

AGARWOOD

I

Letters to Agnes

"I must come to the woman I love before dusk turns to morning. I must tell her I love her because life, as I know it, is already gone."

Yara owns a cake shop at the end of Mary Slessor Street. Its walls are painted of red and white stripes, the front door a dull, putrid green. There are awnings over the two shutter windows, a balcony overhead and a larger one below, over the door. A wide show glass displayed the cakes, each sitting individually in their places on the table like crowned kings. Chocolate fondant, red velvet, vanilla icing. When a customer enters the small shop they will see panels of more cakes—slabs of wedding fruitcake that Yara boasted could stay for as long as a year if properly refrigerated—and sometimes, slabs of brown bread, hot and soft from the oven. If Yara was in a good mood and the customer was lucky, they could get a batch of free cookies that sat in a cane rack beside the sales table, along with some sticks of lollipops, if the customer had any children. The interior smelled like butter and sugar and all the sweet things of life, and these smells rubbed off on Yara, who was petite and round and soft, just like her cakes. Everyone on Mary Slessor Street knew Yara smelt like her cakes.

Everyone also knew that Yara had killed her husband. But this was something the neighbours did not say to her face. They whispered it in their stalls in the market, with their partners in their bedrooms, behind their palms at the town hall meeting. They talked about that morning in July when Patrick had come out on the balcony below the cake shop, smiled down at his neighbour's wife who was sweeping her yard, asked about her children, then climbed over the railing of the balcony and hurled to his death. This was how it was narrated by the neighbour's wife, who had to be sedated for a week because she never slept. She spent her days screaming with terror. Yara and Patrick's home was a two-storey building so naturally Patrick should not have died from such a height. Broken some bones yes, but not death. But Patrick had jumped head first, leaping off the railings like a swimmer off a pool board, landing with a sickening *thud* to the hard grey concrete. His head smashed open on the pavement and blood filled the street like tomato paste. It took hours to wash the blood off and a day to get the metallic stench of haemoglobin to finally dissipate in the air.

Two months after Patrick's funeral, Yara fixed in the awnings. The gossip was spread by a neighbour who had visited Yara, saying how the widow had tearfully mourned that if there had been awnings over the entrance of the shop, it may have cushioned Patrick's fall and he would have survived. The neighbour said Yara's eyes had been swollen and red-rimmed, her nose running with mucus like a dripping tap. But people still blamed her. *Why did she not save her husband? Had she not seen he had been depressed? What sort of woman and wife was she not to know her husband had thought of killing himself?* The blames fell like rocks rolling off a cliff, breaking into small pieces until they crumbled into dust and enveloped Yara's ears. At first, she had been shocked that people blamed her, and those nights after closing up the shop she would crawl into the queen-sized bed she and Patrick once shared and cried until she was too exhausted to cry anymore. Soon the blame spread like the effluvia of death, filling up the mouths and hearts of her neighbours that they began to avoid her. They turned away when she waved at them on sidewalks. They side-lined her cake shop for Baba Basse's instead, preferring his fermented-alcohol smelling breads to her vanilla-essence loaves. They emasculated her voice whenever she stood up to speak in church meetings, clicking their tongues with disgust the day

she protested their indifferences. Then one day, their children threw overripe oranges on her. It was the fifth month after Patrick's death, and she had just returned from the hospital with a diagnosis of strep throat. The day was balmy—it had rained the previous night, and the smell of balsawood was prominent from the carpenter's shop adjacent the shop. She had been twisting the key in the lock, her fingers quivering with tremors from early stages of Parkinson's. This was when the first orange hit the right side of her face. It was soft, smelled like fruity acid. The slushed pulp fell to the concrete and she saw it had been peeled off its back. Straining down to pick it, she fell on her knees, and the rain of oranges followed in succession. They hit her below her buttocks, the back of her neck, the curve of her spine. Soon her brown baby lace was smudged with the vomit-yellow slime of the rotting oranges, complete with the speckles of seeds that slid to the ground with the pulp. Still on her knees, she turned towards the culprits. The children, five of them, were ahead off, watching her, waiting for a reaction. When she gave them none, they became bolder and ran towards her, their skinny bodies lithe with youth and childish mischief. They stopped at the curve of the pavement, exactly where Patrick's skull had cracked open and spilled his brain matter, their chests heaving with excitement, faces glistening with sweat and wonder.

"*Amusu, witch!*" They screamed at her. "Husband-killer, *witch!*"

This was the moment the sun left the skies and settled between Yara's eyes. Its yellowness filled her from within, frothing, like boiling margarine. It coloured her eyes the tint of jaundice. She wrestled back to her feet, screaming, flinging her bags at the children, but they were now running, heading to their parents', the informants who had filled their heads with these insults. And when the air was clear again, she slid down to the front of her door, her knees quivering. There were tears for the dead and the living, but tears for children was water wasted. Why would she blame them? They were after all, children—living organisms with no freedom but the one allocated by their makers. Without another word, she shuffled to her feet, turned the doorknob, and went into the house.

