

The Vapour

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“Good morning, have we woken well?” The ringing voice of Iya Alagbado, the middle-aged mother of my quiet friend, Yakubu, called me out of my deep slumber. I groaned and opened my eyes slowly. It was still dark, but I knew it was most likely past 5:00am already. Every morning, Iya Alagbado’s greetings woke me up as she passed the front of our house, on her way to the community mosque to pray. I knew her husband, a retired soldier whose energetic movements seemed to defy old age, would follow in her footsteps soon.

I looked down from the old sofa I was sleeping on in the sitting room. Folarin and Folajimi were snoring loudly. Folajimi’s right leg was placed elegantly, as if deliberate, on Folarin’s moving chest. Folarin’s legs, on the other hand, were off the Hausa mat they were sleeping on, crossing and inadvertently blocking the tiny passage that led to our parents’ bedroom. Folajimi’s mouth was opened widely, saliva flowing freely from his mouth on to his rumpled blanket. The thought of taking a picture of him in this compromising posture crossed my mind. I ignored it. I could see the faint smoke coming from the still-burning mosquito coil Mother had ignited before we slept the previous night. I was sure Folarin would have inhaled a great deal of the smoke because his face was turned towards the chair under which the coil was placed. Yet, I could still hear the faint “songs” of the mosquitoes flying all round my head. I smiled. I had told Mother as she sent Folajimi to purchase the coils that the mosquitoes in our house were “aliens”. They were immune to mosquito coils. But she would not listen.

I reached for my phone on the window sill beside which I was sleeping. I switched it on and squinted at the home screen. I felt tears rushed to my eyes as they struggled to adjust to the sudden brightness of the screen light. It was 5:29am. If Folarin and Folajimi did not wake up soon, Mother would wake them up herself, probably with hot slaps. Then her usual lines that would follow, “Lazybones, wake up! You won’t wake up of your own accord if I don’t wake you up! Is this how you will continue to sleep when you gain admission into university? That’s your elder brother lying over there! Ask him how he lives his life in school...” Then, Father’s voice would boom from the bedroom “Are those lazy boys still sleeping? Don’t worry, leave them to me...” Father usually did not need to complete his own “lines” before the duo would jump off their mat and start moving around like robots, apparently still half asleep. Not later than 6:30am, when most of the morning chores would have been done, Mother would call everybody around for Morning Devotion.

I looked towards my parents’ bedroom. The door leading into the room was ajar. Their bed was visible from my sleeping position. Mother was not in bed, but Father was still on it. I

knew he was awake because he was usually awake at that time of the morning, but he would not get up until 6:00am. Then, as if it had been there all along, waiting for me to discover its presence, a large white vapour, hovering over Father's prone figure on the bed moved slightly. The vapour had the form of a man and what seemed to be its misty hands gestured at me, beckoning. Marveling at this sight, I looked at Father, wondering whether he could see the human-like vapour. That was when I discovered something eerie about the way he lay on the bed. Though prone, his face was turned upward, his open eyes staring sightlessly at the brown ceiling.

My heart thumping wildly, I rose up slowly from the sofa and started to move towards the bedroom. Preoccupied with the sight before me, I failed to notice Folarin's trespassing legs, still blocking the passageway. I stumbled against them and let out an irritated hiss. The moment I walked into the room, my eyes registered the creepy stillness of Father's body. Then, the vapour spoke to me "Fúnbí, my son..."

My heart thumping even faster, a fear-laden wail rose from the pit of my stomach.

"Good morning, have we woken well?", Iya Alagbado's shrill greeting voice.

"Good morning, Mámá", The answering voice sounded like Mother's.

My eyes flew open, as my heart threatened to burst out of my chest. I was lying on my sofa-cum-bed in the sitting room. Folajimi was standing beside me, his right hand poised to tap my shoulder.

"Eniitan, Mummy said we should come and pray", He said and then walked towards our parents' bedroom. As he opened the door, I caught a glimpse of Father sitting up on the bed and his back resting against the concrete wall. I rose up and walked into the room just as Mother walked in after me.

Throughout the prayers, the dream haunted my mind. After prayers, Mother, Folarin and Folajimi left the room and began to move about, preparing for work and school respectively. I was about to rise when Father spoke.

