

## The Winter of '98

Ibiene Bidiaque

My mother was the epitome of *Fuck around and find out before Fuck around and find out* was a thing. She raised my brother and I with an iron fist that nearly crushed us. I remember catching her eyes across crowded rooms on a number of occasions and dread filling every inch of my body, not even knowing what I might have done wrong. Once, my brother whispered under his breath that she was such a bitch and she gave him two hot slaps in quick succession. He cried and threatened to call the police, and without stuttering my mother said, "Go ahead. Call them. I will do maybe one year in prison for assault on a minor. But you, you will be stuck in the foster care system until you turn eighteen. You will become a ward of the state and that smell will follow you everywhere you go. Go ahead. Call. Them." My brother didn't call the police. And he never called her a bitch again - at least not to her face.

I'm not saying that all Benin women are witches, but there is definitely something in the water. It makes these women unafraid. It makes them look at life in the face and say, "Try me."

My mother took my brother and I away from our father to cold, grey Manchester in the middle of winter. January 1998. I remember thinking that it was some type of punishment. Why would you bring us to a country where it doesn't seem like the sun shines, and the cold enters your toes and your fingers and your neck and your nose? The first few months, my brother and I were locked away in a bedroom in a flat we shared with a stranger. It was the smallest room I had ever seen up until then, and the single bed and our suitcases took up the entire space. Our mother would leave in the mornings and warn Idris and I not to make a sound and only to use the bathroom when we were sure the man in the other room had left for work. She made us peanut butter sandwiches and tea which she left on the window sill. We would eat those sandwiches as soon as we woke up and then wait with growling stomachs until she returned in the evening with Greggs pork bakes and apple juice. It was possibly the darkest time of my life, and I was only 9 years old. I knew that something was very wrong but also knew that my mother was not the type of woman that you questioned. And I had so many questions. Why were we here? Where was our father? Would he be coming to join us or would we be going back to Lagos soon? Idris had no answers to my questions and he was the most irritable of companions. He spent our time in prison sleeping or reading comic books. His approach was always forceful and he would assail our mother with the questions I was afraid to ask the moment she walked through that door in the evenings, whispering viciously. *Where is daddy? How long do we have to stay in this room for? Where do you go all day?* She gave him no answers. She would take her shoes off, eat her pork bake, and fall asleep.

When we started school in the spring of 1998, I knew that I was never going back to Nigeria. The Abraham Moss Community School uniform was a depressing army green and grey, and the tights my mother bought me itched my ankles and my calves. My book bag was too heavy and the hairstyle my mother made me gave me headaches for days. By this time we were living in a one-bedroom flat in Moss Side. The flat was barely bigger than that

prison flat, but at least we had the whole place to ourselves and didn't have to act like mice sharing a house with a cat. The picture began to fall into place in my head as my mother made a friend from work, Aunty Rosemary, who sometimes followed her home, and I was able to piece together information from their conversations. My mother - who had been a matron at the private hospital she worked in in Lagos - was now a caregiver at an old people's home in Didsbury. She wanted to get qualified to work as an RN in the UK but would have to wait until she heard back from the Home Office concerning her asylum application. She didn't have an office at home, so I had no idea what she was talking about.

While I was trying to make sense of cold England and mean boys who made fun of my dry lips, Idris hit it off with the boys in his form pretty quickly. He played hooky a few times with them, going to the Arndale Centre instead of going to school. He was moving mad and must have forgotten who his mother was. She reminded him. The day my mother found out he was missing school, she beat the living daylight out of him and then when she realized the belt had left marks on his arms and back, she called the school the next day to say that he was sick and would be staying home until he felt better.

