

## What A Mother Does.

*Déjà vu – already seen. A feeling that this may have happened before.*

*Origin – Emile Boirac, 1876*

**2003**

### Prologue

There was a time when things between Bode and I were different. A time when he would lay with me, his front to my back and his hand over my belly as we waited excitedly for our baby's kick. We would lay like that in the mornings, our morning breaths mingling into each other and I'd be deliriously happy as we played our favourite game; the battle of the sexes.

He would start by saying something like "*Femi* is energetic this morning." And I would counter with, "*Ifeyinwa* needs to eat."

We would go on and on, giving our baby different names till we couldn't think of any other and we would laugh at our silliness.

But that feels like a lifetime ago. Now, we lay together, my head in his arm, and his hand still over my belly but my happiness has been replaced with anxiety. Our bodies no longer meld into each other as they used to. They feel separated; his with the urge to leave and mine tensely waiting... aware of his urge to leave me, to leave **us**.

I was tired of silently worrying over it. I needed to know why, why do we feel different, why had changed? So when he stood up quietly, shrugging into his navy blue shirt, I asked,

"You're leaving?" He paused on a shirt button, looking at my face through the bedroom mirror he answered quickly,

"Yes." And resumed buttoning, like it was okay, like him leaving us was fine. *Yes?* I thought. *What does yes mean.*

"That's it? Yes? No explanations, no reasons. You're just going to leave, again?!" I feel a stream of rage building in me as I watch him from the room mirror. He lets out a breath before he responds,

“Ify, I have to leave.” He mouths his words too carefully, like I was a child who had to be reasoned with. My rage simmers over and I stand up, screaming like I had gone mad,

“You don’t have to do anything except be here!”

“For God’s sake, Ifunaya!” He lets out, shedding his pretenses like a second skin. He turns to me and his eyes are honest for the first time in weeks,

“Will you stop being hysterical! You know I have to leave, I can’t be away from home for too long.”

I see myself and my actions from somewhere outside of me. I know I am being stupid, unreasonable in fact but I can’t stop. I’ve made a thousand mistakes up to this point and I can afford to make one more.

“I need you here Bode, ~~we~~ need you here.” My plea must have pushed a button because Bode looks at me like he has never done before, if I didn’t know better, I would think he hated me.

“Don’t do that.” He says, with fear mounting in his eyes. It struck me that he was afraid, he was scared of all this and probably had no idea how to handle this, how to handle me. My realization drains me, forcing me to sit on the bed.

“Don’t try to guilt trip me. You knew what you were getting into when this started; you said you understood the situation!”

I nodded my head. He was right. I had said that; I had understood that I was second choice. I knew that he had a family; wife and kids, hindrances to our happiness. But that was what they were. Hindrances that would be forgotten in time. That was what they were meant to be. But for the past few weeks, I’ve come to realize that Bode and I, we were a mistake. Somewhere along the line I had become a situation, one he had no idea how to handle. I was the hindrance to his peace.

I blink back tears. My heart feels like it’s being weighed down with stones so I grip the bed sheet in a bid to anchor myself.

“You have to choose.” I hear myself saying and I am sure I am not myself, that I am not the one saying those words.

“What?” His voice sounds almost comical, dripping with disbelief.

“Choose. It’s either us or them.”

As I wait for his answer, I can’t shake the feeling that this was how we were always supposed to end. I see it now, ever so clearly. Despite my dreams of our future, everything we had ever done, everything I had thought we were was meant for this moment. I was suddenly so sure of it.

So when I listened to his footsteps recede from our bedroom, it wasn’t surprising. In a way it was familiar, almost like I had seen this end before.

*“...My people have a saying. They say “Ke nne, Ke nwa, Ke nne, Ke nwa” in other words; the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree...”*

## 1

Mama was seated under the guava tree of our garden, a plate of egusi seeds on her lap when I came in. I had mentally prepared myself on the way back to beg, crawl, and admit to my mistake. Whatever it would take to make Mama forgive me and take me back, I would do. I could have stayed where I was but staying in that house after Bode left was impossible. A house I had once considered our love nest, one I had imagined raising our children in...was suddenly too suffocating to breathe in.

So when Mama looked up at me, I braced myself expecting to hear “I told you so”, waiting to hear about my foolishness, I expected a re-enactment of our last meeting. But all Mama said was,

“There’s a pot of yam porridge in the kitchen, it’s still warm. You should eat something.” Noisily, she shuffled the Egusi on the stainless plate; this way and that way and I waited because that couldn’t be all.

She looks at me, squinting through her thick glasses, “Are you going to stand in the sun all day?” *No*, I thought, *I shouldn’t*, so gratefully; I made my way into the house and wanting to please, to do the right thing for once, I ate the yam porridge. I ate it ravenously and as I chewed on the green leaves and peppered yams, I felt tears burning the back of my throat. I felt relieved, like a weight had suddenly been lifted off me, replaced by a blanket of drowsiness, so making my way into our room, mama’s and mine, I slept, hoping to wake up devoid of my mistakes.

In the days that followed after coming home, I sought Mama’s forgiveness. I did it silently; joining her in her morning prayers, seating with her under the tree in the afternoons while she read and watching the news at night. My extended belly was a constant elephant in the room, one we never made mention of. But we both knew that my due date was fast approaching.

I made the house my own little prison, never going past the gates, even on Sundays and Mama understood. We both knew what would happen if I did and I wasn't ready for that yet. I couldn't stand the pitiful stares and opinions that waited outside that gate. I imagined my neighbor, Iya Segun and her unwarranted advices; I imagined the whole street watching me as I waddled down to the Catholic Church at the bus stop and the picture alone leaves me with a sheen of anxious sweat.

