

If wishes were horses

The bus is humming as always with the girls' petty drones, the pretty ones that buzz and buzz about their houses, and their clothes, about what they ate the other night, and the boys they kissed when no one was watching. The things they did yesterday, that they had done two years ago, and they will do before the sun went down. The girls buzz. But me, well me. I'm alone in a corner of the bus by the window. And I don't mind the solitude because, well because the solitude chose me.

It chose me when Mama died. But I hardly think of Mama, and I haven't thought of her in a while, but now I do. My mama is gone, I think, but I can feel her touch in the wind that caresses my face as the bus races ahead. I believe I smell her in the air; my mama smelt very nice, you see, like the lilies I imagine growing on the soil. Not that I know how lilies should smell. But I know mama smelt nice, I know mama was beautiful. I know Mama is gone.

"Hef Morayo," Fadekemi whispers behind me. She's different from the other girls who buzz, she's quieter, and she's smarter than most people would realize. "Hey, you," I whisper back, and she smiles that toothy smile that's both endearing and comforting. "Youf okaf Mo?" She says. And I say, "If you must know Kemi, I don't really know." And we giggle, the fruity richness of our giggle overpowering the buzzes. Then I see or sense the stares thrown at us, pretty girls with mean words eyeing us, then smothering laughter behind raised palms. Muttering to themselves and smothering laughter again at whatever jests their vain selves came up with. But Fadekemi isn't moved by their drama--she calls it that, their drama. People that make other people feel small are the really small ones. My smart Kemi says. So I leave them to their drama. And we share a secret knowing smile. Fadekemi and I.

Then my house, the white bungalow with the red roof looms nearer as the bus draws closer to it. I sigh at the sight of it. Well, to make the best of the inevitable, you must strive to enjoy every moment of it. Fadekemi also says, not that I understand exactly what that means. I'll try to survive is what I take though. So with my school bag hung around my back, I bid my friend goodbye "Till tomorrof Mo!" Fadekemi yells after me, as I alight from the bus. And my grin is big, my pride bigger. There goes my kemi. I say. Unafraid to be heard, slurred speech or not, unafraid to speak, dysarthria or not. Daring to defy people's notion of what is normal and what is not. And now, the house I'm walking into isn't so choking anymore. The pictures of Mama on the wall, the ones where she smiled at the camera, aren't so sad anymore, I'm not so sad anymore. I start on my homework, and when I am done with it, I'll do little house chores, like cooking, and cleaning. And when I am done with those, I'll sleep a bit. They are all routines I'm used to, you see. Aside from when Daddy arrives home in the night from his workplace. That--I can never be used to, because I wish he talked with me more often than he does, I wish he asked me about how school went today and yesterday.

I wish he says Morayo, how are you? I wish he did all of those. But Dad, like me, is still torn by grief. And me, well me, I'll try to survive. So I listen to music, I dance a little, I read two books that make me giggle, I keep busy, you see. Fadekemi would be proud.

Then it's morning again, a fine morning that's pleasant in my sight. I love the golden brilliance of the sun, and the puffy whiteness of the cloud as they rolled by. Or maybe it's just me being happy. Or maybe because I thought of Fadekemi when I woke, and I found the day bearable. The ride to school is bearable. The lessons we are having are bearable. We sit side by side. Fadekemi and I. So when some teachers, draw long faces as they look at me, and mutter. "Sorry for your loss," Fadekemi says in a whisper, "I'mf sorry fou deirf faces," of course I giggle, I can't help it, neither can they school their astounded expressions. Long faces becoming puzzled masks in an instant. It's almost comical. And as the teachers come and go, there are breaks in between when we students chatter till we are reprimanded by a teacher who shouts, "Keep your mouths shut! Don't you know you are now in SS3, shouldn't you set good examples for your juniors to emulate? Your WAEC is around the corner, and all you people can do is make silly noise that is disturbing the entire school!"

Shame-faced, at least we pretend to be, we quieten till the next teacher comes to take us biology, and we learn about anemones and osmosis. Mr. Goodwill sets quizzes and a test that tasks our brains. Some students cheat for the test, bringing out their notes to peek at when Mr. Goodwill isn't looking. Some copy off each other as well, and others whisper answers to each other. But me, well me, I wish I cared a lot more than I do. If I could will my hand to write faster than I am doing, if my memory is a lot sharper as it was

When Mama read with me, and told me to persevere, that I was the best of all the best. That I, Morayo, would never be alone. I stop writing because I can't see my test script. My test script is wet, oh God. My eyes are cloudy with rain. I need to leave. I rise from my seat, the first to finish, not that I have finished writing. There must be something wrong with the way I'm walking, my legs feel wobbly, you see, so I must be putting on a good show for the audience that is laughing. Mr Goodwill is shouting something I can't really hear, but when I get close enough, it sounds like, "Keep quiet, do you think this is funny, what kind of children are these!" Then I'm at his front, but his face is fuzzy. His voice is kind when he says, "Are you okay Moryao," I want to howl, I'm not, I'm not, over and over till something big happens. Like the ground shaking beneath my feet or the sky should burst open and maybe God could descend from his throne. If he could bring Mama back. "I'm okay," I say, "just need a break." Then I submit my script to Mr. Goodwill, and I'm running, running away from the class, and the silent mocking corridors, and past the assembly ground and to a derelict building we have been warned to stay clear of. The solitude chose me, you see, so I choose the solitude, just me, walking into what was an office. But is now a shack with scattered remnants of old furniture: a three-legged wooden table stacked on another with no legs backed against the south wall. To their left are two dusty benches that are

rickety, one damaged student chair, and a desk with a mop beside it. I spot a chair among the clutter that seems sturdy.

