

The rubbish being swept to the front of the gate was more broom than refuse, fallen broomsticks had torn holes into polythene bags; they also cluttered the spaces between squashed bottles of *Fantas*, *Maltinas*, *Evas*, and a dark green bottle that belonged to cab drivers at Main Road and his own father. There were also clots of hair extensions, and lots of yam peels.

Kofoworola swept the rubbish into a careful pile, and now that the chore was coming to an end he felt better, almost pleasant.

‘You’re still sweeping? After all these years?’ His mother was just by the door of the kitchen, half the entire compound away, she clapped thrice and then snapped her finger. ‘Let me meet you there...’

Kofoworola shovelled the rubbish into a Bagco sack and stomped on it, breaking the stubborn broomsticks, compacting the bottles, and swept the rest of the potato peels into the sack. He then carried it to the dumpster at the back of the house, holding his breath as he added the sack of rubbish to the pile on a rusted wheelbarrow, the other sacks were tied and dripping with the rotten juice of rotting yams.

He pushed the wheelbarrow, its wheel squeaked but it rolled just fine, and stopped before the kitchen door. His mother was running the tap, most likely rinsing yams, or slicing yams, or sponging the pot to boil yams.

‘I’m going,’ he said.

‘What are you now waiting for?’

‘They said we should not be pouring the refuse beside the clinic again.’

‘Better go and dispose that thing for me.’

‘But where will I pour it?’

‘This boy, stop trying me.’

Kofoworola pushed the stinking wheelbarrow past the kitchen, grumbling. Of course, she was never going to listen. If they catch him, where will she find fifteen thousand naira to pay? All she knows how to do is cook yams like she wants to kill herself, is she the first person to sell food? He wished his father had given him the five hundred naira to go to his grandparents, just how was he supposed to cope with his mother for the entire holiday? If he did not die, let them call him a bastard and—

Something struck his back and pain shot into his chest, his head was burning hot. It was his mother; she had pinched and was now twisting his ears with wet sticky hands. He writhed and screamed until he freed himself, bolting across the compound, towards the black gates, vehicles and people.

She was yelling, ‘Is it me you’re talking to like that? Foolish boy, who is the bastard between me and your useless father?’

He got to the small gate, kicked it open, but it caught on a stone. He pulled the handle, and something whizzed past his face, striking the gate. It landed beside his leg as the echo of the impact rang in his ear. It was his mother’s big iron spoon on the floor, it was bigger than his palm. His mother was running at him, he stepped out of the compound and bolted the gate.

‘If you are the useless son of your father, don’t open that gate. Can’t you hear me?’ The gate banged, she must have been kicking it, or punching it. He flinched at every hit, taking a step backwards until he was on the street. She wanted to kill him; he had always known. Now he was in the middle of the street, and the small gate rattled. A bike sped past him; the rider yelled all sorts of prayers at him. His mother was now looking at him through the opening between the small gate and the wall, where the hinges were, as he met her eyes, she snapped her fingers at him.

The neighbours were outside, standing and looking, jobless as they were and in their stupid houses, it was a daily occurrence, but why couldn’t they mind their own business? He ran off the street, took a passage between two fenced houses, and after a while, he arrived at a house with a large palm tree and a face-me-I-slap-you house; twenty rooms were spread across two unpainted buildings.

He waited behind the palm tree, drawing circles on the floor with his bare feet, his slippers had fallen off his feet when he was running, his dirty and useless feet. It was better than his mouth that kept getting him into trouble, and now that his father was away on his new job, driving a petrol tanker to the North, he was in trouble. She was definitely going to kill him before his father returned in time to deal with her.

‘What are you drawing?’ A little girl was crouched beside him, she rested her face on her palms, her elbows were on her thighs. She wore only a blue pantie. Her skin was covered in reddish spots, like blisters but not quite, he thought he knew what it was called but had forgotten.

‘It is not your business. Leave me alone.’

‘Why is it not my business?’

He hadn’t even realised he had been drawing, had she been sitting there all along? He looked at his drawing, subconsciously rubbing the wet soil from his index finger. It was just a bunch of lines, but that one looked like a house, or a school. He smudged the entire thing with his bare feet.

‘Where are your slippers? My mummy said everybody has to wear slippers.’

‘I don’t care about your Mummy. Just leave me alone, go away.’”

“Why? Why did you clean the drawing? Was that your house?”

He stood up and went to the other side of the palm tree, then she wailed. A terrible cry that rose from the depths of hell, like she was being tortured, like he was her tormentor and she had at long last been broken. He circled the palm tree and stared at her, tears were running down her cheeks, her eyes were closed and he could see the pink of her throat, and she was scratching the spots that were not quite blisters.

“Aisha!” A woman came running from his teacher’s house, he had never seen her before, maybe a new tenant, like his teacher. Her wrapper was wet, like she had been washing plates and scrubbing pots or washing clothes. She came around the palm tree and carried the little girl. The woman glanced at him, completely accusatory.

“My darling, what is wrong?”

The little girl pointed at him, still crying and her fair skin was turning red. He backed away, the woman was no longer glaring, she looked helpless and worried, as if searching for a miracle.

The little girl did not stop scratching or stop crying, and the woman glared at him, as if just by standing there he was the solitary source of her misfortune, then he remembered that Aisha pointed at him.

“I did not touch her. I swear.”

“Shola!” The woman yelled, he thought of running but was paralyzed by the woman’s gaze and also felt as if he was responsible, he did not touch her but he surely hurt her. As whoever Shola was did not respond, the woman hardened her resolve, shoved her helplessness aside. Aisha was still scratching her body and the woman grabbed both of her arms.