So I moped round the house, aware of the pathetic picture I made and aware that I was slowly, uncontrollably sinking into a depression. It didn't help that I kept picturing impossible scenarios; scenes of Bode walking into the garden, declaring that his decision had been a mistake. In my dreams, I imagine him hugging me, clinging to me, apologizing profusely. Other times, I wished I could go back in time, to over a year ago when Mama and I had argued, when she had pulled at my hand telling me not to leave, not to be *that* woman. I wished she had tied me down and spoken sense into me. I wished she had slapped reasoning into me when I had screamed at her, telling her;

"You have no control over me Mama. It's my life, allow me to live it." I can't help cringing at how stupid I had been. I had thought I knew everything; a side effect of being young.

Mama had warned me, pointing out that I was too young, to her I was just a baby but I stood my ground telling her that I was a woman,

'A twenty year old woman for God's sake' was my exact words. We had rowed while I packed my things and all through, nothing she said penetrated my brick of a brain. Mama followed me all around the house in her *shimi* and just when I was about to step out of the door she had pleaded,

'Ifunaya please, don't do this. Believe me, you don't want to,' and I had felt pity for her. She was only a mother, trying to do what she considered best so I had comforted her,

"Mama, don't worry." Dropping my bag at the front door, I rushed to her smiling, "Bode loves me Mama. He really does, you'll see everything will be fine."

I chuckled, smiling up at the guava leaves, the sound causing Mama to look up from her book, *so much for the power of love*.

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*

My daughter, Ifeyinwa arrived on the twenty third of March 2024 after seven hours of labor. She had howled like a sonorous banshee and I was shocked at how black her wrinkled skin was, as black as her father's and I fell deeply in love with her at first sight. It's safe to say, Mama wasn't far behind me.

Ifeyinwa was the bridge Mama and I needed. She was the reason why we laughed again; at the amount of poo she deposited on her nappies, at the face she made the first time she had a taste of pepper, it was her first steps that made us cling to each other rejoicing like we had won the lottery. And to me, I had. Ifeyinwa was the ticket to understanding myself, to knowing Mama. It was while I bathed her, in our tiny bathroom that Mama opened up to me.

While Ifeyinwa splashed around, giggling in delight at the rubber ball that bobbed in the water, Mama told me about my father, a man I had little recollection of. She told me of the mistakes she had made, the marriage she had selfishly broken and the devastation she had felt after.

She told me while carrying Ifeyinwa out of the bath,

“It wasn’t till his real wife came to this house, her baby strapped to her back, begging me to leave her husband that I understood my actions.”

“But you were in love Mama. It wasn’t like you planned to ruin a marriage.” I said, my heart burning at the injustice fate had dealt us.

“Yes” Mama said, smiling at Ifeyinwa, who gave her back a toothless smile. “I was in love.” Mama agreed and in the glare of the bedroom light, she looked old and dismal.

“But love shouldn’t destroy the happiness of others, it shouldn’t invade the home of innocent children, it shouldn’t uproot the home of a fellow woman.”

Ifeyinwa dressed and happy, wobbled out of Mama’s grip and into mine. Mama looked at me, her eyes holding me captive, and for the first time I saw the regret in her eyes, I saw her guilt,

“I failed as a mother to you. I should have taught you these things.”

“Mama please don’t say that...”

Gripping my thigh, looking desperately at me she said, “Ifunaya please let me finish.” So I kept silent. I let her alleviate her guilt.

“If I had told you these things, if I had done better, taught you the proper way to live...” Mama looks around wildly, as if her faults were all around the room with us.

“If I had married a decent man, if you had lived in a normal family, perhaps this wouldn’t have happened.”

I shake my head, telling her that her guilt is unwarranted.

“There were my mistakes to make Mama. I loved him, I really did but I should have known better. And it might seem strange but I don’t regret it...at least not anymore.” I say looking at Ifeyinwa and Mama smiles, her mood brightening,

“I understand.” She says and I’m sure that she does.

## Epilogue

Ifeyinwa is five years old today and in all her five years, her father hasn't come to look for her once. I don't blame him and I try my best not to think of him. None of this was his fault after all and I am more than happy to claim Ifeyinwa as mine. I have claimed Ifeyinwa as *my creation*, my *own daughter*, my only true love. I can't help being filled with an overwhelming sense of pride as I watch her, prancing ahead of me as we walk to church, my eyes daring the neighbours and gossips to say a thing.

I consider myself lucky to have been blessed to this extent despite my mistakes. I pray to God for her that she grows into a beautiful young woman, one who won't make the same mistakes that I did.

After the church service, we make our way home where Mama is already waiting and Ifeyinwa squeals happily at the birthday cake on the living room table and I can't help the burst of joy that swells inside me. From Mama's glowing face, I know I am not alone.

We both may have made mistakes but with Ifeyinwa, we would make things right. Ifeyinwa would never be like me, she would never be second choice; she would never be a situation or a hindrance. And if for any reason, she should follow in my footsteps, I would be there to tie her to a tree, to talk sense into her. And if she persists like I did, losing her mind to a man undeserving of her, then I would be there to catch her at the end. I would nurse her back to sanity and tell her; just as Mama had done for me that it was all right.

Sometimes I wonder if Mama had felt this strongly for me. I wonder how much of her heart I had taken with me when I had left believing myself to be right. I wonder if all mothers feel this way about their daughters. I know one thing, no matter my daughters mistakes, I will always be there to catch her, it is after all, what a mother does.





