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Soft Still Voices

A Collection of Short Stories and Poems

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A Whisper in June

Her gaze caressed your fading spirit. Though soft like a baby's palm and warm like woman's cave, her eyes frightened you, reminding you of your first night in Nigeria when you peeped through the window of the rat infested hotel room in Lagos and noticed a black cat with emerald eyes. It froze in its trail and stared back. Neither of you felt inclined to look away until a rumble in your stomach caused by the *suya* you had eaten earlier excused you to the toilet in which you had never excreted as ferociously before.

The girl whose nose ran down into her mouth like a stream stood beside her mother, gripping on to the helm of her mother's flower dress as they both stood and watched. You were so thirsty that you would not have cared if she offered you her nose to drink. The girl who appeared to be in tears until you realized that her eyes were just red from dust being splashed into her eyes as all the *danfo* buses passed by. She could not have been older than four but you were curious as to why she was so tall. She continued to stare as they undressed you.

Naked and cold; it was bad enough that you were only a few minutes away from being stoned to your grave, but why did it have to be during the wake of a brisk Harmattan morning? The dry and dusty winds consumed your lungs as though the season would kill you before the crowd had the chance to do it themselves. Blinded by fog; you could not see the sun but you knew it was there, attempting to hide from the darkness of an unjust world.

It was a regular day when little students skipped for miles to school, afraid that if they were late they would be lashed by their head masters; a day when men and women prepared for work, aware of the fact that by the end they would only return home with a quarter of enough to feed their children. A day when *ashewo* women would awake with impaired smiles on their ruby

lipstick-smearred faces counting their change, patting their shoulders for jobs well done as they rise from beds they did not lay; in the homes of wealthy chiefs whose spouses had been away, struggling to fit back into their tight pants, wiping their semen-stained hips and walking out the door with the greatest attempt to be discrete.

Indeed it was a regular day; a day you knew you would never live to see the end of. A day when all the love you ever thought existed in this world was tangled in the bosom of a coconut tree.

“One!” The officer yelled as a single bullet shot into the air. The startling sound was terrifying and you were almost certain that you were dead if not for the fact that you could still feel the cool Harmattan air running through your bloody nostrils.

“Two!” He yelled again. Another bullet was shot. This time it had to be you except you could still feel the weight of your body, tied up against the tree. You could still feel the branches holding you in comfort. You still felt the leaves brushing your hair just as mom would do when you were younger, before dad insisted that your locks be cut for fear of what the pastor might say.

You could still hear God’s voice, sharp yet gentle, assuring you that all was well. What you did not hear was the sound of the third bullet when the first strike of a large brick collided with the left side of your face. Your teeth shattered instantly and you shivered as you felt each one slide down your throat and it reminded you of the time when you swallowed a fish bone from mom’s pepper soup.

The yellow dress was no longer in sight. A splinter had entered your eye. A rock pierced your chest and another bullet was shot into the air. You heard many voices but no words. You saw many bodies of many different forms, but no people.

The crowd shouted, yet the silence ran deep as a well. Your urine rinsed your legs as the warmth of it trickled to your feet and between your toes. You wondered how you could still be alive, while you assumed that every breath you took would finally be your last. Rocks, bricks, sticks and stones broke your bones and mom was not there to lift you.

Last night he washed your feet with powdered milk and honey. He clipped your toes and rubbed them with scented oil. The fragrance, familiar, but you could not recall where it was that you met it before.

He was your mentor who gradually became your friend. You sat with him alone in a dark hotel room. Rats, large and small, scurried from wall to wall. NEPA was at its worse once again and there had been no electricity in the foreign city of Ababa for six days.

As the clock struck twelve it turned into seven days; no light, no running water, no one, except him.

You were not a slave but he mastered you. He knew that when you blinked your eyes or licked your lips repetitiously it meant that you were in deep thought. He knew that you did not understand the ways of the land and so he offered, without question, to be your guide.