That night, when the moon was out, a crescent curve of illuminating silver hue, she burned Phillip's belongings. The burning was done in hierarchical order—from his old bespoke coat-tailed suits, his Chester of drawers filled with colourful stockings that formed a rainbow whenever she folded them in stacks, and his threadbare shirts with buttons the colours of black-eyed peas. In the beginning it was a small fire, timid and slow as it moved its flames over the clothes. But when she added his books and research papers from years he spent at Ile Ife as a Masters student, then finally, the mahogany chairs he had bought before they had dated and he had inscribed "*I love you Y*" on the armrest before they had married, the fire began to rise, noisy and cackling, red sparks floating rapidly in the air as the smoke thickened and covered the moon. Soon the neighbours arrived, their eyes questioning as they watched the humongous fire burning in front of Yara's cake shop. But then they saw her standing on the other side of the flames, staring at them, her right hand holding a can of gasoline. Her eyes were bright and clear, unblinking, and she stared and stared until they got uncomfortable and hurried back to their houses. Clearly, the witch has not just a witch; she was now a *mad* witch.

When the last door closed, Yara closed her eyes, raised her face to the skies and inhaled the fire's smoke. It filled her lungs like nicotine. The warmth danced over her skin. The flames formed a dance, alien but known, somewhere in her past, and she swayed unconsciously to the rhythm of its heat. She stood out there for a long time, listening to the flames, hearing it call her name in a voice only she could hear. The echo was soft but deafening, the sound like mirage on asphalt. It was like the sound of silence, if silence had a sound, and if sound was silent.

When the fire quietened down to occasional sparks and smouldering ashes, she went back into the house. Still clad in her smoke-scented clothes, she sat on the dining table. The table-clothed panel held the tray of bread dough she had kneaded for an early baking tomorrow. Beside it was

a paper and pen. Yara placed her palm on it, her fingers leaving a smudge of grey. The air was still and sweet, the smell of burnt sugar. Ignoring her ash-stained fingers, she began to write.

Dear Agnes.

"Sometimes when I look at the sun I see your face in it. I see your eyes; brown and worried, looking for redemption in an empty world. I see your nose, crooked and small, breathing in my smell. I see your smile, your teeth, yellowed from drinking too much coffee and smoking too much cigarettes. And I'd stare and wish, for a moment, that the sun was you."

The letter arrived on the third week, a Friday evening, just as she was closing up the shop. The sun was slow in setting; a round tangerine ball glowing against surfaces and skin, and it caught her eyes as she clipped the padlocks and pulled the outdoor shutters. That was when the mailboy stopped by her sidewalk, his old Scooter spluttering black smoke. He was about seventeen, gangly and ravaged by adolescence, a face spotty with pus-filled acne, knees and elbows whitish with dust. What was his name again? Ah, Tomas...it was Tomas. He walked slowly, his head shaven clean, gleaming with the sun, eyes sleepy and disinterested. Yara watched as he alighted and walked towards her, envelope in his hand.

"Tomas," she said.

He smiled at her. "Da Yara. *Nde*. You have a letter."

"From who?"

"I don't know. No name on envelope."

It was true—the top of the envelope was bare, a crystal white that retracted brightly from the glaring sun. She took it from him but did not open it.

"How did you know it was for me then?"

"It has your address on the other corner, at the edge beside the flap."

"Okay. I see it." She nodded. "How are you, Tomas? How is your mama?"

"Fine."

"Good. I have leftover cake in the kitchen...let me get some for you."

He grinned, his thin cheeks stretching like rubber. "Thank you, Da."

After he left with a tin foil wrapping of carrot cake, she went upstairs and sat in the living-room, the envelope in her hands, still unopened. This was the time for knowledge. For fifteen years she had sent her letters, waiting eagerly for a reply, never receiving any. One morning Patrick had seen one of them. She had stayed up that night while he slept, writing furiously, her face distorted with delirium. That was the forty-fifth letter in fifty-seven years, and none had returned with a reply. There was a pain, raw and fresh in her chest as she wrote, exposed flesh lined with blood, just as the ink flowing from her pen. It filled the papers with words contained in crevices of her body, begging to be spilled, and as her emotions unfolded she began to weep, her sobs awakening Patrick. He sat up on the bed, his eyes drowsy and disoriented, but hooded with worry.

"Ya? What is it?"

“Nothing.”

The next morning, she awoke to him standing over her, the letter in his hand. In her quest for sleep she had left the paper on the desk beside the bed, and he had obviously read it, because now he was glaring at her, his face pale with anger.

“Who is he?” He shouted.

Oh, men who assume their wives love someone as manly as they! This assumption, ripe as grapes, sour to the tongue, a truth they were repulsed to swallow. The possibilities that the woman they had taken to the eyes of men and God at the altar was enamoured with another man, consumed for passion for a body harder than theirs.

She sat up, watching as his chest heaved, his fists curled. A warm sensation filled her chest, trickling down to her mid-section like the greyish braid that tickled the nape of her neck.

Her voice soft and her eyes unwavering, she exhaled. “It is not a he...it is a *she*.”

Yara opened the envelope.

Yara,

This is Agnes.

I am dying.

II

Agarwood

“Have you ever believed in a love so pure it had no other intentions but to simply love you?”

There was a time in the past that Agnes would sit beside her double panelled front door home, fanning away flies that buzzed in the sunny afternoons. The house, a colonial-styled bungalow painted a calming blue, stands fifteen meters away from the foot of a mountain. Sabot Mountain, it is called by the Christians—a place of divine healing. In the days when she smoked she would sit and watch them as they struggled through the rocks, climbing and disappearing to the top, the shrubs their refuge. Most of them were women, clad in long white garments. They rang bells and danced; some standing on one leg, speaking loudly, incoherent. Those were the days she would laugh, blowing a line of cigarette smoke to their direction as they danced and praised a God they could not see.

