

Temitope Oketikun

Distanced

Jola woke up screaming. It had been weeks since the burial, but the nightmares hadn't ceased, and the heaviness could not be shaken off. Images of her relatives with elongated faces and devilish grins pervaded her dreams every night. Their eyes carried a crazed appetite as they jarred razor-sharp teeth; masquerades determined to torment. The dreams started the day after the burial. Her father's siblings pulled up to the house and began to berate and accuse her mom. They were pushing her down and insisting that she was responsible for his death. One of his sisters, Mummy Ayo, even spat at her feet, pronouncing her a witch. An autopsy report had come back revealing that it was, in fact, poison that killed him and not sickness. Jola was shocked, not knowing an autopsy was sent for in the first place. Uncles she had never seen marched forward to claim items from their house. Her body broke out in hives.

Jola was used to being gazed upon. With skin so luscious and hips so tender, eyes could not help but cling to her body. People would pause for her to part her supple lips, and her creamy voice would come rolling over, crashing onto and cooling those who listened. But that was in the past. Now, all conversation was avoided; the energy to present herself had all at once shriveled up and vanished. In darkness's comfort, thoughts swamped over her- *how could the death of a single man propel so many lives into such a whirlwind?* A figure slipped into the room, startling her.

“You were screaming again; for God's sake, what is the matter?”

Her mother's voice was soft, laced with concern as she adjusted the slipping straps of her nightgown. Using the light from the door left ajar, Jola stared at her exposed chest and the deep scars that had formed there.

“It was just a bad dream.”

A strong powder scent wafted up to her nose as her mother embraced her. Head against breasts as soft as dough, Jola’s once limp body curled around her as she whispered prayers through the night.

Late in the afternoon, she woke up to a throbbing body that glued her to the bed. There was no energy for the day’s numerous chores or entertaining any more visitors. But her mom was making egusi soup, and its smell carried upstairs, penetrating the wall’s crevices, tempting her to come down.

Like most days, there was an anointing of all the furniture with a large bottle of extra virgin olive oil secured from the church’s tuck shop. Her mother asked if she had slept well, and she nodded. Jola raised an eyebrow at the amount of oil she doused on her dad’s favorite seat while making a plate of food. *It’s just the two of us; you don’t need to keep performing.*

“We have to do something about these terrible dreams you keep having; it’s not normal.”

A knot the size of cashew formed in between her eyebrows before Jola cleared her throat.

“Mummy, I’m fine. really.”

“You’re such a beautiful girl, don’t let this spoil your life.”

“I’ve spoken to Pastor Wale; he said this needs immediate intervention. He’s agreed to come in for prayer.”

Jola paused. That name sent shivers down her spine. He was Infamous for his legalistic preaching and vivid descriptions of hell, a man who fed off the guilt he instilled.

“Why didn’t you ask me before you told him about my dreams?” Jola snapped.

“Why does it matter? After all, he’s agreed to help.”

“Please mummy, I don’t want a pastor to come. We’ve already had enough people come to the house.” Jola said with caution.

“Well, it doesn’t matter because he’s coming Sunday evening, and that’s that.” She huffed, rising from her seat.

With the safe distance between them, Jola muttered something along the lines of how she acted like she was Mary Magdalene.

“Anjola,” Her mother warned, “don’t make me lose my temper with you.”

“I said I don’t want!” Jola said, folding her arms before she lowered her voice to say, “I’ve been thinking about seeing a therapist instead.”

Hysterical laughter followed, accompanied by handclaps of disbelief.

“Don’t you think I’ve suffered enough disgrace?” She spat, “Eh? Just listen to yourself.” The lecture was foreseen, but she expected some sympathy as she had never needed emotional support more. The break was ending, and she had to return to school. *How could I be denied help because of her pride?* She shook as waves of anger slowly washed over her. Her nails dug into the calluses on her arms and broke them. The shaking further infuriated her mother. Jola had never challenged her, but a new temerity had crept into her body and made camp.

“After everything I have been through with your father, do you see me running to strangers with my problems?” She yelled, gesturing to her body, “God has kept me because I was a faithful woman, and I persevered.”

“You’re such a hypocrite.”

The words slipped out of Jola’s mouth before she could catch them. Her gasp was not fully let out before the back of her mother’s hand swooped down and banged her face. The silence that

came after was deafening. Through the zesty tears that stung her eyes, Jola noticed the continuous flashing coming from the television that had been quietly buzzing in the background. Her mother increased the volume so they could hear the news anchor.

Hundreds of young girls fast asleep in their beds are awakened by the sound of gunfire. Armed attackers have stormed their boarding school and set fire to dozens of buildings. Nearly 300 of them are dragged from their dorm, loaded onto trucks, and carried away deep into the forest. Authorities say this was another brazen attack by the Jihadist terror group, Boko Haram, whose name means "Western Education is forbidden." The group's aim, to establish Islamic law. In just the first three months of this year, More than 1,500 people have died as a result of this insurgency. They've attacked churches, mosques, and markets; entire villages have been blazed to the ground. Residents were killed in firebomb attacks, shot, or hacked to death. This time their targets were young girls. The leader of this group has released a video of the girls.

