THE SHORTAGE OF BEAUTY

i. doubt

I don't know how to begin this story, whether to flow from the top or breeze through it from the corners. Wherever I take it from in whatever shape, I fear the inescapable debris of insufficiency will float through to the surface of this plot. No matter how I ignite the pedal, I will crash into the wreckage of a fall because that's what I've known all my life: how to fall, dwindle into a lesser glint of a star. And I have tried to colour this story in different ways. I've tried to make it carry the weight of a leaf wafting against the sky. But some miseries are too cumbrous to be spun in minced equivalences. So, I'm just going to weave them into a story the way things are. The way I see my life: devoid of the right dose of beauty.

ii. psychedelic fall

I should warn you.

This is a joyless plot and not one of those bittersweet engagements you encounter in a Ben Okri read. Although I used to think I could become like the man. I had called his way with words psychedelic. And then I'd called myself one, a psychedelic writer. And I did believe this as though it was the truth. Or at least not an immediate one but a truth I could yield into overtime. You know, like blossoming into the fruits of a due prayer point.

When I told Serene about this claim at a nice Ice Cream shop at Harvey Road, I must have given the impression that I was already experiencing what it was to be a psychedelic writer, if there was anything like that. She shook her head. There was a way Serene's eyes slowly rolled NO anytime she disapproved of something, and she often did. That warm afternoon she launched the strike to one of my many falls calmly around the bayonet of her disclaimer. She never aimed to smite with words. If you saw her, you'd hardly believe she could hurt an ant. Yes. She was that type of girl. Beautiful and delicate. Spontaneously brusque, although she contended that one of her faults was being too honest. Not brusque. And that nothing was really wrong with that, but it was just humans who tended to misunderstand her or never liked listening to the cruel truths.

—I don't think you really get what psychedelic means. I mean… (she was using her hands now. Anytime she did, it was as though to bend her feelings through the air and mould up her arguments around a frame) … going by your definition.

—Yes. Colourful. A little distorted. You know, like a spectrum kind of thing. Words spinning around light, darkness, colours.

—Yeah. I get it (she nodded to show she got it, even more than I thought. And what did I think? That she didn't exactly get it. And she suspected I thought just that). I don't think you are like that. (She angled her face around a wry smile as she scooped her ice cream into her mouth).

I managed a smile before she continued.

—I think you write just like any other *normal* writer. I mean, it's still intelligent writing. But to me, it's just... (She shrugged). And I don't mean this in a bad way.

—mm-hmm.

—I told you the other day that I don't really fancy Chinua Achebe's works. But everybody loves him. So, yeah, it's like that. I think people will like your work… (She nodded to show she meant it. And to suggest she didn't have to put the final words in. I completed it for her: *the world might like my work, but you because that's just who you are, a deviant*). Remember my friend in Biochem, Bright.

—Yeah. I know Bright.

—I would consider him a psychedelic writer. His words are just… (She put her hands in the air across her face again and I had imagined wanting to know what feeling was sifting through her blood at that very moment. I had wanted to take her place, see through her eyes, think through her head, and talk through her finely trimmed lips. To understand the gravity of the conviction stationed around her body, that moved all her systems and allowed her—5'6, 23-year-old round-faced *ajebo* in an Ice Cream oasis in the heart of running Lagos—function with such far from perfect lingual authority punctuated with a few too many pauses and incomplete thoughts.)

It wasn't my best ice cream rendezvous.

That night I had removed the word psychedelic from my Twitter bio after adding it just the day before. I still thought I was psychedelic, but wanted nobody to think I was into drugs or something. I had not dreamt in a while until that night. I drifted into the hinterlands of spasms that locked me prisoner in half-dream, half-consciousness. I drifted downward, tumbling through a spectrum kind of thing, colourful. Light, darkness. My own words spun into a well of words by normal writers, still intelligent but in a bad way where nobody saw me but saw Bright from Biochem.

Every day since, the form of this particular fall twined with the histories of others. My body and soul progressed, awakened to a consciousness of decline. I strived to push out of this decline and the ringing noise in my head.

iii. home-pursuit

Today is Sunday and I'm in my room in a tiny miniflat I got two months ago. If you asked me, I'd tell you I made a mistake. And it rang all the time in my head how I shouldn't have wasted over half a million, all in the name of being away from family, all in the name of discovering home.