Then the cancer came.

Now, Agnes sits on a large sofa in her bedroom beside the French windows. The windows are closed and sealed off. Her doctors had warned against any form of cold, because it could offset an aggressive pneumonia that would fill her lungs with an infection so deadly, it can kill her in hours. When she is not seated, she lays on her bed, surrounded by pillows or clean towels. The pillows were for comfort, the towels for involuntary vomiting. After each chemotherapy treatment, spasms jolt her bowels with so much nausea she could smell the vomit as it slid up her throat to her mouth. Her hair had once been a mass of full dark curls, lustrous to the human touch. But now the hair was gone. The first bout of chemo had them fall out in massive clumps, deadened by chemicals that tore through her blood to kill the cancer cells. Now they stuck out

in sickly, uncoordinated wisps from her head. Her eyebrows were non-existent, her lips always chafed a flaky white, no matter the amount of coconut oil her daughter Ayuba put on them. On her right hand beside her thumb was a large blackish bruise, a souvenir from countless intravenous injections. On her back, just below her shoulder was a larger bruise, purplish and lined with wormy veins—a reminder of her first biopsy two years ago, botched by an unqualified doctor. Her feet were swollen with oedema, tender to touch, painful to move. It was like being a prisoner to your own body, locked in with no option but to live in pain, or die by it.

Last week she had ordered all the mirrors in the house destroyed. She was not ashamed of seeing her body; she was weary of seeing how it had become ravaged, weakened to a mass of nothingness festering with bedsores. She was beguiled of her presence, sickened of her smell. The absolute dependence on her nurses and caregivers bewildered her; she lived but had no *life*. She dwelled in the shadows of timed eating; strict diets, doctors' calls, numerous jars of medication and pink bottles of *Epilim* to quail her manic disorders from the pain. *The pain*. They were more frequent now, especially after the fifth chemo. It had always been there, this hulking darkness, suffocating, consuming. It made her alien from her body, shocking her with a madness that consumed her being, overwhelming her with the wild velocity of her screams. Sometimes it would be so great that she ground her teeth until the insides of her mouth filled with blood. She stayed up, screaming into the darkness of night until her voice became hoarse, a disfigured croaky whimper. This was when her body betrayed her yet again. Her inability to control pain but the startling ability to live through it each day until a day became a week, a month, a year. A gateway leading further to a death she was sure of but not desperate for.

Then Yara's letter came, and she was sure.

She hears the tires on the gravel and knows she is here. She feels her heartbeat quicken, the air in the room changes. She wishes her children are present, then suddenly is glad they aren't. What will she say to them of her? It is better they are not here—she had dispersed Ayuba after the episode when the last vomiting was over. The door opened, the stairs creaked with footsteps, and Agnes held her breath. The years were gone, the past were shadows but memories were framed pictures that never faded, bodies that never decayed. The door opened and the nurse came in, then behind her, was Yara Mgbemena.

Yara. Her best friend. The love of her life, the dark hole that held a secret that ate faster than the cancer chewing away at her lungs.

Yara, the Killer.

There were different ways of dying, but from my eyes, from here, where I stood, it seemed like you had chosen the wrong one.

They finally began to talk after the maid brought their cups of tea.

The sun was setting. It was a dusky yellow, the colour of fried butter, sinking downwards to greyish orange skies and a horizon of the rocky mountain that framed the back of Agnes' home. Yara stared, watching the birds flying eastwards towards the magnolia trees that shadowed the rocks, a goodbye to the day spent. It was only when Agnes clicked her spoon against the teacup that she looked at her friend, her eyes nowhere but everywhere. The feeling was sporadic, almost fluid, a depression of sorts, filling her with sadness, anger and dread. Was this what awaited her in the future? A fatal depreciation of her body, broken down to nothing but a bag of bones and jutting limbs, shredded hair and chafed lips? Maybe this was the future, the dissolution of life as she knew it. She had begun to think of death as a being after Patrick's suicide, how it slipped over him like a third person, stilling his body to a *thing*. Was Agnes aware

of that stillness, that freezing moment that will transport her from a construction of nerves, skin and blood to a mass of silenced entity, a *thing*?

“You don’t like your tea?” Agnes asked.

Her voice was no longer the cheery whisper of a lovely girl who flipped her curly hair in the wind. It was of a woman tired, a voice patched with the dryness of pain, sickness, and impending death.

She nodded. “I don’t like Lipton, too bitter.”

Agnes looked startled. “Oh.” She paused. “What would you like? I’ll tell Catha to bring it for you.”

“Agnes, I am fine. Don’t worry.”

“I—okay.”

Silence returned and Yara let it in. The room stank like a hospital, of antiseptic and drugs, the faint stench of a certain rawness, like vomit. Agnes sipped her tea once, grimaced and dropped it back on the table. Yara smiled. She recalled the girl she had grown up with, the sharing of dresses and dolls, the fights they had fought, a friendship that had lasted over forty decades. The bond that held them together—a knowledge of a past so significant it was referred to as a third person—the Killing.

She looked at Agnes. The woman was dozing off, and Yara was reminded of what sickness to do to the human body, make it robotic to natural reflexes. Standing up, she went over and sat on her hunches beside the sick woman’s shawled knees. Her bony knees jutted from the knitted material like twin hills. “Agnes,” she whispered.

She stirred. “Sorry. I slept off.”

“It’s fine. Do you want to go to your bed? I can carry you.”

