

THE BEGINNING AND THE END ARE THE SAME

Jare lay on the bloodless ground, staring up at the frayed palm fronds and wooden ceiling. He rolled on his side, struggling to get up but collapsed back to the ground. Loud grunts signaled from his stomach, raising an alarm to its hunger, as though the drought in his tongue was not enough awareness. Through the slightly opened door of the shack, sun rays filtered in, distorting Jare's vision as he attempted to make out the two figures approaching. He looked to the other side of the shack where his Íye lay stridently snoring. The two figures cast a shifting shadow, alerting Jare. He immediately turned, fixing his gaze on them, he could then plainly discern them to be women. At the threshold of the shack, the two women, Uju and Agnes, paced back and forth, quietly discussing how to proceed. Jare wondered in silence about the identities of these oddly garbed women, bravely lingering outside; certainly, they must have heard stories of his Íye, the lunatic who lived in a shack, confining her child from the outside world. Everyone knew to stay clear of the shack he and Íye called home.

The first time many had come to the knowledge of Jare's identity was the day he had snuck out in search of food. No one had seemed concerned or wondered what a child his age was doing roaming the streets, as it was not an uncommon sight for children to be seen begging about. Yet, Jare had at least expected the plight of his looks to invoke sympathy that would have in turn gotten him meals. Instead, all he got were curious glances and head-swaying pity, as though their pity fed the dreadful hunger he felt. He wandered for hours while begging for alms, yet had nothing but a stale cabin biscuit to consume and a bruised feeling from the action of a stranger who had not only yelled at his friend not to give Jare the five kobo he intended to but had also insulted Jare with a stereotypical remark referring to him as an Almajiri. Jare, being a child of above-average intelligence, needed no one to explain what the term implied. He had learned to speak and read through conversations he had with his Íye and the books she occasionally brought from the places she called a home for books, which was, in fact, a landfill site. His knowledge had easily enabled him to find his way back to the shack, the only place he had lived in for the entirety of his six years of life. His return incited a blood-curdling scream and a furious reaction from his Íye, which earned disapproving sniggers from passers-by. They also had not thought to question what a woman, covered in dirt and dressed in rags, was doing with a little malnourished child his age. No one cared, and that was the truth Íye had always spoken about in their numerous conversations prior to that day. Although she had reprimanded him, seeing his eyes glisten with tears had softened her demeanor. Taking him back into the shack, she fed him with his usual meal of cassava flakes and groundnut as she comforted him.

Since then, which was only a few days ago, Jare had stayed isolated. Several people had come by their shack in hopes of feeding their curiosity about the mad woman who had kept a child hidden for six years, all of whom Íye had violently chased away. The past two days had been peaceful; they had gotten no unwanted visitors. Íye had relaxed her vigilance. She had not bothered to lock the door, nor did she scavenge for food or worry about his well-being. Instead, she spent hours roaming the streets and collecting scraps. This wasn't the first of her many neglects. In fact, most days he had gone without food, yet he would find himself whispering, "Íye mi loves me." For knowing how dearly she loved him was the only consolation to the hardships that plagued him.

at such a tender age. But somehow, the hunger had wiped the thought of her love from his heart, and seeing the women outside had advocated in him a prayer of hope for a savior.

The two women, Uju and Agnes, had finally decided to enter, their presence disrupting his train of thought. He took note of their appearance as they tiptoed into the shack. Their blue dresses and veil-like caps had struck a sense of peculiarity. His eyes lit in remembrance 'VHS nun,' he muttered inaudibly, remembering women who dressed like them to be nuns from the videos he saw in the towns viewing. 'Did he say something?' Uju, the shorter of the two ladies, spoke out loudly but was immediately hushed by Agnes, who then proceeded to walk closely to him, fanning her hands as if to assure him she wasn't of any harm. Towering over Jare, she gently scooped him up, placing him on her shoulder. She carried him out of the shack, oblivious to Íye, who was still fast asleep. The evening air rushed through him, carrying along the unpleasant scent of his body. Out of embarrassment, Jare buried his face in her neck. She gently patted his back, whispering into his ear, 'it's okay, you'll be alright.' As they strode farther away from the shack, Jare cried, knowing that it might be the last time he'd see his Íye, he cried not for this reason but because he was somewhat relieved by the idea.

The two women walked in silence for what felt like hours, while Jare bawled out his eyes, and when he could no longer do so, he gently sobbed. "Finally," Uju exclaimed as she hastened towards a vehicle. Jare lifted his head from the nook of Agne's neck to look at what Uju had happily squealed for, his face lit up with eagerness at the sight of the vehicle. Even though he knew how devastated his Íye would be once she woke to his absence, he didn't want to bother; nothing else mattered at the moment. He no longer felt the need to be constrained by guilty sobs, for he had always wanted so dearly to enter a vehicle, and now he was opportune to do so. "No more tears, eh?" Agnes spoke, grinning at him. He shyly looked away, returning his head to the nook of her neck. Agnes walked over to the other side of the vehicle where Uju was seated, opening the door of the vehicle, she spoke "Uju, let him sit on your lap, my hands are sore." Uju nodded but squirmed in irritation when Agnes propped him on her leg. Jare couldn't help feeling out of place, but the sound of the vehicle engine revving up elicited an excited giggle from him. As the journey went on, Agnes brought out a container of boiled plantain, "this has to be the best day of his life," Uju muttered annoyingly. Jare paid no heed to her; he silently hoped Agnes was generous enough to share small pieces of her plantain with him. To his surprise, she did more than just share a few pieces; she gave him the entire container. He gratefully collected it, gobbling its entire content before happily dozing off to the hope of a better life that awaited him.