But this is what I won't tell you.

That I made to save up for years and got this place for a million alongside my flatmate just to wage whoredom. I won't tell you that I fled from the badlands of Ikorodu with my family where there was nothing for me but gradual death—the repression of my sanity and the depression of my soul. Where I chased a cobra with a cutlass into the undergrowth where it lurked, just a few feet away from my window, only for it to return again and again. Two months ago, I was relieved that I had escaped that jungle and the invisibility it afforded me. But now on a Sunday, I'm not going to church and I can't tell the past from the present because they bear the same semblance: a shortage, an invisibility. No matter how much I progress, I still manage to be drawn backwards.

iv. tastes of rejection

I did warn you that this was not a tasty story. I mean even for me it tastes like a fetid private part. And the taste of a fetid private part takes me back to Stephanie. There are some things you taste that ruin your palate so that anytime you take wine, you don't taste anything but hold the smell of rottenness, moisty like blood. Stephanie was my first-ever attempt at sex here. Some attempts just ruin you, take a delight from you and replace with potent sourness such that the thought of a woman's private part freaks you out. And then you seek more the ones on screens where the model is screaming "Yas. Fack me hardah!" or "Don't stop, Hit it!". When I watch them, I like to put them on mute. Their vocal excitement tends to ruin the fun for me. What I want is something subtle with a lot of affection, because that's one of the many good things of life that is missing from my life.

Another thing I won't tell you is this:

I've tried talking to five different girls, all acquaintances—two of them simultaneously—into coming to my place.

It's what loneliness does to a man who's never known a woman, inching closer to 30. The only ones I know are from screens where another man or sometimes two are battering this one woman like their lives depended on it. Nasty but it was just the only thing I could access for pleasure, that made me alive but kept me dead at the same time. I knew that I wasn't living healthy, that I was in a way—even without having actual sex—becoming something sexually abnormal, falling deeper into irredeemable depths. But I just wanted the tenderness of touch. Sometimes when we have this craving, we crouch under the pretense of love. And we sexualize friendships that should remain nothing but platonic. The way I did it was cunning, gradual and tinged with a little patience. But they all said NO, eventually. That they didn't find me attractive enough. Others said it was them, not me. I reckon that's what you say to a guy just to make him feel less about himself. It was what you said to a classless broke nerd.

So, I tried to imitate what I was not: being cool, playing a guy that could spend.

On Bunmi's birthday, I called and told her I would buy her a nice cake and we could have a nice glass of wine at my place. You know, throw a little party. Just the two of us. It was the one time,

out of all of my attempts to get her over, that I had suggested something that would benefit her financially. And it worked, to some extent. You never get to hit on the first night with these kinds of girls. They are pricey, slick in some ways, and cunning too. To get more moments, you have to spend.

Bunmi slipped away from my grasp after a little smooching and wrapped around the covers of my bedsheet. I had suspected she faked moaning, too.

—Let's stop. I can't continue. (She was now piecing herself back together so that she was in no time whole again).

—Why?

—I just can't. I don't see you that way. At the moment. (She had this look of pity on her face that I tried unseeing immediately.)

—Oh. (I was turning gently in bed right next to her, rubbing my bald head as I got up and sat at the desk in the room.)

A moment passed us with silence before she asked.

—How's Serene?

—She's fine.

—Weren't you guys dating or something?

I almost gasped.

—No. We are just good friends. Or so I thought.

—Why? Something happened? (Her right brow was raised now.)

—Long story. How's Gboyega?

—He's alright. (She was with her phone now, scrolling.)

—You guys dating?

—Not really.

—Right. (Should ask for clarity but…)

Pause.

—I should get going soon. (She said, mechanically.)

—Sure you still want to go out tonight? It's past 9. You should sleep here.

—Nah. My friends are expecting me. I told you there's this mini party they've set up.

—Right.