“Ah no, that is not necessary—”

But Yara picked her up and walked to the bed. Agnes had always been small, but she was still startled that now she weighed nothing, more like air, less than an actual being. Sadness filled her like water pouring from a gourd, and as she placed her on the bed she quickly wiped away a lone tear from her eye. Tucking the blankets around her, she asked, “Better?”

Agnes smiled. “Thank you, Yara.” Then, like an afterthought, she tapped the space beside her on the bed. “Lie here.”

It surprised her how she obeyed. But she realized how she had wanted to. She wanted to be beside her friend, wanted to circle her arms around the bony shoulders that was covered with layers of sweaters and quilts. She wanted to pat her balding head; aware of her presence that had been present even when they had dispersed to start new lives, tied only by their secret—a secret that had begun on a cold September night.

1949. A memory, colourful amidst a grey of amnesia. She had been waiting for Agnes to come over to her house where they played Snakes and Ladders, eating soursop and grapes on hot, stuffy evenings. But that day, Agnes did not come. Her mother did instead, running in that night as Yara sat to eat supper with her parents, saying that Agnes was missing. The men were already out looking for her. The next day, she was found sitting in a dug hole at the back of an abandoned church in a wooded area beside the neighbourhood, dirty but unharmed. Tousled hair, speckled with dust, her knees scratched from poison ivy, her dress reddish with mud. Her fingernails had broken off from digging the hole, a desperate attempt to create a refuge for the

cold nights. She had been taken home by the adult hands, amidst rejoicing—God had saved a child lost for days. On Sunday the Parish priest preached about God’s faithfulness of saving innocent children who get lost because He was the God of Refuge. But as Yara watched, she saw something in Agnes they all did not see. She saw the dank look in her eyes, horrors of an untold nightmare. *Something had happened.*

After church, she led Agnes to the back of the church, where nobody but silence was present. Before she said anything, Agnes began to cry.

“Tell me,” Yara said.

Her voice sounded severed, like meat halved with a cleaver. “It w-was the...it is the Reverend.” Agnes said. “He climbed on me. He raped me, Yara. *He raped me!*”

Yara felt the shadows grip her. A disembodiment, the separation of mind and spirit, reasoning and emotion. When they dispersed and went home for Sunday lunch, she never stopped thinking of the Priest, the man who had raped her friend and still had the boldness to preach at the altar. At first, she had told Agnes to report him to her parents, but she knew nobody would believe them. Everyone loved the Priest. He was like God here, an entity that was eerily worshipped by the illiterate villagers. Nobody would believe two teenage girls over him.

She stopped going for Mass. She hid and made excuses when her mother told her to get dressed for Catechism. She never spoke of the incidence again, even with Agnes, who had now transformed into a lethargic sullen person, speaking in monosyllables, jumping at sounds. Days turned to weeks. But that Saturday, Yara’s insides snapped. Nothing pushed her to do it. She left home that evening, walked to the Priest’s house that sat on a lone hill few meters away from the wooded area and the abandoned church. She knocked on his door and he opened. He let her in, smiling, lowering to his knees to hug her, an accepted welcome he gave all children in the community. She went into his arms, then plunged the pair of scissors hidden in her pocket deep into his throat.

It took fifteen seconds for him to die—she counted. Through the years, the sight stayed with her. He was bleeding, thrashing around, seeking for help to squelch the blood sprouting from his severed artery, finding nothing because she kicked anything he reached for away. All the while, she watched him. His gasping was drowned by the playing music from his gramophone, a litany from the church choir. She watched him until his heart stopped beating, and afterwards as he lay motionless on the ground, his blood slowly spreading on the concrete. When her eyes began to water she realized she had not been blinking, and that was when she looked away. Slowly, she barred the front door, went to the back of the house and stood at the threshold, staring at the skies.

The night was beautiful, she remembered.

Stars glittering, a crescent moon that smiled at her—congratulations for her deed, it seemed. The deadness of her heart puzzled her...she felt like she had done nothing. A priest lay dead on his kitchen floor, cushioned by the redness of his blood, and she felt nothing. *Was this amnesia, a deadening of her nerves in response to adrenaline? Was she going to panic soon, regretting what she had done?* For now, she did not.

There was a grave at the back of the church, freshly dug and open, like a screaming mouth. She had noticed it when she took Agnes there that Sunday, the day her heart became a non-living thing. So far the grounds only held two gravestones—the first European priest that had died in the 18th Century from typhus, and a homeless boy who had no parents and had died from sepsis two years ago. The third grave must have been dug for the man who died two weeks ago, the man whose family had refused to bury him at the church, saying it was against tradition. Families here buried their dead beside family houses, a final resting place but still close to home.

Dragging the dead Priest to the grave took another hour—he had become very heavy, but covering him with the pile of sand had not been hard. A shovel beside the door helped. Everything seemed planned, like a greater force of Nature had wanted this to happen. She could still feel her supper warm in her stomach, remembered lying to her mother about returning a textbook to Agnes. But here she was, standing over a covered grave.

The moon smiled further, and she shut her eyes and exhaled. After washing the shovel under a tap, she went back into the house, removed her bloodied clothes and placed them on the Priest's bed. Then she opened the gas cylinder and lit a candle.

The smell of the gas was the last thing she remembered as she walked away, naked, towards the abandoned church beside the wooded area.

I loved you like light loved spaces, like air flowed through channels. I will love you when life ceases, when this life as we know it, is already gone.

