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Crouched over You

by Fortune Akande.

"That was me," I said, pointing at a lean boy hunched by a baby asleep on a shoddy sofa, "crouched over you at six months."

The memory returns to me as I write this: Mom, at a meeting in church; Dad, yet to return from work; us, young unblemished kids by themselves on a sweltering Saturday without electricity. We bring out the photo album—an indulgence we never seemed to get enough of—and start looking, flipping, looking. Soon, you would unfix a photograph: black-and-white, stained with mould. Then.

Simmering with awe, you responded in a voice I thought tiny: "I looked so much like daddy already."

I returned a perfunctory nod, and we continued our travel through time.

But connecting the dots now, as it is common with lookings in retrospect, I begin to realise.

Before we had you, about four months earlier, Dad broke us the news: Grandpa was dead. Though I'd barely known him, I cried. Or, I'd thought of crying, as it was the supposedly decorous thing to do, I'm not sure. But from in the hospital that morning, (and I know I have probably narrated this particular anecdote to you ten thousand times now,) I remember clearer: Uncle Sèye, dad's immediate younger brother who'd travelled down from Ìbàdàn, giggling and pulling at your cheeks in the cot, before he'd turn and say, "He's a Babátúndé, this child."

I caught a familiar glint in Mom's eyes just after he'd said this, and an outburst followed in Yorùbá. "No o! My child will not bear such name." Then she sat up into a slouch and said, "This one is my own fruit," circling her stomach with her palm. "This one is a Jesus' baby. Your father has not returned anywhere," she added, and from the bed, reached over to fiddle with your shawl covering. Uncle had frozen like one of those mannequins in Balógun, his baggy Buba fluttering in the breeze of the ceiling-fan. But he should have known better, too: how did he reckon a Parish Choir Director would stand the judging eyes of the pastors and the congregation when Babátúndé is mentioned as one of her baby's names during the child-dedication service?

And so, that was how you got your name, Èbùn. Èbùnolúwa. And a gift from God you were, truly.

At the locus of another dot, a patch of memory, you are seven. It was the day we first asked Mom if we could buy bòlì from the woman that had just opened by our house then. When Mom said no, you grew berserk, skittered across the room and hurled our old CRT TV to the carpet.

You got the beating of your life. But when Dad returned home later that day, I remember, he perused the gloomy thing, circled around it, turned the knobs to see if they still worked, shook it to listen to the breakage inside it. And then, he said, “Who did you even get this from?” rather calmly as he dropped the TV. The house fell silent. And just as he walked away, sotto voce, said, “Just like Grandpa.”

And so, until we moved out of Ajégúnlè, we would, after we were finished with our homework, sprint five houses away to Akin’s place, to spend the evening watching their television. And whenever mom wasn’t huffy, we got to take along the VHS tapes in our shelf, to bring variety to the tumble of Lágbájá and Fela records Akin’s dad stocked their catalogue with.

Our best memories, I think, will remain those etched on amidst the madness and the dreary spectacle of Ajégúnlè — home-sweet-home. Like the time Nestlé branded the seedy condominium we lived in, (becoming one of the first few in that crazy hovel to get painted,) and the other kids wouldn’t stop palming the walls, rubbing the dust from the cheap paint on their faces.

Like the times Mom let us to join the other kids on weekends to play football on the streets, and gave us enough money to buy as many èkáná gowon as we wanted. We also flew kites we gave Indian names picked up from the too-much Bollywood we saw on TV then. On and on until that rainy Saturday we’d played so much that we fell asleep in the cold into the dead of the night at Smallie’s house—you still remember Smallie? Samad, the one whose dad drove a danfo, and took the petite height of his mom—and Mom, having gone house-to-house searching, stopped letting us after.

Those were the best times of our lives.