A white-stick candle lit the room and you both sat beside it as you read aloud Galatians 5:13. “You my brothers and sisters were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge in the flesh; rather serve one another humbly in love.”

“Are your lips dry? You keep licking them,” he asked. He slowly pulled the blue NIV bible out of your hands which he then held firmly in his. He stared sharply at your face, reminding you of the black cat from the first night. You were not sure if it was vomit you felt in your mouth or

the aftertaste of *egusi* soup made from bitter leaves which you both ate at the local bar down the road few hours earlier.

“No, I’m just--”

“Thinking? Thinking about what?” He asked.

The room was silent. The only sounds heard were the unforgivable chorus of chirping crickets and croaking toads in the backyard pond.

You could not bear to keep quiet any longer. It was frustrating-- the invisible romance you both shared; the joy and anguish formed in your soul in such a short period of time-- a romance that neither of you were willing to claim, yet you both knew that it existed. A romance that neither of you were willing to accept as your own, yet you both knew that there was none like it.

“Tolu?” He said softly, tapping the grey buttons on your blue collar. His dark eyes like roasted coffee; one of the things you were already beginning to miss drinking every morning back home in America. He hunched his broad shoulders to be seated closer to you; close enough that you could smell the moistness of his *egusi* breathe, like dried fish and burnt spinach, and a peculiar voice echoed in your brain.

“This is the North. It’s one thing to be in the South where a relationship like ours is forbidden. Up here, people get stoned to death,” you told him.

He laughed sheepishly.

“What’s so funny?” You asked, annoyed.

“Tolu, exactly what do you mean by relationship?”

“You know what I mean, we’re both adults here,” you said, attempting to avoid eye contact so you pretended to slap a mosquito on your elbow, then scratched it to prove that you had already been bitten.

“Tolu, the only relationship we have is that we are brothers in the Lord. We came here on a mission to preach the gospel of Christ and in no time we’ll be back to our normal lives in Maryland.”

“Thomas, stop pretending!” You shouted. He quickly covered your mouth and urged you to be quiet.

“Are you mad!” He yelled. “*Ori e o pe ni?* This is Nigeria, for God’s sake and we are ministers. Whatever happened the last time was just the work of the devil. I’ve forgotten about it and so should you.”

“How can I just forget it Tom?”

“Thomas.”

“Oh so now it’s Thomas?” You said angrily, getting up to look for your cigarette so you can light it with the candle’s flame. It was the last Newport you had despite your attempts to manage it because you had no interest in trying any kind of African tobacco.

“*Se you dey craze for head?* I am a minister-- married to a beautiful woman with three beautiful children all who are waiting for me to get back to them next week. And you, Tolu, just proposed to a lovely Igbo girl, with an ass big enough to fuck this whole town at once, and you want to tell me about a stupid kiss that happened, which by the way would have been avoided had you not told all the women to leave us to clean up the church ourselves after the convention. You *dis* self-righteous fool, why didn’t you just let them do their work? In the house of God for that matter....”

“So it was my fault that we kissed? So I would imagine that you would say it’s been my fault this entire time, the conversations we’ve had, the undeniable connection we--”

“Deny it! Deny it very well because there’s no connection here. You this boy, you have so much to learn about our culture. This is not America where people can protest for their rights, where you can hold hands with Oprah and cry about people not accepting you for ‘who you are.’ You walk down the street you see a dude kissing another dude. Mary says she wants to marry Jill and they go to town hall to fight for equality. This is fucking Africa and we are fucking Christians! Please don’t disturb me with this nonsense *jo!*”

He sucked his teeth stood up, then sat back down.

He asked you for another cigarette. You both sat quietly, staring at the candle.

Irritated by the stillness in the room, you rose and said you were going to bed. Few minutes later, he joined you.