Agnes waited until Yara's fingers on her head formed a rhythm, then she said, "I always knew."

The fingers stalled, the tips tickling the wisps of her hair.

"Was that why you never replied my letters?"

"Yes."

"But I did it for you."

"I know. But you still killed someone. It did not change that."

"I know."

The fingers resumed, and Agnes shut her eyes. Her breath deepened, her chest softly rising and falling. It was a luring call to sleep, but sleep was a stranger, far from here, from home. She opened her eyes. "W-when you went there...do you remember the distinct smell of the wooded area?"

"It smelled sweet, like a perfume. I remember."

"That smell, it is from Agarwood. I always smelt it wherever I went. I noticed it when nothing else but air was around me. It lived with me for so long, I had to find out what it was. It was decaying wood, Agarwood." She paused, a tear fell. "All through these years I smelled of something I wished I could wash off my memory. It was not much of what happened, but the smell of where I was, but of how it filled my nostrils, my body, and never left."

Her sobbing squeezed at Yara's heart, and she circled her hands around her shoulders. If only tears were easy, like how they had flowed at Patrick's funeral, how she blamed herself because even though the Priest was the only man she had ever killed, she still felt like she had killed Patrick—the man who had loved her madly enough to kill himself, taking his life because even though she was a woman of bones and blood, she was also a woman who never loved nor accepted love in return.

"Agnes. You do not have to remember. They never found him, I made sure of that."

Agnes looked up at her. Her eyes were red rimmed, her nose running with mucus. "Do you think this cancer is God's way of punishing me...us?"

Yara shook her head, cleaning the mucus off with her hands.

“If God was to punish anyone, it would be me, and only me.”

Silence reigned again, but now, Yara’s fingers did not resume their patting. Now the women looked at the ceiling, admiring the circular concrete patterns. They lay in a comfortable familiarity, unified by a memory that bound them in age, sickness and spirit.

A minute passed before Yara spoke. “I do not regret a thing.”

Agnes stared at the ceiling, counting the circles that looked like bubbles. A smile pulled at her lips as she exhaled a breath.

“For that, I am glad,” she said.

THE THINGS WE NEVER SAY

I first experienced love in the arms of my mother on a Sunday morning. I stood beside the rose bushes, watching my father slowly drive out of the garage. One year, seven months. She came from behind, plucked a lone pink rose from the bushes, still dripping with dew, and tucked it in the hair around my right ear. Then she circled her hands over my shoulders and chest in a warm hug.

Twenty-eight years later, my mother will die on a hospital bed, her left hand clasping mine. It was a Monday afternoon, bright and warm with the sun. But she was cold. And slowly, like clockwork, I watched love die in my life. I saw that love had sheltered me from the glare of the world’s wickedness, the bile of men. With my mother, I had never tasted bitterness. Waking up was like eating the sun—it filled me up with so much light and optimism for mankind, I would feel like saving people I had never met.

Now, I know this is a horrible attribute to have. You cannot love the world. The world is like an intruder who comes into your apartment in the dead of night, brandishing a knife while standing over your bed, waiting for you to wake up. When you do, it kills you. This is because the world wants you to be aware when it snuffs breath out of your nostrils. It wants to watch your eyes widen with confusion and fright as the knife divides your liver and your breath ceases. It wants you to be aware of your pain.

But sometimes the world is kind. It becomes your friend, holds your hand and skips over puddles, laughing to the sky. It tends to your wounds when you fall. It cries with you at night when the loneliness is suffocating. But the biggest mistake is falling in love with the world, believing that its friendliness betrays its heart for you. No such thing. No such thing as love from the world. A true friend does not hold you when you cry, they let you cry and give you water to drink. They let you feel the coldness of pain, then warm you up with tenderness. But the world never does this because the world is not your friend. The world is your enemy, and enemies keep enemies closer.

1995

Love is in the hands.

When my mother was alive, I asked her a question. “How do you know someone loves you?” She smiled. “You feel it in the hands.”

“The hands?”

“Yes. Someone who loves you will hold you like they will hold glass—you do not want it to fall and break less it would cut your hands. You would not hit someone you love. You won’t push away someone you love. You would hug them, stroke them, and wipe their tears away. It is always in the hands.”

Ah, my mother, a hopeless romantic. She believed so much in the good of men, she searched desperately for it. This was a woman with a history of dreams but she fell at the feet of the world for fear of being rebuked. How do you give up a past of glory like a Valhalla returned from war for a future of standing in a hot kitchen baking pastries for a toddler’s lunchbox? But this was my mother—the miseducation of an independent woman. She traded her independence for the fullness of a family, tied it to a post for the confines of marriage.

One Saturday when I was nine, I sat at her feet on the cemented threshold of our veranda, my elbow resting on her lap as she braided my hair in cornrows. Her skin was soft and cool. Mine was warm. The artificial fruity smell of *Apple Hair Food* clung to my nostrils, strands of my long hair fluttering on my eyelids whenever my mother combed. Pushing them away, I sucked on a Buttermint, listening to my mother’s fingers as she interlocked hair into braids. The friction of hair and fingers sounded like electric wires sizzling in unison. Whether they sparked a light, I do not know. But then, I remembered. *This* had to be love—the sounds of my mother’s fingers, skin touching hair, holding, pulling, kneading, caressing, the light weight of the edge of her palm on my earlobe as she finished up the rows. Maybe even the pain. Yes, the pain that came with the comb, the stretching, even the softness of the oiling on my scalp as she dabbed it with hair cream. This was the love she talked about, in the power of hands.

