

“On Flying and Falling” by Orabelema Tonye-Abere.

Everytime she slept, Sobomate had the same dream where she was either flying or falling. The world around her was dark and a strong wind blew at her from all angles. In today's dream it definitely felt like she was falling. A ting foreboding told her she was about to make impact at last. Before she reached, she was brought back to earth by the sound of scraping chairs and a beeping timer. The instructor stood in front of the class collecting papers from the other students. She quickly got up and handed over her half filled question sheet. There was a little drool on the front page and the instructor was unimpressed.

On exiting the exam hall, her phone began to ring. She picked it up and immediately regretted it.

“Your father and I called you 10 times, Sobomate. You couldn't leave your studying just for a little while to pray for your brother's soul?!”

When the hand that feeds you gives you a slap, does one turn the other cheek or bite the hand with equal ferociousness? That was the question Sobomate asked herself on that hot Texas afternoon while her mother screamed over the phone so loud her eardrums rang. With the sweat dripping down her and her brain writhing from the mess of an exam she just wrote she chose to bite.

“Why would I want to fellowship with you in any way when all you do is scream at me, Mother?!” Using “Mother” instead of the sweeter “Mummy” was her personal form of spite. A way to hammer at her mothers throbbing sores. The other end went quiet for a moment. In her mind's eye Sobomate could see a sneer draw across her mothers beautiful oval face. She could see her forehead contort and her almond shaped eyes thin to slits. It was the same sneer she always drew before stabbing her opponent with her verbal dagger. Sobomate braced for impact.

“You never loved him.” The dagger traveled all the way from Port Harcourt to her exact latitude at University of Texas and pierced Sobomate’s heart. In a last ditch effort to have the final say she said, “You’re right, I never loved him. That's why I did what I did.” Before her mother could respond she hung up.

In the moment that followed it was as if the world around her fell into oblivion. Her heart felt strained as it beat faster and faster against her yellow tank top. All of a sudden the birds were too loud and the sun was too bright. She rubbed absentmindedly over her pleated skirt as the fresh cut she’d made on the inside of her thigh smarted alongside the others.

“Soso? Are you okay?” The voice brought the world into focus again. It came from a petite girl with strawberry blonde hair and the eyes the shade of deep blue that set people at ease.

Sobomate cleared her throat before speaking, cloaking her voice in her American accent. “Oh hi Melanie. I’m okay...”

“Right.” Melanie said in an unconvinced tone. “Thermo exam was that bad huh?”

“It was horrible,” said Sobomate.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Wanna go eat?” said Melanie.

“Definitely,” said Sobomate, cracking a smile. In truth she wanted to head back to her dorm and cry but she couldn’t say no to her best friend. After arriving at the cafeteria and scoring some food, they scanned the bustling hall for the perfect seat.

“Soso! Melanie! Over here,” yelled a chestnut haired girl with eyes the color of caramel eclairs and skin the color of beach sand.

“Aubrey!” Melanie yelled. She and Sobomate made a beeline for the waving girl. She sat at a table near a large window with 5 seats, three of which were occupied by her, Dalton and Troy. Sobomate’s heart skipped when she saw Troy and all of a sudden she would give anything to be one of the freckles on his skin. With his bottomless dimples, messy brown hair and position as captain of their school’s basketball team, he fulfilled her childhood obsession with the Troy from High School Musical with alarming accuracy. The intensity of his lightning blue eyes on her as she approached the table lit a fire beneath her dark skin.

In an overly dramatic gesture, Melanie quickly took the other seat beside Aubrey so only the seat beside Troy was left for her. When she sat down, Troy almost immediately readjusted so that their knees touched ever so slightly beneath the table. It made her breathless.

“So how’s our Homecoming Queen doing?” said Dalton. He was a little taller than Troy and broad with rough tanned skin and fierce green eyes. Before Sobomate could respond to his question Melanie spoke up.

“Oh my God! Y’all should have seen the stares she was getting on our way here. Folks are obsessed. One guy even whistled,” she said.

“He did not!”

“Did too! You’ve got competition Troy,” said Melanie, giving him a cheeky look.

“Do I?” Troy said, fixing Sobomate with a big grin.

“I guess you’ll have to find out,” she teased. The other people at the table hollered. Troy shifted his knee closer to hers.

