

3 weeks after her father died, Yetunde went back home. It did not matter that they had already buried him and she never got to say her goodbyes because she considered those already said a long time ago. She only came home because her mother begged her to, she had called and cried. Said Yetunde owed her this, owed her because she was her mother and her father was her father. And so now here she was, in front of the gates that held her home but Yetunde knew that the house was not a home, that nowhere was home the way her body was.

Yetunde was born in a house of ghosts. Her father was a buried fountain yearning for sunlight and her mother a haunted statue, silent and heavy. Yetunde was born after a decade of babies who died before they learnt how to sit and with every death, the house had sunk deeper into the darkness that now cloaked it, a darkness so thick, Yetunde's birth was a dull flicker in a tunnel.

She stopped the car engine and stepped out, not bothering to honk because she knew the building would still be teeming with family members, with people who came in and out with food and gaping mouths that only offered *sorries* and *take hearts*. Her ears rang with the screeching noise of hinges bearing years of rust and she felt the whole compound quiet down as she pushed up the gate. Strange faces swarmed her vision and it surprised her how many people were in the house. Did her mother even know all these people? But Yetunde had since learnt that this was the way things were with people shoving themselves into other people's lives.

Ignoring the rising whispers, she stepped into the house. It was exactly like it was when she left years ago with its white curtains that fell from ceiling to floor and all the pictures of Yinka and Dele that peppered the walls; Yinka and Dele at their wedding, Yinka and Dele with their first child Folakemi who stopped breathing after a short bout with malaria, Yinka and Dele with Durojaiye, with Remilekun, with Durotimi; each of their names a plea. The pictures with children stopped after Durotimi so there were no pictures with Yetunde. After she was born, her mother had been too scared to hold her for fear that Yetunde would end up like all the others leaving her with splinters for a heart and so Yinka pushed her daughter away and draped herself in loneliness.

In the beginning everyone thought it would pass and eventually the scales of pain would fall from Yinka's eyes. That she would hug her baby to see that there was no greater joy than the pain of motherhood but Yinka only saw her daughter as a dead thing living and soon the neighbors began to whisper and the family began to talk.

*Is it not enough? Is she the first one to lose children? See the Oyelekes on their twelfth year childless. She's not even grateful*

They called her cruel, a wicked mother undeserving of a child. *What kind of mother refused to carry her own child?* Refused to play with her or even look at her for too long. *The child would grow up to hate her*, they said. They talked to her and her husband but Yinka only replied with heavy sighs before dragging herself off the chair and into her room and Dele mumbled apologies before showing them the door saying "She's doing better, she's just tired" again and again till they stopped coming.

As Yetunde grew up, everyone talked about her mother like she was already gone and told her stories of how her mother was such a good soul. Stories Yetunde listened to wistfully, unable to find the connection between this angelic woman they talked about and the woman in her house that lay under the blankets in her dark room.

When she tried to play with her mother, Yinka would turn wearily to Dele; Yetunde's father with pleading eyes, with eyes that said *get her away from me* and her father would silently pry her off her mother's gown and lead her back to the room where Yinka drew the covers over her head and did not come out for hours until eventually Yetunde would learn to leave her alone.

Yetunde shook her head, bringing her thoughts back to the present, her eyes roaming over the landscape painting that hung over the three seater couch. Her father had painted it. She remembered watching him work in the studio and they were the only times she saw who her father must have been before Yinka and all their dead babies. He was different in the studio and there was none of heaviness that lay everywhere else in the house. When the painting was finished and after it had dried, her father had let her hang it. He balanced her gingerly on his neck and stood patiently as she placed it on the nail before standing back to admire their work.

"You're here", a voice said and Yetunde jolted, biting a curse under her breath before she turned to see her mother. "I'm here," Yetunde replied, unsure of how to handle the atmosphere. They had never been alone before. Yetunde's father was always there; a buffer and a translator, conveying lost meanings the other simply could not understand.