I asked, just to be sure. “Does this mean you love me, Mum?”

She stopped, bent her head until she was looking at me. “What?”

“You once said love is in the hands.”

My mother must have understood then because her eyes misted, her brows released from the slight frown that creased her forehead and the small scar on it. She smiled as she tugged my cheeks, her fingers greasy with hair cream. “Yes. *This* means I love you,” she said.

Then she continued braiding my hair.

Three months later, I came to her as she sat on the battered La-Z-Boy in the living room, watching *Jeopardy*. She had her glasses on, the tips of the bifocals steadily sliding down her nose. She kept sniffing to keep them up. The room was slightly dark, but she saw what I held in my hands.

“Scissors,” she said, looking up at me. “What for?”

I grinned at her. “Love is in the hands. Mummy, please can you cut my hair?”

1997

Does it hurt when you walk?

This was the year they found out I had scoliosis.

It was Aunty Arith, my mother’s stepsister, who noticed the oddness in my posture. She had just arrived from Port Harcourt where she ran a business selling expensive *gele* and lace, her head

still shaded by her baby pink fedora, nails painted a fiery pepper-red. It was when I had brought the bottles of Gold Spot and a blue stencilled saucer of *chin-chin* that she looked at me, one brow lifted up in puzzled curiosity. “Why is our daughter bending to one side?”

My mother had been seated across from her, crocheting. She looked at her sister and me, a cloud of inertia on her face, unsure of who to focus on. “What? Who?”

“She’s not standing straight.” She gestured at me. “*Nne*, walk for her. See? See how she bends to the right side? It does not look normal.”

Of course it was not *normal* because I spent the rest of the week living in the shadow of my mother, who began watching my movements with anxiety in her eyes, the skin of her jaw creased with worry. I felt the fear too, especially the morning after I showered, standing naked in the large mirror that hung in my room. Aunty Arith was right—the right side of my hip bone jutted out while the left side was still normally symmetrical. I also noticed that my left rib was enlarged, protruding like an uncertain hump. After I showed this to my mother, she grabbed her purse and keys and led me to the front door and her Passat on the garage driveway. My father was at the dining table, drinking a cup of tea and reading the newspaper.

“We are going to the hospital,” my mother said.

“Hmm,” he mumbled, wetting his index finger with his tongue before turning a leaf of paper. He barely looked up at us.

Outside was hot. It was the middle of August, the rains still pelted Umuahia with raindrops the size of kola nuts and the trees were rich with bright green leaves and juicy fruits. But today was different. The air was heavy and humid, swollen with heat that left droplets of sweat on foreheads and pools of dampness under armpits. Halfway to the hospital, my mother whipped out her hand fan, the one her Indian friend Indira had given her on a sponsored trip to Singapore. She wound down the windows for me, but the air was stifling with so much heat and the combined street smells of sweaty bodies, red earth, burning wood, and decaying feces that I could hardly breathe.

The doctor, a tall man with sad-looking eyes, had some good news. I had idiopathic scoliosis, which my mother also had, but it could be rectified by wearing a body brace. The bad news was we could not afford the brace. It was sold in the United States and came at an alarming figure beside multiple zeros—in dollars. I could never forget the look on my mother’s face as we left the hospital, forlorn, like a woman defeated. She struggled to hold back tears as we drove home, her hands white as she gripped the steering wheel. It felt like she had given up on me at that moment, this one thing her child needed, *a life-changing thing*, and she could not afford it. It tore me apart to see her weak and despondent.

I decided I was going to help her. If I was not going to wear a brace, I could *trick* my body into believing that I was wearing one, perhaps work on my bones and joints to make my posture straight again, just like every other child. Personally, I cared less about my scoliosis. In fact I barely noticed it until one boy in my class made a disgusting joke, calling me *high-high low-low*, a mimic of the way I walked. Of course I cried, mainly because he was a boy, bigger and taller than me, and I could not fight him. Besides, I hated fighting. But what tightened my heart with angst was whenever I caught my mother looking at me. She began to do it more after the trip to the doctor’s, her eyes following me wherever I went—the kitchen, the living room, even the toilet. She would ask if I felt all right, and if the right side hurt. I would tell her I was fine but she never believed me, and one Sunday after church service I found her crying into a jar of orange juice in the kitchen. The orange squeezer and a pool of orange pulp sat on the table beside the jar. I said nothing, picked a tablecloth and began cleaning the mess. She watched me, her eyes red rimmed, face shining with tears.

"If it hurts you better tell me!"

"It doesn't, Mummy. I promise."

She sucked air through her teeth, stared at the ceiling. "God, how can you not give me this one thing? *This one thing!* My only daughter . . . how can she be walking sideways for the rest of her life? Look at me, no salary for two months. We can barely feed. Why are you doing this to me?"

I had come to realize that asking God rhetorical questions was a futile act but I kept quiet and indulged my mother. I held her hand and comforted her. And the next day I went to PE classes with the intent to realign my hip bone. I walked instinctively, pushing my left hip forward, trying to disguise my posture. It was uncomfortable and awkward, and soon my left hip bone began to hurt, but I did not stop. I rode my bicycle harder to put pressure on my pelvis. I played tag. I joined the long jump team. Then one day, while climbing the almond tree in front of our house, I swung from a branch, lifted my left hip bone to the sky, and let go of the tree branch.