"Fúnbí", He called.

Fúnbí was Father's pet name for me. It was actually my middle name, but I had no love for it because I felt it sounded feminine.

"Sir?", I replied, freezing in my half-standing position. My hands were still resting on the edge of the bed.

“Sit down.”

I lowered myself back to the bed, wondering if I was going to be late for work that morning. Ever since I came home on vacation, I had been teaching Literature-in-English at a big secondary school close to the house. Though the appointment was a part-time one, which gave me the choice to resume work anytime I wanted, as long as I missed none of my teaching appointments, I preferred to resume work early like the full-time teachers.

“Yes, sir”, I replied, adjusting my position so that I could face him. As I stared at him, I hoped he was not going to prolong this impromptu conversation. Father loved to talk. I knew that with conviction.

“My son”, He started, sighing deeply, “my heart is heavy...”

I let my gaze focus on his face. He suddenly looked very old to me. I tried to guess a number of things that could be weighing down his heart. Faintly, in the background, I could hear Folarin rebuking Folajimi over something. At that moment, I envied them. They were not the ones caught up in one of Father’s rare heart talks.

“Good morning, will you buy my homemade Ogi?”, The seller’s strident voice invaded my scattered thoughts.

“Good luck. May your market sell.”, Mother’s voice replied from the backyard.

“...and I don’t know how to pour it out to you, in case you misunderstand me”, Father continued, drawing my attention back to the room.

He cleared his throat, “In our culture, it is often said that one’s first child is more or less one’s younger sibling. So, you’re like my younger brother...”

Indeed. I thought and looked away from him, staring into the opposite wall as if a television screen had suddenly appeared on it.

“My heart is so heavy...”, He repeated.

I know, Father! I snapped at him in my head. *You’ve said this already.* I was tempted to voice my thoughts.

“...with secrets I cannot share with you and your Mother.” He concluded.

Secrets! I looked sharply at him.

“You know the kind of Mother you have.” This time, he had my full attention. “She jumps to the slightest conclusion whenever she hears something. And you and your siblings, her children, cannot be trusted with these secrets because it is like she controls your mind. Whenever she draws your head close to her bosom, you simply spill out everything I told you.”

I sighed and returned my gaze to the wall, knowing how right he was. I was not certain whether to persuade him to divulge his secrets to me while assuring him of my discretion or to simply allow him make the decision himself. However, I reasoned that doing the former might depict me as desperate, subsequently discouraging him from saying what he needed to say. So, I held my tongue and waited.

“Like I said, you are my first fruit and you’re like my younger brother. I should not be hiding things from you. Our people say that ‘a corpse does not hide its nudity from those who will wash and bury it’. But...” His voice faded away.

I shifted my gaze back at him. He rested his grey-haired head on the palm of his right hand, the elbow of which dug into his right thigh as a result of the weight it carried. He remained like that, as if in deep thought, for some seconds before he sighed deeply and looked up.

“I don’t feel good at all”, He announced, “Sometimes, my heart will just start beating fast as if I’m afraid of something invisible. Other times, one side of my body”, He swept his left hand across the right side of his body, “...will just go numb for no reason. And at other times, my mind will just go blank for minutes...”

Stroke? I thought alarmingly.

“Could it be just stress or...” I began to ask.

“Stress is part of it...but...the secrets...” He sighed, “I really wish I could tell you and your Mother, but I know what your Mother is capable of...especially when it is about Ajike...”

Ajike! A strong wave of irritation washed over me in that moment as I struggled valiantly to hold myself back from hissing.

Ajike was a forty-something year old unmarried woman, who Father claimed to be his sister. However, their “sibling” relationship was so close for comfort that it had had almost everyone who noticed it wondering if something deeper was not going on. Discreet and direct inquiries into the true nature of their relationship had revealed that Father and Ajike were only remote in-laws and shared no direct relations. Consequently, the issue had fueled so much contention between Father and Mother such that they gradually drifted apart from each other over the years. Yet, Father continued to insist that Ajike was his “sister”.

“Your mother will just not understand that Ajike is more than a sister to me...”

His voice was beginning to grate on my nerves and I had to will myself to not let my boiling emotions reflect on my face.

“I am so fond of Ajike and I cherish her more than my own life...”