‘Go inside and tell Shola to bring palm oil. Go!’ She barked at Kofoworola, Aisha was now writhing like a worm, crying too but the woman held her arms at bay.

He ran into the house, unsure of where and who this Shola person was. It was impossible to find out, standing in the hallway with imposing doors standing at attention on each side, some were curtained and some were open, but none was producing anything that resembled a Shola... He knew his teacher’s room at the end of the hallway, so he ran there and pounded the door.

There was a metal door at the end of the hallway, a twin to the one at the entrance, and it led outside, where big basins were filled with white laundry and foamy water, he smelled *Hypo* bleach. Aisha’s crying was faint, how had the woman heard? He banged his teacher’s door. He waited, banged it again. The crying approached the house, and he yelled, “Uncle!”

“I’m coming, what is the matter? Who is it?” The door opened, his teacher wore singlets and was scratching his head, the man was looking out the front entrance and loosed a heavy sigh, he rubbed his eyes and muttered that the girl was crying again.

“Uncle please, red oil? Her skin is burning.”

“What are you—Who is burning?”

“Red oil!”

Uncle stood stunned, the crying was so close, the woman’s long shadow filled up the hallway, her slippers went slap-slap. Uncle understood and went inside. He returned with a bottle, the entire bottle was red, like it had been shaken, so the palm oil was running inside the bottle.

Kofoworola ran to the woman with the bottle, opening it on the way. She poured the oil on the child’s skin, then rubbed it all over her body. She removed the pantie and lathered her in oil, then hugged the child, cradling her head. Aisha’s feet were now bare, her slippers must have fallen outside. He looked at his own feet and was ashamed.

“Thank you,” the woman said.

“I did not touch her, I swear,”

“You should take her to the hospital, this thing is getting serious.” Uncle spoke from behind him, he looked hurt, like it was his child who was whimpering in her mother’s hand.

Kofoworola wished he had answered the girl, he might not have touched her, but it was still his fault. It was always his foolish mouth. He rubbed his finger inside the bottle and rubbed it on the back of her leg where the woman had missed.

“I left her with Shola, where is that boy?”

“Shola is irresponsible. And you, what did you do to your mother again?” Uncle knocked Kofoworola on the head in a way that spoke of kindness and family, everything his parents were not, and he cradled the spot and slipped away from Uncle’s reach.

“Nothing.”

“Your eyes are swollen because of Nothing?”

“Who is he?”

“One of my students, you must know his mother. She sells pounded yam at the junction.”

“Iya Kofo?”

“This is Kofo.”

“What a shame...”

Kofoworola wondered what was such a shame, his back had long stopped hurting. He remembered the spoon that had struck the gate, it would have been another scar to show his father, who would have beaten the madness out of his mother, and she would have left him alone, at least while his father was around. It was a shame that she had missed his face, and it was a shame that he was her son.

“Is it measles? I had measles once, but it did not pain me like this.”

“I don’t know. I took her to the clinic last week. There was no doctor”

“Uncle?”

“Measles and Chickenpox produce rashes, the things on Aisha’s skin are called welts. They’ll have to run a lab test at the clinic before they can make a diagnosis.”

“Just where is this foolish Shola? I have a lot to wash.”

“Give Aisha to me, I’ll watch her.”

The three of them sat on a mat beneath the palm tree, Aisha had curled into a ball, the oil on her skin made it glisten. She hadn’t spoken, but she was no longer in pain. Uncle was finding the right channel on the radio, but Kofoworola knew that he was also waiting for enough time to pass to ask what ‘really’ happened.

“I was mumbling and she heard.”

Uncle looked up from his radio, turned the knob a little, he got static with some words. There was a red line that moved over the band of channels, the knob was what made it move, and Uncle pushed it further then tilted the radio and twisted the antenna. The radio leaned on the palm tree, while the antenna bent at an angle towards the house, all of it was useless.

“What was happening before that?” Uncle kept turning the knob and kept getting varying degrees of static, nothing close to what he wanted, but he was really just waiting for Kofoworola to talk.

He told Uncle everything, with some hesitation at first and then found his rhythm. He was feeling better and did not know how Uncle had done it, but that’s why he kept coming to Uncle’s

house. To feel better. He noticed Aisha was staring at the moist floor, he had been drawing again. Uncle never said anything until he was done, and now he was.

“Kofo, do you love your mother?”

“She doesn’t love me.”

“That was not my question.” Uncle said nothing else.

Kofoworola’s legs were swinging in the air, his stomach was flat on the mat. He had rested his face on his palm, and he did not want to talk to his teacher again. Instead, he looked at the little girl and saw that she wanted to know what he had drawn.

“Aisha, it’s the house I’m going to live in when I’m older. My father will have a room, and I’ll have a wife, and two children. Like you, but prettier.”

“They can’t be.”

“They will be.”

“Where will your mother stay?”

“I don’t care; she won’t stay with me.”

“Why don’t you care?”

“She hates me, so I can’t live with her.”

“Why does she hate you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?”

“Does your mother beat you?”

“Only when I’m naughty.”

“My mother beats me every day. I hate her.”

He was crying, hot tears ran down his face and he tried to hold the sound in but failed. Aisha wiped his tears with her oiled palm, then he buried his face into his own palms. He was ashamed that he cried, that he loved his mother and he wanted to be loved. He hated how Uncle had put the thought in his head and made him cry.

The radio’s static vanished and Uncle laid his hand on Kofoworola’s shoulder, he cried even harder but was finally able to stop, because even without being told, he knew in that moment that he was not useless, that he was loved.