The impact to the ground was not detrimental because it was October, the rains had stopped and the tree had been shredded, leaving a bed of dried, brown leaves. They cackled and cushioned me as I landed on the ground, sharply, the edge of my hairline cutting on a buried stone. I saw the blood before I heard my mother's scream. She had been in the kitchen, filling up small transparent bags of nylon with *moi-moi*, tomorrow's breakfast. The blood was on the tip of my nose as she ran and slid down to the dirt with me, cradling me in her lap, her face a cocktail of panic and shock. In those few seconds, she kept shouting hysterically for my father.

"I want to walk normal again," I said, smiling, disoriented.

"Walk anyhow you want, we will live with it," she said. "Anene, *Anene!*"

Her voice was loud and beautiful.

1998

If love was a walking human I would have killed it a long time ago. I would have stabbed it in the throat, sliced an artery and ceased oxygen to its heart. Love is stupid, amongst other things.

My father was addicted to Lipton tea. Every morning he sat beside the third window of the living room, the window that overlooked the front yard, his Bible or a newspaper in one hand, a steaming cup of Lipton tea in the other. He always made it himself, only asking me to boil water or fetch the hot water flask from the dining table. He would dip the bags into the mug meticulously, like a clock master repairing a watch. He loved them dark and bitter but on stressful days he added a spoonful of creamer and two cubes of sugar. I should have known that day was a stressful day because he told me to bring the dairy creamer and a packet of *St. Louis* from the third shelf of the kitchen cupboard. But I paid no particular attention because I was excited. My art teacher had given us homework to draw animate objects in our homes, and I had painted our English spaniel, Snoopy. This was my first painting, and my insides fluttered with pride. I was eager to get to school and show my work to the class. I brought the creamer and sugar for my father, then hurried to my parents' room where my mother was wearing her shoes with a frown on her face.

"Hurry, Mummy."

"Go to the parlor, I'm coming." She sounded upset. But of course, I was not paying attention. I went downstairs and sat at the dining table, watching my father drink his tea in noisy, intermediate sips. The steam made his dark face shiny with sweat.

I began to pay attention when my mother reappeared a few minutes later, shouting. So many words, but I saw her holding up a stack of receipts, pointing them at my father and asking questions. He dropped his cup of tea and watched her, his eyes suddenly bloodshot. That look sent me into déjà vu, faraway to a certain night in 1994. A night filled with raised voices and sounds of drizzling rain, wet concrete roads, and dark looming trees. Bloodshot eyes, shouting, a door flinging open, my mother pushed onto the gravelled sidewalk of the highway. Her feet in red shoes were the only thing I could see from the back seat of the car. The rest of her had fallen in the bushes, hidden in the shrubs. Screaming, lots of screaming.

I blinked and returned to the living room. My mother was no longer shouting. Now my father was and he was standing. Now he was facing her, his Bible clasped in his hand. *This was the moment of tears and blood, isn't it? Is this the moment you are going to save her again, not because you love her, but because you are afraid?*

I stood up, a bitter taste in my mouth. My ears were filled with the thunderous voice of my father, droning, cursing . . .

"Mummy, please let's go," I said to her. My voice had not broken yet. This was my tactic, a safe way to lure her from what may happen, what *will* happen. But today, my mother was ignoring me.

"Go to the car."

"Mummy, please."

She glanced at me and saw it, the look of desperation laced with panic. And then she knew. She turned to Daddy. "I'm going to work," she said in a quiet voice and headed toward me.

It was fast. Later, it will replay in my head continuously in a loop for as long as I live. How he leapt for her, flinging the Bible at the curve of her back. Grabbing her perm curls, tugging, throwing her like a handball across the room. Her startled shout and my shriek coming together, unifying in the quiet space, like liquid and oil. She standing up, dazed, him running toward her, his arms like large, dark logs as they went up in the air and came down with thuds of slaps on her face. She staggers to the floor, him lifting her and slamming her on the gray sofa that sat beside the TV. My favorite chair. I hear a *crack* and realize it is her head hitting the wooden canister above the sofa. This was also when I realized I was rooted to the spot beside the dining table. The blows were coming now—rhythmical like song, each descending on my mother's face like notes on a lyrical page. She is saying something between the blows but they are coming out in gurgles of spit and blood, punctuated heavily with flying fists. In that moment, she turns her head toward me. What I can see from the bruise thickening around her eye is a look of acceptance, hopelessness even, beseeching me to turn away. She did not want me here, her hands were not blocking the blows but were waving me away toward the door instead. *This was normal to her.* It was at the sixth blow, the one that sent a splatter of blood and a tooth flying out of her mouth and to the floor, her head lolling back like a rag doll's, that I realized if I continued standing here, watching, comatose with terror, she would die.

I ran to them, screaming. He was still hitting her, his chest heaving, white vest spotted with blood like Gothic art. Drenched in sweat, eyes fiery with rage, his breath hot like the Lipton tea he had drunk an hour ago. I felt urine escape my bladder, startlingly warm as it rolled down my leg to my pink stockings and brown Oxfords. He had not seen me yet even though I was screaming at his face, trying to stop his blows. Finally I crawled up my mother's lap, through the opening that he had created by pinning her legs down with his knees, and I threw my body over her face and shoulders. The next blow hit my head, expectant and unwavering. My eyes were shut but I still saw the stars. The pink neon lights that flashed in the void of darkness, the blinding pain that traveled from the point of the blow like wildfire, enveloping my skull until it

became a swimming motion, like the incoming tide at a beach. I shrieked and he noticed me then, because he stopped.

