

The plane was relaxing. I found the dins of the plane's wings soothing. My stroke of luck was securing a window seat. The clouds appeared irresistibly soft, resembling the cotton wool mama used with methylated spirit to tend to our wounds. I had hope in those clouds, that if against all odds the plane were to falter, I'd pick the softest one to land on. However, the serenity of the plane was soon shattered as it began to convulse. 'Why is no one scared?' I thought to myself. Even as the carry-on bags drizzled from the over-head compartments, there was still no uproar. I had expected to hear fervent prayers like some 'Blood of Jesus!' here and there, but the eerie calm persisted. If no one was screaming, who am I to scream? I kept mute as well, but my brain was in shambles. The staff in my brain, who were assigned to keep me sane had evacuated. Some had already died at the first turbulence. I could feel only a handful of them struggling to maintain some semblance of order. I was in panic mode. The plane was nosediving in fumes. It was heading for a local fish market. The market women stared at this flamed enigma hurtling towards them. In surreal twist, they had thought that it was the second coming of Christ, erupting into cheers of anticipation. They urged this flamed mystery to descend quickly and release them from their state of poverty. Like a ball out of hell, the plane crashed into the market, a spurge of lifeless and toasted bodies spilling in its wake. The impact set the market ablaze, paying gratitude to its supporters by trampling them underfoot. The clouds had failed me. Just like everything else.

I felt a sudden convergence of my spirit and body, accompanied with a sudden urgency that sprung me out of bed and into the bathroom. I knelt at the mercy of the toilet and dug my head in its bowl. The contents of my stomach thrust out the *pap* I had at family dinner. I wished the dream was a reality, but a particular focus on Pop. He was to fly to Lagos that morning on a work trip and I deeply yearned for Pop to die in a bloodcurdling and agonizing plane crash that very day.

At dinner that night, Papa, who was now known as 'Pop', throng the air with a ceaseless chain of praise directed at my younger brother, Obinna. Obinna was a beautiful man. He possessed skin as smooth and unblemished as *fufu*, and a thick, lustrous mane of hair. His lips were small and pink like a rose, a framed set of faultlessly arrayed, yellow-tinged teeth. A single dimple on his left cheek, adding to the charm of his contagious smile. Everyone loved Obinna as opposed to me. He was just the likable type, that effortlessly drew the affection from all corners.

Pop praised Obinna for the littlest things, often for the very same actions I had undertaken. Obinna's accomplishments ranged from taking the ninth position among his twenty classmates back in Secondary school to completing chores like dishwashing. He was even lauded for simply waking up on certain occasions. That day, Obinna had scored Colin's heart, resulting in an invitation to spend the summer in London. Pop cleared his throat and took in a deep breath. I wondered if he was going to complain about the sogginess of the *pap* but blurted out "my boy does not fail me"

Obinna chuckled out in response, as they shared understanding glances. Mama joined in this intimate connection, leaving me in the dark.

"Obi, my international boy, is going to London to make us proud! Colin has agreed for him to stay with him this break" Pop, Mama and Obinna seemed to have already known this and were informing me for my dismay and jealousy. I looked down at the *pap* in front of me, as though it had something to say. Mama's nudges implored me to react, to contribute something to the conversation. I did not have anything to tell my self-declared rival. He took pride in my downfall and I his, but unfortunately, he did not have any. At least not in this household because my parents made sure Obinna had the best life. Mama nudged at me again

and I still kept mute. With a forceful push against the table, I rose abruptly from my seat and headed straight to my room. I felt their piercing eyes on my back, it felt like they had silently launched a barrage of daggers and bullets at me. My family members embodied the very “village people” that Nigerians had fervently rebuked and been cautioned to shield themselves from. Collapsing on my mattress, I found myself staring at the unvarying rotations of the ceiling fan. I hated everyone in my house. I hated my parents for giving me the ugliest genes, I was ugly and as thin as a needle. Hell, even my name bore the weight of ugliness, a series of syllables that no one could pronounce it. I had to succumb to “*hace you*” or just “you” or the usual “what’s your name again?” when they did not even bother to know it in the first place. I loathed my father the most and was counting the days to his demise. I plotted on how I would strike his carcass for the longest time. Pop was the absolute worst, he lived a terrible life and projected his burdens on me when I was a child.