She took with her what was left of her cake alongside the bottle of wine we didn't finish. I peered outside my window and saw her walk up the road to this nice car. A man came out of it, looking like Gboyega, to open the door for her. I shook my head and managed a soft laugh. My flatmate came knocking at my door a while later.

—So, did you guys?? (He had his arms akimbo, expecting good news, knew I was long due for one. I had told him before about my misfortune with girls.)

—Not really. (I shook my head.)

—To hell with that babe. After you buy am cake and wine.

—It wasn't all that bad. I mean it's not like we didn't do anything.

—Ehen. (He scratched his beards). Next time, go for the simpler babes. (He was turning to leave.) How far that Stephanie babe? You should call her.

—Yeah maybe. (I haven't told him what happened with Stephanie and how I would not be calling her back.)

I did try other girls, only not simpler ones.

All rejections.

I told myself I was getting used to them by now. Every rejection not just from girls alone. My career as a writer, and my life, was a joke too— the kind you crack in a room full of people with faces infected with rejection, not laughing at your jokes).

v. fear

It’s raining this Sunday morning. I can tell it is beautiful outside, but I'm not having it. Not going to church or sitting in a bar later to watch Chelsea. I’ve shut my window and deleted my WhatsApp and Twitter. Maybe that will quieten the noise and the fear that pangs in my mind, echoing in vivid details how I’d still be the same loser this time next year just like the year before and the year before that and on and on. That my unstable job as a freelance writer won’t sustain me and I won’t be able to afford rent next year. And then I’d have to go back to the suburbs of Ikorodu. Maybe by then the cobra in the undergrowth lurking outside my window would have birthed more of its kind. My mind scurries to the memory of a neighbour back home who had taken out a loan of about a million but couldn’t pay it back and had swallowed Sniper. Renting this place here in Lagos feels like a loan I won’t be able to pay back. Returning to Ikorodu would be like swallowing Sniper. But I don’t want to die. Oh God. I haven’t lived enough to enjoy a portion from the enormous beauty of the world.

vi. reference

It feels like a sorry joke how the lack of affection, particularly the sexual kind, could make me feel colourless. Especially when you factor the tangibility of poverty into the palette of my life, where I look 6'3 but only feel 3'6. And I’m not a freak or something of the sort like that other babe (what’s her name now?) implied by her Whatsapp text, after I tried, perhaps a little too hard, to convince her to meet with me just one more time.

TWITTER. ***A popular tweet by Girl****: A man named Anthony, Girl's old classmate, had been harassing her online for years.* ***Girl's screenshots of her Whatsapp and Snapchat (proof)****: Anthony had said he'd been dreaming of the size of her boobs and just wanted to feel them; he couldn't stop thinking of how good of a wife she'd make; she'd had to kill him to get him to leave her alone.*

I thought it was a wild comparison from this other babe since I hadn't done anything, remotely close to what this Anthony guy did with Girl, to her But who am I to evaluate the extent of someone's reaction to my own actions? It was the way she framed her text, though. Something around the lines of *"toeing along the corridor of what that Anthony guy was doing to that Twitter Girl."*

Her reference broke my heart. But the expression— *"toeing along the corridor..."* I couldn't bypass the precise gracefulness of it. If only I could write with such collected meanness. Perhaps one of those online literary magazines would have published me long ago. Maybe Serene would be convinced that I am (potentially) a psychedelic writer.

vii. hope-overtures

Oh, world.

I'm just nothing but a young man starved of life's beauty, tired of falling. I wish every subject of my hope-overtures understood this. That every dream I chased would then give in. That God would compromise and hand me my glory. I wish they all saw that I can't help but cling to beauty. The beauty of living in a miracle: capturing a woman dance in the rain with a wink at me; waking up to a smile, the whiff of food from the kitchen; my spirit smeared across the motion portrait of a window shielding a lagoon… a dog wagging its tail, the *ting* from a microwave; the intelligence of a woman… the tenderness of touch, and the allure of language

melting with a Mychael Danna type score to manifest the scape of my favourite football team lifting a league trophy.

When I die, it may be from the chaos of clinging too much to these technicolour dreams. For why should a man chase something with such keenness if not because there’s a shortage of it in his life?