Or perhaps it only feels that way, because after eighty-six—when Dad's electronics store business took off—the darkness started to creep in upon us; our candle-light was smothered, and the sun had sunk into the West to protect its own. We saw my bumfluff that year, you remember? And for the first time in eight years, we got to watch television without having to sprint an eroded road and knock politely. Ajégúnlè didn't match our personas, to be frank. It reminds me of that night neighbours who would later be benighted, were jostling one another in our living room to watch Maradona in the World Cup. It was the same year I would get my admission into UI. You haven't forgotten all these, too, I know. Or have you?

Èbùn?

Èbùn another dot comes to mind now. It is not as dark, but in typical fashion, it bulges first, then implodes into an abyss and swallows me whole. Inside it, floating, I see you: twelve or thirteen, tinged gold under a dull amber light, now rising up to my shoulder, yet to start growing your afro, wearing a smile devoid of the worries of this world. It was around three years before we left Ajégúnlè, the day—a day—during the National Praise Convention that took Mom from us for seven days yearly. But this time, because of the economic problems in eighty-three then, it had been postponed, so, made to coincide with Dad's birthday, falling in its week. Mom had written him a letter and instructed us to hand it over while she was away. But that wouldn't suffice as we also had to preserve our tradition of jollof-rice on birthdays—the only times of the year apart from Christmas that we got to eat it. I wanted to give it a try, but remember how clueless I was? I resigned, and that was when you said, "I can cook it," and cook you did, taking the apron to give us 'jollov'.

“This one is ‘jollov’,” you said as we ate from the tired upholstery of the furniture in our small parlour, washing our throats with drafts of the Coke Dad had bought us on his way home. “You took it from me,” Dad said, wearing a proud smile. “And Grandpa,” he added. And when I said, “Mom cooks well, too,” he only smiled and nodded.

You would go on to prepare ‘jollov’ many more times, (even when Mom was around) and from then, we started to see reasons, too, why Mom called you Èbùn.

Before dawn, they say, is when it’s the darkest. But don’t you think we all say that and dismiss the innuendo of the wax-melting, blinding light that must’ve preceded that darkness? The light before the dark. It was dusk when Mom died. Golden, because an angel had just caught its wings; wistful, because the quantum jump had come way too early.

One thing anyone who knew Mom well would never not say about her was how every line in her life was paragraphed by prayers, and amen closed each chapter accordingly. Remember those stories she always told us? Those ones she’d told us on several occasions and in different versions, about how her dad, Bàbá Èwe as she said he was widely called, would make her spend her long vacations in Bible camps and prayer programmes. She was Sunday School teacher at first, before we too, would watch her climb up from Choir Director to Deaconess—the first year in our new home when the church reckoned her wealthy enough to take the role—and finally, to Women Leader. She would often add that if Bàbá Èwe were still alive, he would have insisted that you particularly went through the same drill—“To deliver you of that stubbornness from your father’s house,” she would say.

You know we could really say we were single-handedly trained by Mom and not be wrong? And for that, I fail at thinking about you, looking back, without feeling a resentment build up

afresh in my heart. Severally, I would see her with my half-shut eyes, come into the room at night to draw crosses on your forehead with her Goya oil, muttering prayers that aired as sobs and pleas. It was on one of such nights, nights when sleep had spurned me, that I would overhear a squabble between her and Dad. It was then I got to know that the 'big woman' from whom Dad had claimed he secured the gig that changed our lives was his mistress; her husband worked with Shell abroad so, she sought respite in the loins of men who needed what she had and had what she needed.

It wasn't too long after that that Ìya Tolúwani slept and forgot how to wake up. She'd only complained of aches here and there but a few days later, Our World would bid us goodbye in a 'goodnight'.

Sometimes, it looks to me like God loved Mom so much He made her escape the sight of the horrors that followed her death; her only two children turning their backs against each other; her husband wasting away, cruising cheap brothels in Festac and Allen Avenue; the scandal of the assistant-turned-director of the choir allegedly involved in multiple sexual affairs with married women in the church. On and on, a life that I knew well she wouldn't have condoned, went.