So I wrestle it out to the center, and I'm left with stains on my white shirt. Both sweat stain and dust stain. Then I sit on the chair without cleaning it; what can a few more stains do to my green skirt? Or to me with my face buried in my dirty hands. My sobs coming out of me and stilling within me. Then there's silence, and then a chorus or maybe a chant in my head. I wish I wish I wish. It says.

I wish my life isn't what it is. I wish the girls aren't mean to Fadekemi and me, I wish I'm strong and bold like Mama. I wish, I wish, I wish

mama is here--

Then something happens to me and I can't quite explain it. It's like a force forcing me to my knees, and I find myself kneeling on the grimy floor, the office wall spinning with a light too bright that makes me shield my eyes. Then the chant in my head gets louder. I wish, I wish, I wish, it says. And I'm falling, falling to the grimy floor, I find myself lying on grime and dust. Then there's silence and a dream-like quality that is becoming my reality. I think.

It's still me, Morayo, but a prettier me in a flowery dress. The yellow gown Mama gave me on my sixteenth birthday. It's still me waiting for someone I know, for someone who is gone. But it can't be, mama is gone but--

Mama is here! And hale. She is running towards me like she did before she got sick. And I'm running, running to her open arms, and her beaming smile. I'm not alone, you see, all around me, everywhere I look, I see yellow and red, shades of blue and green butterflies accompanying me to Mama, I'm being tickled by grasses tickling my bare feet. Then I'm in Mama's receiving arms, surrounded and in her warm embrace. My mama's face is full of love and flesh.

The fleshy mound that is her buttocks, and the ample bosom I'm resting my head on. My ear pressed against a steady beat that's music to my soul. Life, life, life, she's alive. It sings. "Omo mi," mama says. And Mama's face becomes fuzzy because I'm crying again, you see, but the good kind of cry that is grateful Mama is alive. The good kind of cry that erases cancer's stains on Mama's face. The good kind that is happy, that is glad mama is here.

Then something happens to me, and I can't quite explain it. It's me, still me. But I'm with Fadekemi. "Hey, mo!" Can you hear that? the utter perfection in Hey Mo that wasn't there before. The fluent ease in Fadekemi's speech I haven't heard before. "Hey, you!" I scream my excitement, overwhelmed beyond words, so I only stare at her in amazement. My Kemi. But she hasn't changed really, you see, I still see the joy the world couldn't take from her still bubbling inside of her. She still smiles that toothy smile that's both endearing and comforting, slurred speech or not. Still possessed with so much grace and elegance that distinguishes her from others, slurred

speech or not. And when we giggle at each other's bemused appraisal of each other. The girls wave at us. "How far Kemi?" Busayo hails Fadekemi. And two of them--Chichi and kanyinsola--come over to where we are seated.

These girls say nice things to us, like, I love your hairstyle, your sandals are so cute Morayo, please tell me where you got those bracelets Kemi.

They buzz and they buzz. But the buzzes are pleasant.

Then something happens to me, and I can't quite explain it. It's me, still me. But I'm with Daddy. And we are in the parlour watching a movie on TV. I laugh alongside him at a funny scene in the movie, even as I sneak side glances at his cheerful face, that it's so easy to call his wrinkles, laugh lines, and the greying hairs at his temple, silver strands. I'm not as sneaky as I think because Daddy catches me looking, Daddy smiles gently and says, "How are you Morayo? how was school today? did you have fun yesterday?" Questions, questions, they tell me he loves me. And so I talk and talk till my throat is hoarse, and my voice spent on all the words I long to say.

Then something happens to me, and I can quite explain it. It's me, still me. But I'm back in the office. There's dust in my nose, grime stains on my shirt, and a chant in my head as I rise to my feet. Can you hear It? It says, if wishes were horses, my life would be different. If wishes were horses, my mama would be living, If wishes were horses, Fadekemi would be speaking and people wouldn't laugh. If wishes were horses, Daddy would be happy. If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

I clean myself up as best as I can. But some stains stay glued to my shirt and my skirt. But stains could come off, couldn't they? So I walk out of the office holding my head and shoulders high. And there's a new confidence in my walk that makes me saunter to the girls buzzing midst. Then Fadekemi sees me and runs over to me. "Wer haf youf bein," she says. And they start to snort muffled laughter, spineless, mean girls that are nothing compared to my Kemi. I raise myself to my fullest height. "You know what, Gbemisola!" I say with a new confidence that makes Gbemisola's "What?" Seem timid. "People that make other people feel small are the really small ones," I reply. And for the first time since I've known Gbemisola, she remains mute till Fadekemi and I saunter--that's right-- We saunter away from their quiet midst. "Youf changef," Fadekemi says with a satisfied smile. I smile back and say, "I was bound to."

Then after school, and the bus ride from school, I'm at home, and Daddy's home too. Most times I confine myself to my room, and I'm in it now, confined and stuck in my head. So I banish the solitude to the abyss, and leave the silence and my bed, walking to the parlour to sit where Daddy is seated. He is surprised by my presence, then the surprise turns to joy. "How are you Morayo?" He asks. And I say I'm fine sir. Daddy and I sitting together and laughing together. And he asks me how my day was. how yesterday was? how the day before yesterday was? And I'm taking and talking, and Daddy is listening. It's like Mama never left because she's everywhere, I see that now.

I feel her love in the chair I sit upon, I glimpse her smile in mine, and in Daddy's crinkly own. My mama is here, I know that now.

I hear it in the wind, I see it in the sky. I feel it in the breeze that kisses my cheeks. It whispers, "Omo mi--my child." It tells me to persevere, and that all will be well. So I'll persevere till the very end. I'll live, I'll love, I'll enjoy every moment of the inevitable. Then I'll dare the world like Fadekemi does.