“Student council president and Homecoming queen, y’all are such a power couple, I’m jealous,” said Melanie.

“Stop it Melanie, I’m not president yet,” said Troy. His ears rimmed red in the way Sobomate loved.

“With those speeches you give there’s no way you’re losing and you know that,” said Dalton.

“I mean if you put it that way...” Troy agreed.

“It's the Troy way or the highway!” Melanie and Aubrey chanted Troy’s campaign slogan in unison.

The whole table erupted into a laughter that drew stares from the students around them. Sobomate’s laughter died when she checked her phone. She had multiple calls from her father and a text that made the food she ate churn in her belly.

*“Soboms, your mother didn’t mean what she said. Please call me back. I love you so much.”*

She stared at the text with unblinking eyes to still any wayward tears that could attempt to embarrass her. Her father did love her, there was no doubt about that. She wondered if he would still love her if she told him her ugly secret about what really happened 11 years ago. Would anyone on this table still love her if they found out? Would Troy?

“Soso? Are you coming today?”

“Coming out for what?” she said, turning to face Melanie.

“The basketball season’s about to start so the team’s throwing a party at Four Beers,” said Aubrey.

“Yeah, I remember.”

When she said nothing else Troy said, “So are you coming or not?”

Looking into his intoxicating eyes she said, “Yes, I’ll be there” because how could she ever say no to him.



The Four Beers bar was a sweltering mass of sweat, liquor and hormones. Despite that, Troy still managed to stand out. Sobomate found it ridiculous to see anyone look so regal in a stuffy bar. With his brown hair perfectly tousled and the blue lights bouncing off his clean jawline he raised his glass and spoke over the roar of the noisy bar.

“A toast,” he said, “to a night of doing whatever we want and showing up for practice early tomorrow morning.” The group hollered with laughter before tipping their heads back in unison. The liquor stung Sobomate’s tongue and heated the back of her throat. Four shots and two unknown pills later she was lost in a haze of electrifying music and rainbow colored lights. She danced until her skimpy leather top clung to her like a film.

Melanie's hair stuck to the sweat on her face and caught in her mouth as she swung her neck to the music. Aubrey had found a giant man with a buzzcut, shiny boots and a face almost as old as her father’s. Dalton held a bottle of liquor in each hand and screamed the lyrics of a song that wasn’t playing. And Troy? Troy stuck to Sobomate like a glove. His hands on her waist swaying to her rhythm.

Soon the crowd died down. When Melanie began spewing slight racial slurs and Dalton began to vomit, they knew it was time to leave before they were thrown out. They spent the night at an apartment Aubrey’s dotting parents rented for her in case she ever got tired of staying on campus.

As per their usual arrangement boys took the living room and the girls took the bedroom. The other two women passed out as soon as they arrived and Sobomate wanted to do the same

but her bladder would not agree with her. She tiptoed past the moonlit living room to the bathroom like cautious prey. Everywhere was silent except for Dalton's drunken snores.

She closed the toilet lid without flushing so as to not make noise and opted out of washing her hands for the same reason. She unlocked the door in a slow, silent *click* and opened the door. Troy's large body filled out the door frame. In one rushed move he clamped his hand over her mouth and together they lurched back into the bathroom. With his other hand he shut the door and locked it.

"Shhh babe, it's just me," said Troy. His voice still slurred and his eyes were wild.

She took a few steps back. "Troy, you're drunk. Remember, we talked about this last time."

"I ain't drunk baby girl. Whatcha talkin 'bout. Can't a man have some fun with his girlfriend?" Troy was typically a gentle lover...except when he was drunk. When the liquor flowed in his veins he became rough and dangerous. Evidence of their first rendezvous when he was in this state remained in the scars around her neck and now she knew to avoid him when he was like this.

He held her chin in an iron tight grip and kissed her in one wet, sloppy motion. She struggled against him, her responses weakened from the alcohol. When he let go of her long enough to undo his belt she pushed him. The back of his knees tripped against the bathtub and he fell inside. He slumped against the tiled wall and for a moment she feared the worst. At arm's length, she pressed her fingers to his pulse and sighed in relief.

She backed away and slid against the bathroom wall. Her head pounded in sync with her trembling heary as the emotions she had been bottling all day fought multiple wars inside her. Troy's body began to shift again so she left the bathroom quickly. Outside the others were still

fast asleep, oblivious to what had happened. She walked out the sliding balcony doors and barricaded the latch on the other side with a chair.