Though we'd grown up to see Dad otherwise, I remember so vividly how he was broken, how he struggled with believing that his wife was really gone, that never again would those eyes hold his, and call him Àkànní. And although I was too bitter to feel, I knew then how much he might have loved, or still loved her. But it was the opposite with you. The callus over your heart had began to spread more and more, as if Mom's death had poked into a long-existing infection so that it began to fester. That was when we started to grow apart, got estranged from each other.

Memories of how beautiful you—we—were still persisted, however. I would randomly remember your letters, those letters you used to write when you were much younger; how incoherent and formless they were but poignant enough, still, in their tenderness, that the love and intent was always felt; so palpable that you could almost hold it. Like the ones you used to write Mom then thanking her 'for loving you.'

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Last night, flipping through photo albums like old times, I found a sepia photograph of me, you and Dad from his fiftieth. Is it not ironic how we'd worn large smiles on our faces while our whole world was falling apart? It made me think of how if whenever we say we're happy, we truly are, or it's only a façade for the rotting inside.

Over the years, I have constantly blamed myself for you, for us; always felt I hadn't been there enough for you when you needed me the most. When Dad called me in school to tell me you'd found solace in a symbiosis with a boy who'd lost his dad some years back, I felt some relief, that maybe it would turn out to be the anchor that you'd needed for you to heal. I didn't know he would in fact, be the extra shove into the abyss you were already headed.

I knew how strong you were, too, perhaps, why I'd trusted you to be good. I remember now one of our races to Akin's place back in AJ, that time his cousin from Maryland visited with his camera, and you tripped on the gullied road and bruised your shin. I remember I looked back and saw you sprawled on the road, writhing in pains, but as I made to run back to tend to you and help you up, you stood right back up just as you had fallen and sprinted fast enough to finish even ahead of me. Returning to this memory always has my head held in my hands.

A labyrinth of lives dappled with coordinates marked by maybe's and what-if's: that is what this story—our story—is.

After the accident in ninety-nine was the lowest I had ever seen you. It was like the weight of all the pain you had held in all these years suddenly added a dozen pounds to your spine and shattered you into unidentifiable pieces. The one of losing Mom and not living the legacy she left us, the one from the scorn that had grown between us, the one of a broken arm from a gang clash, and newly, the pain of the death of the one whom you always saw whenever you contemplated yourself in the mirror.

Dad before that accident, the time you'd left home, talked every so often about you with the regret of a failed father. And he did say it, too: that he believed he had done no more and no less than Grandpa, with the tone of one who had ignored the foreboding of an ominous tendril. He said he wished he'd been there for us more, more available, and that maybe then it wouldn't have been like this.

But his death changed you, and there is nothing he and Mom would have wanted more than that. I saw you start being there again for those that you loved and those that loved you; in that birthday we shared together for the first time in years; in the Facebook post with you, your wife and 'Sanmí at his high school graduation; and ultimately, how through your flaws, mistakes and scars, you'd learned to embrace who you are and who you were: a gift, nevertheless. I don't know what you think of the life you lived, Èbùn, but I'm telling you now that it was one worth living, one filled with love. And love, love is the only thing worth living for.

Or dying for.

April 4, 2013: the last time I saw your face at the morgue room through the window as the attendant raised the wrapper off your head mutilated from the shooting—a metaphor for how merciless and unforgiving life had been to you. You still had that cocky smile plastered on your face, as if time had frozen since that photograph from almost five decades ago.

On Motún's wedding, as we locked into an embrace, tears filled up to the rim of her eyes and she stuttered through phlegm and sobs how she would have wanted her uncle to be in it. I told her you were there with us. And I knew you were. Because what I'm most sure of over all is that we never really lose the people we truly love, for they remain parts of us forever.

And so, I am here today, brother, crouched over you again as you sleep. Over a decade since the reunion that Christmas—the last time we had 'jollov'—and still, a day barely goes by without the clouds forming images of you and Mom at dusk, sentient, performing a pas de deux.

"It's Grandpa's remembrance today, too. And Motún and 'Sanmí and his mom brought you orchids. He's wearing a graphic t-shirt that says 'world best dad'. I don't know if that's for you, or for Dad, or for himself."