The grief of losing our fathers - even while they were still alive - was what brought Sinead and I together. That, plus the obsession we had about the fact that both our names started with an "S" and each had 6 letters; Sinead and Salina. We were inseparable from Year 5 through to the Sixth Form, and we were complete opposites. Sinead's father came from Belfast, mine came from Benin. Sinead's wavy ginger hair ran down to her waist, and her pale skin was freckled, her green eyes bright like gemstones. My 4C hair grew in tight curls, my skin was deep brown, and my iris was close to black against very white sclera. We were a walking contraction, with her high-pitched Irish accent and my low-rumbling Nigerian one. But we did have one thing in common: our mothers had taken us away from our fathers. Sinead's father had been in and out of prison since she was a wee child and one day her mother had enough and carted her on a ferry to Glasgow; first to a cousin's house and then moving south to Manchester when she met and married a construction worker called Gary. I hadn't known exactly what my father had done to make my mother leave him, but if I was to be entirely honest, it might have been a combination of his heavy drinking and his refusing to return to the house for days on end. He also had a lot of female friends he brought home when our mother was at work, and I found out when I was older that he had gotten one of them pregnant. He had always been kind to me, but it turns out he had not been very kind to my mother.

The thing about losing your father while he is still alive is that you hate him for not coming to find you, and yet you still love him like your life depends on it. I found my father on Facebook. By this time I was on a gap year I had chosen for myself because I hadn't made the grades I needed to get into Medicine at Imperial College, and I had moved out of my mother's house in Didsbury and out of her way into a massive Victorian house in Fallowfield that Sinead and I shared with eight other tenants. I was working at DeliCare Laboratories as a biochemical intern and my mother was convinced that I was wasting my time, when I could have taken the Nursing offer Birmingham University gave me and "moved on with [my] life instead of being hooked on this doctor-doctor dream." I found my father during my lunch break at a cybercafe that was wedged between a Café Nero and a crumbling bookstore. Idris Gbadamosi Snr. with 351 Facebook friends. Managing Director at Gbada & Sons Investment Properties. Studied at University of Benin. Married to Stephanie Adebola

Gbadamosi. Lives in Lagos, Nigeria. He had aged but he was still that man that I knew. I had memorised his face. He looked just as I imagined he would a decade later. How many more sons did he have now? Gbada & Sons could definitely not refer to Idris, could it? His wife was very ugly. I hated the smile on her face and her hagged wigs. She was a thief. An intruder. Between him and his wife's Facebook profiles, I counted their three daughters in various pictures. They all looked as ugly as their mother. I closed the tab and felt a pit in my stomach.

I never messaged my father or sent him a friend request. Sinead and Idris said that I should, but it felt like an invasion to do that to him since he had another family. The family that he had chosen. By this time, Idris had moved to Spain, chasing his "music-music dream."

The thing about losing your father while he is still alive is that everyone moves on but you. When I walked into my mother and her underaged boyfriend (he was young enough to be her son), I nearly lost my mind. They weren't in bed. But they might have well been. When I walked into her bedroom, she was slipping her robe on, laughing about something, and he was laying in bed, the duvet stopping at his waist with his bare chest exposed. I screamed. She screamed. He nearly jumped out of bed. I ran down the stairs and then back up the stairs into my bedroom, locking the door. This was several months after I had found Idris Gbadamosi Snr. with 351 Facebook friends.

"Why didn't you call before you came? Why didn't you call?"

My mother repeated those words over and over again through my locked bedroom door.

"I didn't know I had to call when I was coming *home!*" I yelled.

Home. The word rang in my head. Where was my home? Where did I belong? Was it in Lagos with my father? In Didsbury with my mother? In Fallowfield with Sinead? In Madrid with Idris? In the cold DeliCare lab running glass slates under microscopes and testing urine and stool samples for bacteria?

The underaged boyfriend was fully clothed and sitting at the kitchen table when I was leaving. It was when he offered a type of goodbye that I recognized his voice; he was the kid from down the road who used to mow the front yard and plant primroses along the driveway during the summers. God of Abraham.