The cool night air against her face caused her racing heart to still. The sky was a startling cloak of darkness with stars scattered in perfect impermanence. The moon was full and shone with a brilliance that only God could endow. She sat down on the cement floor and sunk into her thoughts. Tomorrow, Troy would apologize to her with flowers and she would forgive him because she always did, and move on because it was the price she paid for his love. It was a love she did not deserve for the thing she'd done.

As the tears brimmed her eyes and made streams of her mascara she brought out her phone and opened a photo. It was one of her brother Miebaka at 6 years old taken a week before he died. He had skin the color of burnished bronze and hair in tight black coils. The photo was taken just after he'd lost his first tooth which he cradled in his hand as he brandished a gummy smile.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she muttered as her figure shook with tears. Beneath her leather shorts her wounds burned. Right there, makeup ruined beneath the moonlight she had a moment of untainted clarity. She called her father. He answered on the second ring.

"Hello, Soboms," came his voice, loud and clear in the silent night.

"Daddy..." Her voice broke off into sobs.

"Are you okay my daughter? What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

It took her a moment to recollect herself but her father was patient. "Is mummy there? Can she hear me?"

There was a pause before her father said, "yes we're getting ready for work. I'll put you on speaker."

She took a deep breath before speaking. “I want to tell you both what actually happened that day.”

Her father spoke after another pause, “Go on Soboms, we can hear you.” There was a quiver in his voice she had never heard.

“So...uhm...” she faltered.

“Take a deep breath Soboms.” Her father reassured her.

She inhaled until her lungs strained and let it out in a loud wheeze.

“That day I was playing with the new building blocks I got for my eighth birthday. Miebaka came and started dragging them with me so we argued. He took some and stuffed them into his shirt...then he ran to the balcony and I chased him. I remember mummy always told us not to play there because it wasn't safe. I remember thinking about how we would get in trouble if she caught us.”

She took another breath before continuing, “I was the older sister. I should have just given them to him but I didn't. I tried to drag it out of his shirt but he bit me so hard...” She rubbed the spot on her hand as her tears flowed with renewed velocity.

“It was so painful and I was just so...so...angry so I pushed him so hard against the banisters. I pushed him even though I knew it was wobbly. Then he fell and all I could hear was the sound of his head hitting the tiles. He didn't even get to scream.”

When no one spoke on the other end for a while after she finished she said, “Daddy, are you still there?”

“Yes...I'm still here.” His voice held unreleased tears.

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...” Her apology tasted salty on her tongue.

“No...it’s not your fault. You loved your brother, you didn’t mean to Soboms. You have to understand it wasn’t your fault.”

“But it was daddy...”

“No, my child. It wasn’t. It was an accident, okay.”

“Do you still love me?”

“I will always love you. Always...”

“Mummy, do you still love me?”

The line was silent. Sobomate’s throat closed as panic seeped in and rattled her bones. “Mummy, I need you to say it back please! Do you love me?” she wailed as she clutched her beating heart with her free hand. Her mother said nothing.

“Mummy please...I’m so sorry...I’m so sorry. Forgive me please!”

Her father sounded even more distraught as he spoke “It’s alright Soboms. Your mother loves you, she’s just tired right now. We’ll call you back later. I love you.”

The line hung up and Sobomate decided she’d had her fill of undeserved love. She got up and climbed on the thick wooden balcony railing. From her angle 10 stories high she couldn’t tell if she would land in the glimmering pool, the ground or in between. With her arms stretched at her sides and the wind in her hair she felt like a bird. Would she fly or would she fall? She would let fate decide.

*For Sobomate,*

*Why do you choose to fall in the direction that harms you the most? Why do you choose to surround yourself with people who undervalue and depreciate you? Why do you choose to drink until stupor and laugh when something is not funny?*

*Why do you choose to scald your skin beneath the shower and scrub your gums until they bleed? Why do you choose to overwork when you are sick and make accommodations for others where none were made for you? Why stuff your feet in shoes that mar your little toe?*

*When all is said and done and the pavement erupts beneath your skin would they do the same for you? Will they abandon their comforts to mourn for you as you lived for them? Will they fast and pray in the name of Soso? Will they weep when they realize they could have saved you from yourself all along?*