

It starts raining shortly after we get into the car on our way to the hospital.

My mother does not like driving while it rains as a rule; her vision becomes blurry and her reflexes slow down as though her brain interprets the rain as a time for sleep.

Rainy Port Harcourt is my least favorite representation of this city which has been the only home I know. It becomes grey and dirty. The city gives up its guise of a civilized society and reveals itself for what it truly is: unplanned, unmanaged, and unclean.

My mother had gotten out of the car and was hurrying, hunched over to avoid the rain, into the reception when I realized we had arrived. I get out, slam the door, see that my bag is still on the car seat, and clamber upstairs. I get the keys from my mother and traipse back downstairs to rescue it. I don't know why, I don't need anything from it, literally nothing of value is inside.

While we wait in the reception, I keep nausea down by flicking my tongue against the roof of my throat. My mother keeps glancing at me with a pained expression.

"I can't imagine how hard it is to be back in a hospital again so soon after... I know you wish she was here too?"

I shake my head.

She tries again.

"Did you eat anything before we left?"

"I don't think so," I say, then add as I catch the implications of what she is asking,

"Was I supposed to?"

"They didn't say, either way, I just thought you might need your strength or something."

"Oh, okay."

We lapse back into silence.

It occurs to me that with everything I'm feeling at this moment, my mother's heart must be quite torn to shreds as well. There's a part of me that remembers how to comfort her and acknowledge all she's doing for me through this process. As soon as I told her, she set up this appointment in the hospital where we go for everything. We haven't had to come here in ages and I don't remember any of the staff but still, it can't have been easy setting this up.

I'm altogether too tired to even move my hand to squeeze hers. It's a tiredness I never knew existed; if it wasn't mechanical, I probably wouldn't have the strength to breathe. Probably wouldn't care to.

A nurse comes into the reception area and asks us to follow her. Inside a white room, I see an inner room with a doctor and a couple of nurses around a bed with contraptions around it. I can feel my mind shifting to autopilot and I thank God for the gift of disassociation. With any luck, I'll never remember what is about to happen.

I'm handed a hospital gown as my mother makes small talk with the doctor in the inner room. They are having a conversation about work and stuff like we are here for a routine check-up. Fascinating.

As she excuses herself, she asks me if I'm okay.

"How painful will it be?" I risk asking.

"It will be painful. But it won't take long. So, there's that."

I don't know what to say to that so I turn around and start taking off my jeans. It's not so easy to breathe now.

When I'm done, a nurse helps me up on the bed and starts cleaning my vagina with a cotton swab and something that smells of disinfectant. I begin to shake so badly, that the nurse asks me if I'm alright with a skeptical look on her face. I imagine that she

has seen this so many times that it's become rote for her; she spares no compassion for what she sees as my dramatics.

The shaking only intensifies when the doctor prods my lower abdomen and spreads my legs to begin. It causes him to frown at me, to ask if I'd like to do this another time. He asks this patiently and I immediately feel a rush of gratitude for him. It's pathetic really. Nonetheless, I shake my head. I want this to be over more than I dread it happening.

He starts to talk to me then. He asks if I'm still in school, what I studied, the random small talk I usually try to avoid, but this time it sort of does the trick of helping me relax and I feel the walls of my vagina begin to unclench as he inserts some instrument inside me.

"I'm using this to widen your uterus, to keep it open."

I don't want the live commentary but he's being kind so I let him go on.

"Next, I'm going to use this to seek out the foet- the mass of blood. Then, I'm going to start suctioning it out."

The pain throughout all this is completely indescribable. It feels as though my body, my nerves, and my brain are screaming against this invasion. I'm aware that I'm muttering something like a mantra but I can't make it out. I cannot believe the pain.

When it's over, one of the nurses cleans me up and I don't know if it's her gentleness or the knowledge that it's finally over that makes me break down in the most heart-wrenching tears, that even I am surprised. I hear the sorrow in my voice and it makes me weep even harder. The nurse rubs my back and I can see the other nurse and doctor watching me in silence. Witness the utter destruction of my soul. No matter how good I am at disassociating, I know I will never forget this.