My birth coincided with the loss of my father’s greatest love, his mother. Additionally, one of the buildings he supervised was subpar and did not meet up to the standards of the owner, leading to his dismissal from work. He did not care to show up to the hospital, to bail my mother and I out, we were left cold and penniless. He resurfaced a week after, with the hospital bills and informed my mother that I was cursed. She believed unquestioningly. I was neither breastfed, nor shown any affection. When I turned two, my father embarked on midnight rituals to “drive the spirit of bad luck” out of my body, by inflicting scars with a whip on my back. My awareness of having a brother was deferred until my sixth year, so I didn’t lumber my “bad luck” to him. As time wore, he was groomed to have an aligned outlook of me, with that of my parents.

Mama’s stupidity was jarring. Pop wanted a better life in London. This ‘better life’ wasn’t for the family but tailored solely to himself alone. He decided to leave Nigeria to start anew. He did not want his fat wife, nor his ugly daughter anymore. He did not want to eat *akamu* every night. He did not want to worship God anymore; our community demanded a strict allegiance to a higher power. One *had* to be principled by a supreme being or be considered a mentally unstable. He wanted a Caucasian wife with a slim nose, he wanted a beautiful daughter that would be coveted by potential suitors. With the belief that London was a domain of wealth, he desired to escape the cycle of his manic Nigerian life. He desired to put an end to paying tithe or seeking solace in a being that had been punishing him for years. After years of trial and error, he secured a visa and ventured off to London without notifying his family. He stayed with his old friend Colin for a while. We did not know much about Colin; all we knew was that he had come to Nigeria years back to inspect on the building Pop and his “boys” were working on. Pop stayed at Colin’s for three months and picked up only unnecessary and superficial things: like forcing us to call him “Pop” as opposed to “Papa” and introducing the concept of family dinners. What he failed to grasp from Colin were habits of substance; he did not pick up how to love his wife like Colin did, he did not pick up on how to participate in family chores, he did not pick up on how to apologize sincerely or even at all.

After some weeks, Colin urged Pop to find a job and contribute to the rent. Pop could only get a menial job as a janitor. In just two days of scrubbing toilets did he realise how good he had it in Nigeria. He was the supervisor of a local construction company back in Nigeria, he never did manual labour, he was “too big” for that. He realised the London dream was nothing but a façade. He could testify that the illusion of London being a ticket to freedom and wealth was shambolic. He was unable attain his romanticized Caucasian woman with a slim nose, he was not chauffeured around in a luxury car and his daily existence

consisted of cleaning toilets. In acknowledging the emptiness of his London pursuit, he realised the humbling experience which jolted him back to reality and back to the life he had abandoned in Nigeria. Mama had an inexplicable change of heart and received him with open arms. Stupid woman.

After I had finished vomiting and cleaned myself up, Pop had announced his departure. The sounds that accompanied this announcement were a mix of the grumble of his old luggage and the slaps of Mama's rubber slippers against the floor. I trailed the happy family outside, where his cab was parked. Pop had donned his favourite brown fedora and his "good suit". He only wore the "good suit" on special occasions; Obinna's secondary school graduation, Obinna's soccer games at school, Obinna's University graduation and travels, of course. Not once had he worn it for any of my milestones: not for my secondary school graduation, not for my convocation, not for my call to bar either. In fact, he did not even bother to show up for any of those events.

Obinna loaded Pop's belongings into the boot of the cab, closed it and tapped it twice, indicating to the driver that it had been secured. Pop hugged his family, Mama and Obinna that is and inserted himself into the rusty cab. Mama clutched Obinna in tears, while I lingered at the back, as a mere observer. Inwardly, I wished for the plane to just plummet from the sky. I yearned for the clouds to laugh at him as he fell to the ground. My wishes for him were nothing short of death and eternal pain in hell, while Mama and Obinna wished him a safe journey. We stayed and watched how the rusty cab roared out of the compound.