He stopped. He stopped.

I do not remember him leaving, but I remember opening my eyes and he was not there. The living room was the same it had been that morning—sunlight streaming in from the louvered windows, lace curtains fluttering in the breeze. The smell of home and breakfast, the teacup on the stool, finished of its contents and left with dregs clinging to the base like burnt clay. My head still throbbing, I looked at her. There was a woman lying still, her eyes shut and swollen with quickly darkening bruises. Her nose was awkwardly twisted to the left side, her nostrils streaming with blood. Her lower lip was split open, a tiny gaping flesh. Blood was everywhere—smudged on her forehead, dripping to her collarbones. But her chest was still rising and falling, rising and falling. She was still here with me.

It was the landlady, Mama Cameroun, who came in and found us.

2006

The only death that can kill a woman is death to her spirit.

That evening, as I sat on the veranda close to the cashew tree, my eyes looking through the curved holes of the barbed-wire fence, dried leaves crushing eagerly underneath my bare feet, and ants crawling hastily to shadows of sand, I saw her walking toward the house. I recognized her by her dress—it was the red-and-white polka-dot gown she had worn to one of my aunt's weddings in 2001. I hated the dress; I thought it made her look fat. But she loved it. The evening sun made her skin glow, her dark hair glistened from pomade and sheen. She was dragging a suitcase behind her, full and heavy, and when I realized it was really my mother I was seeing walking toward me, I stood up and hurried to her. The sun warmed our hugs; her fair skin refreshingly cool, like an oasis in a desert. Her gown smelled like her, heavy with lilac perfume, faint with camphor. She was smiling at me, a colorful reminder of her ingenuity and her love that burned my soul even from a thousand miles. Taking the box away from her, I led her to the veranda of her friend's house, the house I have been living in since I came here for my university education. The smell of broiling potatoes from the kitchen, the sound of gravel as a car drove by, and the chirps of birds on the cashew and *moringa* trees in the small yard filled our noses and ears as we sat down on the blue plastic chairs.

"Mummy, welcome. What happened? What are you doing here?"

"They transferred me here. My office was shut down, so they posted me here to retire."

"Really? That's good!"

She was looking at me with the eyes I have known since I could count my 123s and sing my ABCs, but for the first time I noticed the crow's feet at the corners of her lids. The shadow of darkness that circled underneath her eyes, caused from years of wearing bifocals. The smile lines were now deeper—they had engraved themselves so prominently that they were even visible when she was not smiling. Her hands were still soft and slow, the skin of her fingers still wrinkled, just like mine. And I realized that she was getting older. This was not just a woman with stories as a nurse during the Biafran war, of seeing tears and blood at the Red Cross clinic in Port Harcourt, attending to soldiers with bodies torn apart from bullets, heads shattered from shrapnel, women and children crawling on the floor on bony arms and knees, delirious with severe malnutrition. This was not just a woman with stories of walking from Port Harcourt to her village, a basket of food supplies on her head as she maneuvered soldiers so her family

would not starve. This was not just a woman with stories of sitting at the reception of Central Bank for a day, waiting patiently to see the governor without an appointment, hoping to get a job without a university degree.

This was a woman with stories of her own; a brutal reminder of life taking away the beautiful things. I looked at the finger—she had the gold band on. I always remember it shining; she washed it with water and detergent, cleaned it with a crisp white handkerchief. Easy to clean a ring, but can you save a marriage? Can you wash it and wring it out to the sun in its bright light, hoping for the rays to dry it, for it to flutter in the breeze? Can you clean it with a handkerchief until it sparkles in your eyes? What can you do to an ever-after that leaves you breathless, choking for freedom? What can save you before you save yourself?

The scar from one of the beatings was still on her arm, and 1998 came back to me again, fresh and alive with the teacup. The gray sofa. The bloodied face. “Mummy, what happened?” I asked again.

She began to cry—she knew I knew. When a bond exists, you can only tug at it, but it tightens with each grip. “H-He . . .” she was gasping to speak. I placed my palm in hers and entwined my fingers with hers.

“*Gwa m.* Tell me. What did he do?”

“He picked the wrench. That wrench in your room. He picked it and raised it to hit me. I was ready. I told him to do it, to end it. After all, you were not there . . . nobody will save me like before. This is all I have gotten from this life. I told him it was better dying than living this way—being beaten like a dog.”

Tears clouded my vision, and I shut my eyes. The liquid was hot and tepid as it flowed down my cheeks and landed on my lips, tasting like salt. “And?”

“He threw the wrench at the wall and left me. This happened yesterday. I packed this suitcase and ran to the bus station this morning. He was still sleeping when I left. Everything else is there.” She blew her nose loudly into a handkerchief, rolled it into a ball and dabbed her eyes. “I do not want to die. The doctor told me those one-sided headaches I always have are from the beatings. I c-can’t go back . . .”

I said nothing. But slowly, I raised my arm and circled her shoulders, watched as they jerked with sobs. And then, something amazing happened. She placed her head on my lap and cried. My mother. The Valhalla that came home from battles fought with emotions, the soul that had understood independence and held to the pillars of strength for fifty-four years, she placed her head on her daughter’s lap and cried. Tears a river; flowing, imminent to wash sorrows that burdened her heart from years of pain and antagonism, eager to shed them away.

And in that moment, I understood what love means again.

Love is patient, love is kind. But Love is leaving while you can.