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When I was much younger, I thought my mother was the most intriguing person in the world. She always looked like she wasn't here in this reality with the rest of us and couldn't be bothered to participate in the mundane, pointless drama that made up our existence. This complete lack of interest in the world made her all the more interesting and I did all sorts of things to get her attention but all I got for my antics was a bemused gaze. If I got into trouble, it would evolve into a slightly disappointed frown and that was it. I got the impression that she didn't know how I had gotten here; like I was an alien that had landed on her doorstep, disrupted her peaceful lifestyle and she was doing her best to coexist with me.

She had me when she was thirty-five years old. After spending most of her life intentionally alone, and still new to a successful and fulfilling career as a project manager, she decided a child wouldn't be a bad idea after all and set out to have me. She named me Nwakaego as a way to remind herself if she ever regretted having a child, why she did it in the first place.

She introduced me to the world of literature when I was three; I was the only child in kindergarten whose parents read them to sleep every night. She invariably read to me what she was reading at the moment so I grew up in a world crafted by Alice Walker and Buchi Emechata and Marian Keyes and Zora Hurston and Leila Aboulela and Chimamanda and Hosseini.

Homework was often interrupted by, “Listen to this sentence, baby,” and we would spend the next few minutes talking about the beauty of the prose. It was a peaceful, predictable, idyllic life. It never occurred to me to want for anything else.

I remember when we stopped visiting my mother’s sisters. They were Amazonian women; marriage and motherhood had sculpted their bodies into soft, yieldable, huge mounds of flesh and their hearts into resentful, suspicious places for storing grievances and planning retributions.

I found their interactions with my mother mildly entertaining, to say the least. It always started with them airing their marital woes before we got through the front door. “Ah, you have come! I would have come to visit you, oh, but that stupid man seized my car keys again because I came back from church late last week. Imagine! So I should not go for the last Friday of the month vigil? When he is not my God.”

And on it went. A fascinating dance with them navigating from the living room to the kitchen with us in tow, them narrating the latest incident that had occurred in their marriage which had stripped them of their humanity, my mother bobbing her head like a lizard to show she was listening attentively and making the appropriate ‘can you imagine!’ sounds to show that she, too, felt the speaker had been treated terribly.

After her troubles had been thoroughly purged, the sister would look at my mother with eyes full of condescending pity thinly veiled as concern and ask, “But how are *you*?” At this juncture, their eyes will dart to the general area I occupy to ensure that my mother does not misunderstand the object of their inquiry. And like a well-rehearsed play, my mother would respond, “We are fine oh, sister!” in a tone so assured that it leaves no room for doubt that we are, in fact, living such blissful lives that words cannot do it justice.

In foresight, I realize that this insistence of my mother to not accept and admit that her life was just as bad as everyone else's fed into the resentment her sisters began to feel towards us. It just was not the Nigerian way. We thrived on exchanging stories where our lot was worse than our neighbors'. If you talked about a bad husband, your neighbor could do you one better by narrating her life as the mother of an addict.

The fact that our lives were truthfully drama-free and seemed almost perfect was beside the point. It was seen as bad manners to imply that your neighbor's life was truly a mess by not recounting your troubles. And so my aunts set out to prove to my mother how imperfect her life also was by chanting like a prayer every chance they got: "So this child will grow up without a father? I just don't understand how a woman will decide not to have a man in her life. A man is supposed to be a woman's crown. How will this child marry in the future without ever having a father figure? And you're still young oh. It's not too late."

To which my mother calmly replied, "The ones that have fathers, which of them can hold a candle to my Ego?"

My mother was never coy nor patronizing in her esteem for me. It seemed like a given: of course I was smart, of course I was resourceful, of course, I was eloquent, how could I not be? This child that came from her. Coming home with good grades was met with proud but unsurprising praise. She knew I could do it so I never doubted that I could.

Shortly after I turned 14, the weekly visits to her sisters turned to monthly drop-ins and eventually dwindled to periodic phone calls "to see how the kids are doing". She still sent birthday cheques unfailingly. I missed my cousins terribly but even then I knew a toxic environment when I felt one.