"Would you like your old room?" Yinka asked at the same time Yetunde said "You look well", and Yinka laughed her high tinkering laugh that Yetunde rarely ever heard before, saying "thank you" just as Yetunde said yes, that she would like her old room and although she knew the way, she followed behind her mother quietly up the stairs.

In the room, her mother switched the lights on before going to the windows and pulling back the curtain. "So here we are", Yinka said, as she walked back to the door. "Make yourself...at home" she said, cringing as the words made their way out of her mouth. Yetunde nodded, not wanting to say anything as tiredness worked into her bones. "I'll be in my room," her mother added before easing the door shut and it was only after she heard the lock of her mother's door did she let out the breath she had been holding. .

○○○

The first time Yetunde met her mother, really met her and not the shadow Yinka had been since she was born, she was ten and she had just come back from outside where she played when she returned from school until her

father stood at the gate and called her home for dinner "Go upstairs and change." her father called to her from the kitchen and she tiptoed quietly up the padded stairs, her sock covered feet shuffling over the carpet.

Before she made her way to her room, her eyes lingered at her mother's door. Years before, Yetunde would have knocked on the door lightly before entering the room to shake her mother's figure beneath all the covers she weighed herself with. Sometimes Yinka would remain silent and still until Yetunde tired of trying to call her. Other times, she would stir and scream her father's name over her head like Yetunde was invisible till he ran into the room and she would look at him with those eyes until he took her away, cleaning the tears off his daughter's face mumbling apologies to anyone who would have them.

She ignored the heavy black door and entered her room, jolting in surprise at her mother perched on her bed. She looked strange here. Infact, Yetunde did not think she had ever seen her mother in her room; it seemed far too small for her presence and the bed far too big. "I was never a reader," her mother said, looking at the bookshelf that housed all of Yetunde's books.

"Okay?" she replied, frozen at the door as she eyed her mother warily.

"How was school?"

"Okay"

"What class are you in now?" Yinka asked her daughter and Yetunde raised a brow in confusion.

"Primary 6" Yetunde replied after a brief moment of awkward silence

"Oh" Yinka said, looking at her as if she was a stranger she had awoken to and Yetunde cast her gaze on anything in the room but her mother's face. "Well, dinner is ready. We're waiting" her mother said, making her way to the door where Yetunde still stood holding the knob, her eyes fixed to the floor. "You look well," she added before leaving, placing a palm on her shoulder to which Yetunde mumbled a quiet *thank you*.

Alone, Yetunde stared at her bed and if not for the now rising dent on the bed and the ruffled sheet, she could have sworn she imagined it all. She remained at the door for a few minutes, taking in deep breaths before making her way to the bed and stripping the sheets off.

○○○

A knock at the door stirred her awake. It was her mother coming to tell her that food was ready. Yetunde rolled over to check her phone, letting out a small groan at all the missed texts and calls that took up her phone screen and hissing at a "Please call me. It was a mistake" text from her ex fiancé.

At the table, Yetunde and her mother sat at opposite ends and Yinka ate while Yetunde picked at the food on the plate first thinking about how dinner was yam and fried eggs and how it was her least favorite food. And then

thinking about how her father had known that but he was dead and no one really knew her anymore so then she was angry. Angry at her father for not telling her how bad his cancer was, at her mother for being her mother, for making her come here to this house where all the worst parts of who they were as a family lay and at herself for staying away for as long as she did.

In the past, before she decided she could not keep coming home to a mother who felt like a shadow, dinner time was usually her and her father talking about anything; the weather, school, the state of the economy and her mother adding nothing but silence to the room.

“You’re not eating” and Yetunde could not determine if it was a question or a statement. After a few beats of continued quiet, she heard her mother sigh before pushing her food away. “Um..so how is...Tunde. Your boyfriend?” Yinka asked and Yetunde chuckled sarcastically under her breath.

“It’s Kunle, he was my fiancé and we broke up months ago but I wouldn’t expect you to know that” she replied, her voice intensifying with every word and Yinka stared down at her plate, her brows furrowed. “Your father never mentioned that...um” she said, her voice rising slightly above a whisper.