Waking up from a deep sleep, Jare's eyes widened in terror at the unfamiliar environment he found himself in. Soon, memories of the previous day flooded him. He remembered arriving at a cathedral and then drifting in and out of sleep. The rest of the day was a blur. Sitting up, he winced at a sudden stinging sensation that eroded his left hand. Upon examining his hand and sighting a needle wedged into the swollen patch of his skin, he cried out loudly. A small girl walked into the room, toddling her way to the edge of his bed. Standing by his bedside, she gasped at the sight of his swollen hand and then ran out of the room. A few seconds later, she came back in, pulling Agnes by her arm. "He is awake and crying again," Agnes spoke as she smiled. The girl tugged on Agnes's clothes, pointing at Jare. "Yes, love, I can see him," Agnes said, caressing the

girl's hair. A few children trooped in, chattering loudly. Agnes turned, hushing them. Again, the little girl tugged at Agnes's gown and then pointed directly at Jare's swollen hand. "Uju!" Agnes exclaimed at the sight of Jare's swollen palm. She looked back at the children and proceeded to usher them out, standing by the edge of Jare's bed, tending to his hand. "Uju can't do anything right," she muttered underneath her breath. When she was done tending to his hand, she sat by the edge of his bed, comforting him. "It's a drip; we put it in your hand to make you stronger," she said, to which he made no retort, only stared into her eyes. "Do you like my eyes?" She questions in hopes of probing him. He remained silent, his face expressionless. "We brought you to our Saint Joseph orphanage; you are safe here," Agnes spoke. Jare reacted in confusion; he couldn't remember why he prayed to be saved. "Ah!" Agnes blurted out in remembrance, "I didn't tell you my name. I am Sister Agnes of Saint Joseph Parish. What is your name?" "Jare," he responded immediately, happy with his response. Agnes spoke excitedly, "Jare, wow, that's a lovely name." "It is Adejare; my Íye says I come from a lineage of kings," he spoke, scrutinizing her to examine if she would laugh or call his mother a liar, which was the reaction he got on the varied occasions he had eagerly shared knowledge about his presumed identity. Agnes excitedly proclaimed, "Wow, maybe one day I will witness you move into your palace." To Jare's surprise, she had reacted favorably. Agnes rose from his bed. "I will leave you now, don't worry about anything once you are better you will love it here, I promise." With that, she exited the room.

As the atmosphere fell into silence, Jare began to contemplate the conversation he had just had with Agnes. It had brought back memories of the day his mother had told him about his heritage and how proud he had felt. He had thought to himself then, that someday his kinsmen would search for him and his mother. They would find him and take them both to a palace where they would live lavishly. Upon passing the market and overhearing a conversation among the market women in their native dialect, he began to doubt if there was a possibility of the life he fantasized. The woman who sold locust beans and vegetables had started the gossip; she spoke of how his mother was raped, which subsequently led to her insanity and his conception. Other women chimed in with several other scenarios. One of them claimed that a man who wanted to perform money ritual had been ordered by a traditionalist to sleep with a mad woman, resulting in Jare's birth. As he stood eavesdropping on their conversation, he grew angry and irritated. Initially, his anger was directed at his mother and himself; he couldn't believe she had lied to him, and he disliked that he might have been conceived under such gruesome circumstances. However, as he continued to listen, he realized quickly that none of them knew what they were speaking about; they only made assumptions, and their assumptions were terrible. He redirected his anger and frustration towards them. "Wicked women! You don't know anything about us; I am a king's son!" he yelled at them. They laughed mockingly at him. One woman spoke, shooing him away, "Better run back home before your mother gets back." He didn't care as he was happy to have defended his mother.

Weeks had gone by, and Sister Agnes's promises hadn't been fulfilled. Jare had not come to love Saint Joseph the way she presumed. In fact, he detested it more than lying on the cold ground of his Íye's shack. He hated himself for leaving his Íye; he hated that the home had occasionally paraded him like an item on auction alongside the other children who wanted so desperately to be adopted. He knew that despite his mother's vices, she cared for him, and the thought of this

made him dislike the home more. He disliked the sisters because they were nonchalant and ignorant of the abuse the children endured. He would find himself occasionally appreciating the idea of being starved rather than being fed the tasteless glob of food the home gave them. Most importantly, he hated Sister Agnes for bringing him to the home without his Íye's consent, for preying on his desire for food, and for instilling a sense of utopia, which he had now found to be false.

In fact, his detest for her overshadowed all other complaints he had about the home, and it didn't make things better when she had tried to appease him by showering him with compliments in front of the other children. It made him a subject to unsolicited attention, which in turn brought distasteful remarks and slurs from his peers. Jare could deal with all his hate and dislikes for the home, all except the very word "orphanage" that kept him tossing and turning at night. He didn't like the idea behind the word, and it fueled his decision to escape from the home. He was neither abandoned nor orphaned, so he couldn't come to terms with the word, and the guilt of knowing he willingly chose to leave his Íye scoured him. It hurt him to think of all the possible ways she might have harmed herself in his absence. He had grown accustomed to the solitude, privacy, and neglect that came with his shack life. He made a final resolution to leave the premises of Saint Joseph orphanage forever.

By the fourth week of his stay in the home, Jare had properly devised a plan to make his way back to his Íye. By the morning of the third day in his fourth week, he pretended to be ill and stayed back in the room when everyone went in for their morning mass. He snuck out of the home as fast as he could. Jare had walked for hours, and being stopped by a few concerned foreigners and getting lost severally had made his journey uneventful, not until he sighted his Íye roaming and weeping bitterly. "Íye mÍ!" Jare screamed, sighting him she leaped with joy and ran to him. Even in her state of insanity, she was ecstatic. His Íye embracing him gave him an instant form of relieve; the caged feeling of guilt slipped off, and the liberation of knowing he was still loved by her washed over him.