Retreating to what Obinna mockingly referred to as my "evil layer", fixated on my novel, I reclaimed my solitude. Laying down with my face glued to the book, I had already found myself kneed deep into the fictional realm of alphabets that became words, words that became sentences and sentences that became a serene space. A space where my family members couldn't find me and I was in the companionship of the characters crafted by the authors, whom I called my friends.

The evening brought another serving of *pap*. This time, there was no family dinner due to Pop's absence. I had the privilege of not sitting in the midst of my sworn adversaries, escaping their taunts and jeers. The *pap* retained its unwelcomed sogginess, I found myself wondering why no one expressed their dismay of Mama's culinary shortcomings. "How hard is it to make *pap*?" I questioned myself.

Few hours after dinner, my attention was diverted as two men in mountainous suits passed by my window. They both had shiny bald heads and virtually non-existent necks. I could deduce their despondency. Mama was already outside with Obinna, I found myself compelled to join them outside. As pleasantries were exchanged and introductions made, the solemnity of the moment became apparent. The first man bowed his head while the other cast his gaze skyward, a synchronized motion that seemed practiced, as if they had engaged in these ritual countless times before. Cold air found its way to my spine when they announced Pop's death. Indeed, the plane had crashed. Mama's response was a loud, shaken "*Chimoo!*" as she crumpled to the ground. Obinna and I, for the first time ever locked eyes. His eyes were filled with tears, and I could already taste the bitterness of his tongue. The two men lingered for a moment, to observe our reaction and I could sense the satisfaction they derived from witnessing our grief. I left the two mourners and the bearers of bad news outside. I retreated from the scene, overwhelmed by a newfound fear of myself. In the solitude of my bathroom, I stared at the mirror to see if horns had sprouted from my head. I paced round the

bathroom thinking about my malevolent wish. “How on earth did it come true?” I questioned to myself. “When I wished to pass the bar exams the first time I took it, why didn’t *that* come true?” “I hated Pop with everything in me, but I did not mean to kill him!” My heart was not thumping anymore rather, it was striking my chest. I had committed murder. I was indeed a witch. I became haunted by the impending sight of the “Adieu Papa” posters and T shirts. Questions raced through my mind in split seconds: Would thunder strike me if I wore the shirt? Would the supposed God of Pop avenge him? A whirlwind of thoughts roaming through my mind, drawing anxiety from within. Mama’s mournful wailing crept into my room as a piercing reminder of the tragedy I had brought upon my family. I found Obinna seated on my mattress when I came out of my bathroom. “Had he uncovered the truth?” I asked myself. It was odd seeing him in my “evil layer”. He made a gesture which indicated that he wanted me to sit beside him. I complied, and as I sat with him, he threw himself at me and cried a painful cry. The cry that I thought only babies could, the ugly cry. Obinna was undeniably a beautiful man but his cry was hideous, snotty and LOUD. It was almost emasculating. I instinctively held him tight, which to him was for comfort but to me, it was an apology for killing his beloved. I joined him in the crying, not for my loss nor the death of Pop but for the repercussions I anticipated facing.

We detached ourselves minutes later and looked at each other in nothingness. I had not given Obinna much credit for his beauty. He gazed into my eyes while I was lost in his. Was there a beauty in me that he recently discovered? We drew closer to each other, hesitantly, but still drawing slowly, till our lips touched. The emotion in the room was larger than us and we were found wanting. Obinna’s lips and mine became entangled. It felt like we should have done this years ago. It felt like something new and good. For once I did not feel like an outcast. The pain of killing my father was lifted, as though it had never happened. I was in a new moment and a whole new feeling. Intimacy. Something I had never experienced but got from my younger brother? I found myself inhaling his hot exhales, it was the best air I had ever breathed. We released ourselves, peering at each other in what seemed like a complex fusion of dismay, astonishment and need. Obinna’s palm brushed against my face, his thumb tracing a path along my cheek. I had wished to feel wanted all my life and I had never felt more wanted than that very moment. That very moment to me was life itself. In the moment of palpable hunger for more, I summoned the courage to lean forward. In the need for the continuation of another taste of newfound intimacy, I whispered into his ears. “Again”.