“Why am I here? What are you trying to do?” Yetunde interrupted,

“Your father would have wanted us to be a real family,” Yinka said, shifting in her seat, her eyes trained on her almost empty plate.

“But he’s not here mummy. And we’re not a real family. I really shouldn’t have come here. I’ll leave in the morning” Yetunde replied, standing up and walking briskly back to her room.

Alone, she paced the length of her room wondering why she had agreed to come. She had thought she needed closure, needed to fill the gap that had wedged itself between her and her father; a mother-trauma sized gap but now she was here, and she wasn’t sure what she had been thinking.

A small knock stopped her pacing and she stood staring at the door deciding whether or not to open it. “Yetunde” her mother called from outside and Yetunde held her breath like she could will herself to disappear.

“I don’t know why I insisted you come. I was lonely...am lonely. Your father was all I had and now that he is gone, I am lonely”.

“You are lonely? You are lonely?” She asked, opening the door to look at her mother’s tear stained face before finally letting the tears she had been holding fall.

“Please listen to me. It’s what your father would have wanted”.

"I think my father would have wanted you to be a parent. That's what I think he would have wanted. He would have wanted a home with a daughter who did not count the days till she could move out because his wife refused to stop being a ghost"

"Yetunde..." Yinka started stopping as her daughter dropped to her knees before following suit, her face a painting of pain and tears, stretching out to her daughter's crumbling figure on the floor.

"No," Yetunde said, yanking her arms out of Yinka's grasp.

"Please"

"I said no," Yetunde repeated, scrambling to her feet and entering her room again before shutting the door on her mother.

Alone again, she sat against the door forcing heavy painful breaths in through her nose and out through her mouth as the silence in the room buzzed loudly around her. As she sat there, she hoped her mother would say something or anything at all and she breathed something like relief when her mother's voice carried through her door. "I wanted to call you. At the end. I wanted to call you" Yinka started, her shaky voice slicing through the paper thin air of the room.

"Why didn't you?" Yetunde asked

"He said no. He said you deserved to remember him whole. Alive. He did not want me in the room either. I've caused him, caused you both a lifetime of pain and it was the one thing I could finally do for him and so I did it"

Yetunde shook her head as soundless sobs fell out of her mouth and fresh tears tracked down her face.

"And I tried with you Yetunde," Yinka continued "when you were born, yes I ran but when I started to think everything was okay, you fell sick and it seemed you were going to die. You were so sick for so long, we didn't think you would make it and I couldn't do it so I ran some more and I never forgot how to stop running" her voice hitching in her throat as she finished

"But I'm here. I'm 25 and I'm still here" Yetunde choked out in between her sobs and Yinka nodded, letting out a humorless chuckle.

"You're here and I wish I had let myself see you sooner. I don't expect you to forgive me but you have to know I thought I was saving myself. I thought I was doing the right thing by not raising you with a slice of heart"

"I loved you. I would have taken it. I would have taken anything you gave" Yetunde replied, laying on the floor, her voice breaking as she spoke, the weight of the last few hours hitting her again. "I thought you hated me. You're my mother and I thought you hated me" she whispered loud enough for her to hear.

"I could never hate you. I loved you. I thought it would hurt less with every child I lost but it didn't, that I would love less with every child I had but I didn't. " —Yinka stopped as Yetunde opened the door — "You came and you were perfect. You came and I loved you just as much" she finished, holding her daughter's tear stained face and smiling a little as she leaned into her palm

"I'm so tired" Yetunde whispered

"I know Yetunde" Yinka replied, her voice lower than her daughter's

"I still don't forgive you"

"I know Yetunde"

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I can't stay here yet. It's too hard here"

"I know"

"Goodnight mummy" Yetunde said stepping out of her mother's hold and walking back into her room

"Goodnight. I'll see you in the morning" Yinka replied, smiling sadly at her child. She was walking off when Yetunde opened the door and asked if she could stay with her till she slept to which Yinka said yes, she would love to. And there in the darkness of her childhood bedroom, was how Yetunde met her mother for the second time, with her warm palm tracing circles on her arm until she fell asleep.