I never contacted my father and I never gave up my Medicine dream. I decided I would find my own home, make my own place. I chose Brighton. Ordinarily, it should have been a coastal Californian city with the soothing sounds of crashing ocean waves and beautiful sunsets that can take your blues away, but I was broke and the pebble beach of Brighton would have to do. Sinead didn't understand it, but she was newly pregnant for a married man who lived in Saudi Arabia, and so she had too much going on to try to convince me to stay in Manchester. Idris was touring Europe with the record label he was signed to, so he was too busy to respond to my text messages or voicemails about finding another address to forward his mail to since I was moving to Brighton. My mother was furious that I

was still studying to get A's in A-level Chemistry and Biology while "[my] mates were preparing to enter the second year of university." She asked why I had chosen Brighton and Sussex Medical School instead of sticking with Imperial College, she asked where and whom I would be living with in Brighton, she asked if I had a job lined up or if I was foolishly leaving my internship at DeliCare. I gave her no answers. It was like the winter of 1998 all over again. When Idris finally got back to me, he sounded like he was sprawled out on a beach somewhere, gleaming with carefully applied sunscreen - "because we black people lie to ourselves when we think we can't get sunburnt." His voice was raspy and the words poured out of them in a scattered fashion like he had been drinking much of the day. He said something vaguely kind and philosophical about being proud of me for chasing my dreams, and then said he would forward his mail to my new address in Brighton and thanks much for the support.

Brighton was not as bright as I had imagined but I made that bedsitter my home. Sinead and her big stomach came to settle me in and we bought overpriced, fragile IKEA furniture that neither of us knew how to couple together properly. I bought too many potted plants that I knew I would not remember to water. The view out of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the ocean and I pretended that it was the Pacific and that I was in Santa Barbara.

I got an A in Chemistry and a B in Biology. BSMS rescinded their conditional offer but I refused to return to Manchester. I refused to tell even Sinead that I would yet be spending another year trying to get into the Medicine course at BSMS. She had just had her baby, Noah, and was considering her married boyfriend's proposal to be his second wife. I was too disappointed in my own life, in my own bloody B in Biology, to explain to her that she deserved to be a man's first choice. The days that my mother wasn't too busy working at the hospital and banging the neighbour's kid, she called me to ask how I was doing; specifically, to ask if I was now studying that Medicine that I so desired. I kept her in the dark and danced around the topic, and then when she started to get angry, I told her I was tired and hung up. Apparently, she was so upset about the whole thing that she told Idris, who called me to ask if I was in school now because mummy wanted to know - and those two never talked about anything unless Idris needed money or mummy needed help with her phone or laptop. I asked him if he remembered those months in the winter of 1998 when he asked her where our father was, and she never gave him an answer. A laugh seemed to get caught in his throat and then he offered, "True that, true that," and said he had to go.

I went back to studying A-level Biology and took up my old job at the DeliCare lab in Brighton. The lab was an hour and a half away from my bedsitter and took three buses to get to - after walking seventeen minutes to the bus stop. Getting disappointed once is a challenge, but a second disappointment about the same thing feels like a nightmare that you will never wake up from. The home that I thought I had made for myself consisting of an ocean view and indoor plants and plush pillows looked like a façade; props I was hiding my pain with. I just wanted to study Medicine and I wanted to hear my father's voice again. That was all. Somehow, I found the will to try one more time to beat A-level Biology. I felt like a fool most days. What if I really was wasting my life and my talents chasing this "doctor-doctor dream"? What, really, was I trying to achieve? What point was I trying to prove, and to whom? But I found the strength to study, somehow. And I told myself that this was it. If I did not get an A in Biology the third time round, I would study Biochemistry part

time at the University of Sussex and work at DeliCare part time. No matter what happened, this would be my home, of my own making.

I eventually told Sinead when she came with Noah to visit that I hadn't started the Medicine course and she was hurt that I hadn't told her. I was equally hurt by that 3.5 carat diamond ring on her finger and told her so. We fought about it, but she said she loved him and that she couldn't help how she felt. We had dinner at the Palace Pier and took Noah to the beach the next day. She showed me a text conversation she had been having with a mutual friend from college who had written A-level Biology four times before getting the A's he needed for Medicine at Cambridge. There was a Facebook study group he ran on Friday evenings and Saturdays that Sinead made me promise to join. I told her I would think about it. We hugged at the train station like I was going to war.