My mother's choice to never marry was so reasonable, I was confused that anyone questioned it. She simply did not see what a marriage would add to her life. Hers was the unruffled existence where predictability and routine ruled. Courtship held no magic for her, she was perfectly content to live life vicariously through the characters in her novels.

It is a testament to her unending capacity for understanding that my mother never held any grudge towards her sisters for their inability to accept a lifestyle they could not relate to. She saw their constant criticism for what it was; a need to project their unhappiness unto her. As a young girl, she saw men as a means to an end while her sisters saw men, and marriage by association, as *the* end. She never intimated her desire to live as a single mother to them because she knew they would not understand, and also because she avoided all kinds of confrontation like the plague. So understandably, her decision was received with shock.

Limiting contact with them was her way of setting boundaries and reducing my exposure to negativity and criticism. I grew up with a sense of self-awareness often mistaken for precocity which was finely crafted by my mother. She spoke to me like an equal and sought my opinions on things ranging from dinner to my choice of school. Every question was patiently answered, and every opinion was curiously explored. She did everything right, all mistakes are mine alone.

My mother and I were eating a late dinner in the sitting room two days after she successfully dragged me out of my room when, out of nowhere, she said, “You should go somewhere. Traveling is the best antidote for depression I know.”

“What? I’m not *depressed*!” I twisted sideways on the sofa to frown at her. “You can’t just dish out mental illnesses like that.”

“Okay. So what are you then?” she retorted, calmly loading a piece of plantain with eggs on her fork.

“I’m just.. sad. Very sad. And just tired. I just don’t want to do anything which is why I haven’t been leaving the house much.”

“Babe, you left your room five times in the past two months.”

“Because I was tired!”

“Okay, well, traveling is the best antidote for sadness I know. Besides, it’s July, the NYSC list won’t be out till November at the earliest. What will you do till then?”

“Read.”

“You can read in South Africa.”

“What’s in South Africa?”

“Your Uncle Akio. His partner is doing an installation so they’ll be there till the end of the year.”

“Oh, Andrew is working again?”

“It’ll seem so,” my mother replied as she stood up to refill her wine glass.

My godfather had been in the most tumultuous relationship with his partner, Andrew, for the past five years. It was clear to everyone except Uncle Akio that he was Andrew’s sugar daddy, but Uncle Akio thought Andrew was the love of his life so he excused Andrew’s excesses. He explained away Andrew’s unreliability and self-absorbed nature as the by-product of genius, a term only Uncle Akio used when

describing Andrew's drug-induced sculptures. Art magazines and galleries could not even be bothered to pass commentary on his work so Uncle Akio had to constantly make 'donations' for Andrew to be invited to exhibitions.

"Will you come?" I asked my mom. "I can't bear to be with Andrew for long periods. I may kill him and then how will you survive with me away in jail?"

"I can't come, babe. We have new projects lined up till February next year. You know, I recently connected with your cousin, Dera, on Facebook."

"Oh my God, really? Wow, how is she?"

"She's doing well apparently. Just rounded up with NYSC, living in Abuja. She seems happy."

"Hmmm," I muttered, wondering where this was going.

"You should go and visit her." (there we go) "You've never been to Abuja, have you? You should go see what it's like there, I personally love the town. You might decide to do your NYSC there if you take to the place. There's so much to do; you could go hiking in the mountains, there's this wonderful farm at Kuje, so many beautiful parks for picnics, and the food! It is so cheap and delicious, you could finally try Fulani food, you've always wanted to try it..."

I looked over at my mum. She was staring at me intently as if by sheer force of will she could get me to move to Abuja this second.

"Mummy," I sighed, pushing away my barely touched plate. "I wish I can explain how tired I am. I feel so brittle, like if I stepped outside for a second I'd blow away to a million tiny pieces."

"Okay, so let's do it now. Let's take a step outside together, that way if you blow away I'll be there to catch you."

Our eyes met and I could see all the despair I felt mirrored in hers. She nodded her head once, after a beat I nodded mine, and we got up.