I slowly began to bite down on my lower lip.

“Anytime I see her or think of her, I can’t stop my heart from racing...”

My eyes stung with the pain of the revulsion I felt towards him. *Has his heart ever raced for my mother?* I thought, as I bit harder on my lip. My saliva was beginning to taste bloody as the sensitive flesh of my lip gave way under the assault from my teeth. My legs started to shake.

Just then, Mother walked into the room. She stopped abruptly when she discovered me still sitting with him.

I threw her a glance, sending her a silent plea with my eyes.

The nod she gave in response was almost imperceptible.

“Eniitan! Are you not going to work today?” She asked.

“I am”, I replied in the most even voice I could muster, “but Father is having a discussion with me presently.”

“Have you checked the time?” She raised her voice dramatically.

I glanced at the wall clock hanging on the wall behind me. 6:57am.

“Oh!”, I exclaimed, turning towards Father with an agitated expression.

“M.D., please let him go and prepare for work or he’ll be late”, Mother pled.

Father was silent for a while before speaking eventually. “Okay...you can go.”

I practically jumped to my feet immediately and threw Mother a grateful look.

“Sorry I delayed you”, Father added.

“It’s alright, sir”, I replied and walked out of the room. *It’s not alright at all.* I muttered under my breath, my mind replaying the conversation I just had with him.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. After a long day at work, I visited a close friend, came back home late in the night and went straight to bed without supper.

“Good morning, have we woken well?”, Iya Alagbado’s voice again!

I opened my eyes and looked around in the mild darkness. The sitting room looked different. My sleep-in sofa felt softer. The room seemed spacious, as if some previously unnoticed fixtures had been relocated. The two curtains adorning the windows in the room were

missing. The air in the room felt unnaturally cool. I looked down. Folarin and Folajimi were still sleeping. However, their usual loud snores had been replaced with peaceful respiration.

Yawning, I stretched and as a sweet ache washed through my body, I suddenly realised my limbs could move freely on the sofa. Intrigued, I looked more closely and realised I was not on the sofa as I earlier assumed. Instead, I was really lying on my parents' twenty-one years old bed, directly on Father's usual side of the bed.

What's going on? I wondered. What's the bed doing in the sitting room? Where is my sofa? My gaze fell back on the sleeping figures of my siblings. I realised something new! They were not sleeping on the mat! Rather, they were on their blankets, spread on the bare cement floor. They slept uncovered! The mat stood, rolled up, in a corner of the room.

An eerie quiet prevailed in the room.

I looked up just in time to catch the white human-like vapour hovering near the sitting room door. It *felt* as if it was looking straight at me. I stared back at it. The form suddenly took on a resemblance of Father's figure. Then it turned black and blended with the surrounding darkness. However, I could still sense it.

I started to stand up.

The vapour backed straight into the door. Then, it disappeared.

I rose up fully and looked towards our parents' bedroom. Its door was slightly ajar.

I walked over to it and pushed it wide open. Father was on my sofa, lying face-up. *How? What is my sofa doing in the bedroom?* Father's eyes were open. His left forefinger was in-between his teeth as if put there as a sober, reflective act of regret. His right arm hung stiffly from the open side of the sofa, its fingers resting on the cold cement floor. I moved closer to him but he made no sign to acknowledge my presence. Yet, his eyes were still open. Then, I stared into his face. It looked rigid. Like a granite statue. His eyes, they were lifeless.

My heart was only too eager to start thumping wildly again.

"Mother!", I called.

No response.

"Mother!", I raised my voice a bit louder this time.

No response still.

I bent down and held Father's right hand. It felt cold to the touch. I tried to raise it up. It was stone-stiff. Then, his body tumbled from the sofa on to my legs. He landed face-down. And his left forefinger stayed between his teeth as if stuck there permanently

“Mother...!”, I screamed.

“Good morning, have we woken well?”, Iya Alagbado. A greeting.

“Good morning, Mama.” Mother. Its response.

“How is the family?”

“Everyone is fine, we thank the Creator.”

“Today will be good.” A prayer.

“Let it be so.” Its reply.

I groaned.

I opened my eyes slowly and looked around. I was on my sofa. Loud snores drifted from the direction of the floor.

My heart was racing wildly...