoping to catch a glimpse of that laugh. But it was only the baby. And Zahrah promptly went silent, quietly leaving the sitting-room with the baby in tow.

The curves of her body became strange lines he could no longer trace. The dimple in her smile was a distant memory and when he tried to remember how her eyes lit up at the sight of him, he broke down and cried, very much like a baby himself. When he decided to move out, all he left was a note on the table.

3.

THE SECOND TIME he lost his mind was the first time he pronounced her name clearly. She knew because his eyes no longer held her in awe. She could feel the barricade growing between them and a stab of pain in her chest confirmed her fears.

Zahrah woke up with the distinct feeling that something was wrong. It had been several months since she saw Yasir. At first, the pain had been unbearable. She kept wondering if there was something she could have done. Then the baby

will squirm and cry out, throwing his arms in the air and inviting her to pick him up, and as she ran to him, she would forget her worries.

As the baby grew, their attachment grew. Everywhere she went, he crawled in with her, even as she took her bath or used the restroom. He would sit on his haunches and smile up at her, waiting patiently for her to be done. Then he would crawl after her again, from room to room. She was only ever alone when he was asleep and usually, at this time, she was too tired to do anything but lay down to sleep too.

As usual, at the end of the month, a stipend arrived with the taxi driver that brought in loads of foodstuff. Even the baby food and diapers were accounted for. He would smile a large toothy grin and say, '*alhaji wai in kawo*.' And she never asked him when and where he saw Alhaji.

And then she knew. The end of the month had come and gone. There was no taxi driver blaring his horn outside the door. It had been a week since they were due but because she lacked nothing, she didn't associate the empty feeling in her heart with the fact that she had not heard from her beloved. And she knew what she must do.

At first, the phone rang and rang without answer. She knew she should call again, but Zahrah was stubborn. She reasoned he would find her missed call and return the favour. But a growing feeling of dread forced her to take a deep breath and dial the number again. This time, a female voice picked and Zahrah was ready to terminate the call when she heard the teary note in the voice. In between hiccups and tears, she learnt of Yasir's passing and though the words were clear enough, none of it made sense.

Her heart thudded and she could swear she heard the sound it made as it cracked. It was reflex that made Zahrah turn to look for her son. He was always her go-to place of comfort. But for the first time ever, the boy was not sitting at her feet, or playing close by. And she suddenly could not remember seeing him since she bathed him that morning.

The thin thread holding her sanity together threatened to split. She could feel its frayed ends in her head and she sat upright, fighting to keep it intact. Then the bedroom door opened, and Zahrah's jaw dropped open as her one year old son walked out and continued to walk, away from her.

"My baby," she said, in a shaky voice, as he headed for the door on wobbly feet. He did not look back. It was again, a day for shocks. Zahrah knew there was something about the call she had just made that she should be attending to, but her mind had refused to register what it was. Then she had just found out that her baby could not only stand on his own, but could walk, albeit unsteadily.

As the screen door slammed shut behind him, she knew, with a certainty only a mother could have, that she had lost her child forever. The echoing silence in the large sitting-room seemed to mock her. Zahrah heard the voices of the children outside as they welcomed the new addition; she heard his giggle and knew it was not directed at her, and something inside of her snapped.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

HOWARD M-B MAXIMUS is a Cameroonian writer. His works have appeared in or accepted by magazines such as *The Africa Report, Catapult, Aerodrome, The Kalahari Review, Brittle Paper, Bakwa Magazine* and so on. His fiction and nonfiction pieces have appeared in such anthologies as *Selves: An Afro Anthology of Creative Nonfiction*, *Love Stories from Africa,* and *Limbe to Lagos: Nonfiction from Cameroon and Nigeria*, and are forthcoming in others. He was one of the participants of the Literary Exchange Program for creative nonfiction between Cameroon and Nigeria, organized by *Bakwa* magazine*, Saraba* magazine, Goethe Institute Nigeria and Goethe Institute Cameroon, and also a participant of the workshop for Afro Young Adult Fiction writers. In 2018, he was shortlisted for the Miles Morland Scholarship. He is currently working on a novel. He is a staff writer for *Bakwa* magazine and runs a PhD program in Microbiology at the University of Buea, Cameroon.

KLARA KALU is a storyteller. She is currently an undergraduate. She lives in the South Eastern part of Nigeria. She is a past participant of the Purple Hibiscus Creative Writing Workshop. She wants to make people laugh when she grows up.

UGOCHI OKAFOR writes from Delta State, Nigeria. She likes to engage in a discussion with herself—she thinks she understands better. Her works have appeared on *The Kalahari Review, Africanwriter.com* and in the Art Naija Series anthology, *Enter Naija: The Book of Places* on *Brittle Paper*. She enjoys travelling.

NONSO ANYANWU is an editor and a prose stylist. His work has appeared in various publications including *New Contrast*, *Afreada, Sunday Sun Review, Africa Book Club*, and *Brittle Paper*. He edited *Gossamer: Valentine Stories*, introduced by Toni Kan; *Love Stories from Africa,* introduced by Helon Habila; and *The Vanguard*

Book of HIV/AIDS and Sexual Awareness. He lives in Abuja, where he spends his time working and writing. He recently finished his first novel.

IFEANYICHUKWU PETER EZE studied Philosophy at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His works have appeared on *Pangolin Review, The Single Story Foundation Journal, Expound, Brittle Paper, Scarlet Leaf Review, Selfies and Signatures* anthology*, Late Night Blues* anthology, and a few other places.

HALIMA ALIYU is a Consulting Editor and mentors kids in creative writing at the Hilltop Creative Arts Foundation Centre. She is a fiction writer and has attended a number of literary workshops across the country including the BBC Radiophonics workshop in 2007, the 1st Northern Nigerian Writers' Summit, and the ANA Annual International Convention. She is an awardee of the Marine Platforms Award. Her works have appeared in *Expound Magazine, Praxis Journal, Africanwriter.com*, and other places. She is the author of the children's story, "One Little Trick, One Painful Death." Her second book, *Fire on the Tip of Ice*, was published in 2015.