I was going to war. I joined the Facebook group and made my weekends available for study. A few of us lived in the Brighton area and met on Sundays in the basement of The Black Lion pub to study past questions. We all seemed to be living the same lives; one revolving around working a 9 to 5 and getting into Medicine, as though anything short of that would kill us. But I had made an escape plan I told none of them about; this was my last round. I knew that I had to move on.

A few Sundays after drinks and Biology at The Black Lion, Conor drove me home. He had lived in Brighton all his life and his bright blue eyes reminded me of Sinead's. He started working at a bar after college and played guitar with his band from time to time. They were called The Maniacs. This was his second shot, and his dream university was Manchester. When I told him that if I ever stepped foot in Manchester again, it would be too soon, he laughed hard and said he found it funny that one man's trash was another man's treasure. The study group cancelled one of the Sunday Black Lion sessions because of a Liverpool match but Conor and I decided we would meet up anyway and then we decided we might as well meet at his or mine since no one else was coming. We decided on my place. We didn't study. We watched the stupid Liverpool match and then watched *The Great British Baking Show* and talked about the royal family, Anglo-Saxon history, and the Labour Party. When I asked why he wasn't studying History or Political Science, he thought long and hard and then said, "Because I want to help people." He asked why I wanted to study Medicine and even though I also thought long and hard, I didn't have much of an answer. I instead told him that I couldn't stand that pastry smell that comes out of Greggs because it reminds me of being locked away for hours in a small room in a flat in Manchester. When he looked at me the way that he did, I knew I had said too much. Instead he said, "No wonder you hate Manchester."

It was easy to talk to Conor. And that type of ease can put you in trouble. Because nothing tended to shock or surprise him, I found myself saying the things that I had never told anybody before, not even Sinead. I even talked to him about how disappointed I was that she was marrying another woman's husband and he agreed with me that she was blinded by love. I told him that I knew when the pieces fell apart, I would be the one to pull her and Noah together and he agreed, telling me to prepare for it. He also told me he thought my father would be happy to hear from me, but I disagreed.

Three months before our exams, Conor and I both got conditional offers from the University of Manchester and BSMS, respectively. We celebrated with Thai and wine at my bedsitter and Conor told me that he missed me already because he knew I would never come to see him in Manchester. It was a loaded statement. It had the potential of meaning so much but could also have meant nothing at all.

Two weeks before the exam, we were both nervous wrecks. Too much anxiety and too much wine meant we went dancing and ended up at my bedsitter and the only reason we didn't end up in my bed was because the buckle of his belt was difficult to undo and when he stopped kissing me and reach down to unbuckle it, I stepped back and seemed to be viewing myself from above, stood there in my dark bedsitter with this handsome, shirtless man and I knew it was a bad idea. I told him so and he agreed. He put his shirt back on and we decided seeing each other again before the exam would be a distraction we both didn't need. He was in for the long-haul but I had an escape plan. It didn't seem fair.

On the day of the exam, he picked me up and we drove to Brighton College in silence. We waited patiently outside the hall and before we got called in, he hugged me and whispered in my ear, "You've got this."

The results were to be out in a month and the winter of 1998 almost paled in comparison to that tortuous wait. I felt physically ill most days, feeling like my life was in the hands of an examiner I did not know.

Conor and I decided beforehand that we would open our results together. On the day the postman delivered the Edexcel package, I called in sick and we congregated at my bedsitter. Conor took my parcel and I took his. We opened the parcels at the same time. I saw "A" next to Biology and leaped off the sofa as he yelled, "Ayyyyyyy!" We kissed and cried and hugged. It was a dream come true and a nightmare that had finally ended.

"You must come and see me in Manchester," Conor told me after a while.

"You know that I won't," I said.

"Then what happens with us?"

I shrugged. The emotions would eventually abate. BSMS would send me an acceptance letter in the coming weeks, and I would hand in my resignation at DeliCare for the second time and start applying for student loans that would run me into debt for years to come, and the numbing feeling of missing my father would rear its head again, like it always does. Life would kick into full gear and Conor and I would decide what exactly this was, if at all it was anything more than solidarity and loneliness. But at the end of it all, I would be okay. After all, I am Justina's daughter. I look life in the face and say, "Try me."