In the video were hundreds of girls dressed in black and gray hijabs reciting the Quran on the ground. One of them, who looked about twelve years old, had such a familiar face. Her rheumy eyes were fixed on the armed man beside her. She was terrified. Jola wanted to see if the girl would move, but her mom approached her with full force, so she backed away and dashed out of the house.

Outside, the sun hung intimately low in the soft sky. It was comforting to see people going about their everyday lives, skin scintillating with sweat. Walking to the wide street now, she maneuvered between women carrying large loads on their heads, traders yelling, mallams wandering. The honking of cars had paused, and a corner shop played loud reggae music, so she

slowed to sway a little. Neighbour's children squealed as they kicked a football around, raising dust. She released a breath she forgot she was holding and took in the crisp air. The boys rejoiced as one blasted the ball into the goal post and spun around to see if anyone had noticed. A smirk formed on her lips when the ground began to shake violently, and she lost her footing. A grip tightened in her stomach. Looking around, everything was in place. *What was that?*

Suddenly, two speeding cabs collided at a junction. The impact sent shards of glass flying, one of them slicing the neck of the boy who had scored the goal. Wailing had begun in the distance as more cars swerved and screeched in all directions. Gray smoke from the fire that now engulfed the cars filled her nose until she started coughing. *Shit.* Her legs wouldn't move; pure panic had overcome her body. Her heart was beating louder than a drum. Mustering up all her energy, she got back to her feet and started to sprint back home. When she got back, she noticed in the mirror that there was dried blood on her temples, but she quietly slipped to bed.

The following day, they prepared to go to the church and see pastor Wale. Clothes were sprawled all over the room in an attempt to find the single long-sleeved dress she possessed. While trying to cover the wound on her forehead with hair, she remembered the familiar gaze of the girl from the television. The girl reminded her of Blessing, the maid that used to work for them.

Jola pondered what Blessing was doing now, wishing she was around so she wouldn't have to wake up early to complete chores. As she wiped down their silver dining table, she pretended not to hear the muffled prayers coming from the kitchen. The newspaper that lay on the table headlined "68 Killed in Bus Station Bomb Attack."

Its image was apocalyptic. The more she looked at it, the more vivid it became. Car rubble and burnt trash were scattered across the ground. One could tell from the photo that after the initial blast, further explosions occurred as fuel tanks in nearby vehicles ignited. Those passing by were blown to bits or roasted alive. Jola had never seen such an intense fire, with flames so potent. She felt the room grow hot, and pools of sweat gathered beneath her dress. Some people captured in the frame were far enough not to be burnt but were wallowing on the ground with outstretched hands; the vibrations from the explosion kept them in the dirt. Their expressions of agony flipped a switch in her. The smell of burning tires and plastic filled the room and choked her. An entire ring of fire formed around her; flames hissed and crackled as they rose high in the room. Faces of relatives and faces she had never seen were included in the fire, chanting, telling her she was next. When they laughed, the fire grazed her skin, threatening to burn through. One of them whipped her with its tongue, making Jola scream like hot coals were scorching her body. Crying desperately, she called out that she did not want to go to hell. Her entire body trembled on the floor as she scraped more lines into her arms. It was only the shock of the cold water her mother had splashed on her that got her to stop.

“Jesus Christ, Anjola. If this is how far you will go to prove your point, I will pay for the therapist.” her mother shouted, “Just stop all of this right now.”

“I’m sorry mom, I don’t know what happened.” Jola sobbed.

“It’s okay, just stop crying.”

Until she was in the arms of her mother, the shaking did not stop. Jola was so thankful to have a mother who cooed her and kept whispering her oriki in her ear, telling her that everything would be alright.

Getting into the building was a difficult process; security had tightened everywhere since the attack. People walked and talked differently; a bitter taste of mistrust that lingered in their mouths. New precautions were put in place, car and body searches were mandatory before entering any building. Especially in schools, Jola's resumption date had even been delayed. The therapist they found was yet to have her own place as she was just starting. So she hosted her patients in the high school office she worked in, one of the only ones currently open. It was a posh school with perfectly manicured landscape. They both admired the beds of delicate blue and white flowers that lined its entrance. Inside they had lime green walls lined with several awards and trophies.

"This is a lovely school!" Her mom beamed, intrigued by the tasteful art displayed. Jola stayed quiet; she never quite believed she would get help. She thought she didn't deserve it. She traced the lines on her arm as they waited.

Her therapist, Mrs. Katy, had a slick bob and kind eyes. The moment she ushered Jola in, most of the tension she felt dissolved away.

"I'm happy to have you here Jola, why don't you take a seat and tell me a little bit about yourself." Katy started.

Jola's eyes were fixed on the group of younger children playing outside the window. A bigger boy had tripped one, and the smaller one began crying.

"I did it. I killed him." she said quietly with her gaze still fixed on the children.

"Let's begin."