For everyone else the night had ended but yours had just begun. Little students were home, ironing their uniforms for school the next day for fear of being punished for wearing wrinkled clothes to school. Men and women were tired from a long day of work. Hunger followed them to bed but at least their children ate. *Ashawos* wore their ruby lipsticks and sprayed perfume, shamelessly stepping into the luxury cars that their chiefs sent to pick them up in.

You my brothers and sisters were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge in the flesh; rather serve one another humbly in love.

The scripture reverberated in your mind; it was almost audible, as you lay next to him, chest to chest. He apologized for insulting you. He explained that there were different kinds of love in life, and that the kind between the two of you had no place in the kingdom of God. But, he loved you. There was nothing in the world that he would not do for you. He made a joke about eloping to Atlanta and you released a faint laugh. He suggested that the two of you try as much as

possible to stay away from each other at the church conference the next day in case suspicion surfaced.

“But what about when we get back?” You asked.

“We’re fucking Christians,” he answered, as he planted a solemn kiss on your shoulder.

Then he turned around and fell asleep.

Ashe

Seated silently on the cherry wooden chair that squealed like a hungry mouse each time she shifted in discomfort, Amina anticipated the loose nails of her hostile chair soon releasing its bond, causing her to fall. Her sisters worked tirelessly on her to make her look elegant and comely enough to present her as the village bride.

Though it had not been long since the sun had proclaimed itself into the barren sky, their necks were already laced with seductive sweat, mixed with creamy foundation powder on their faces, resembling a cascading illusion of a warm chocolate milo beverage descending into their enduring silk bras. The echoed laughter of what appeared to be the entire village of Ilu, combined with the conclusive cries of slaughtered goats and mutilated chickens preluded the morning's festivity.

Young girls with beaded jewels and stones around their waists danced with hips and legs only. Young boys huddled in a tight corner, sorting out which girls they would have by the end of the day. Amina could hear the vigorous vibration of Banji's fingers beating the talking drum with his peculiar talent of conforming classic Yoruba melodies into modern tales.

Amina's attention was then redirected to the ache in her head caused by one of her sisters who was almost done with plaiting her hair. It was unbearably tight; unforgivably tugging every last strand of cotton-like hair she had, but she dared not complain. She tried to distract herself from the pain and rested her ears on the vivid sensation of Banji's music, which then shifted from Yoruba classics to her very own *oriki*, her praise song, the song of her ancestors, of Adagunodo. The song that spoke truth of her grace; the song proclaimed that even if she wore a crown of dusty stones and stood next to a person wearing a crown of fine jewels, that women would still submit to envy because they could not compare to her.

The crowd roared as loud as an army invading a city, impatiently awaiting Amina's entrance as the new bride of Chief Olasegun Alakija. The hearts of her parents beamed like the rays of the sun; filled with pride and joy.

Wunmi, the youngest sister, did the makeup while Demi, the oldest, worked on the bride's attire. Amina's soul, a melting pot of ponderous grief and decayed dreams.

"Hold still," Demi said as she struggled to tie Amina's head wrap around her head.

She gripped on to the fabric tightly, placing two angles of it from ear to ear. She pressed her lips tightly, an expression she always made whenever she focused hard on anything. Her mates had always teased that she looked as though someone had messed in her mouth when making such a surly face.

Demi was older than Amina by fifteen years. She was not familiar with the new fabric that was given to her sister to wear for the wedding and was a bit envious of the fact that she was not given a *gele* as intricate as the one she was helping her sister to fix for her own wedding eleven years ago. She was marveled by the artistic delineation of the blue and yellow pattern of the two-yard fabric made from damask and wondered where it was found. Perhaps the chief had it imported from the East, she assumed.

"*Sistah mi*, please just take it easy," Amina replied, disinclined to take part in her own celebration. Her eyes had already been concealed by the brown pressed powder and charcoal eyeliner which Wunmi applied. It felt much too heavy on her face, clogging her pores, though she could not care less. Beneath her eyes were inflated bags of tears which demanded several attempts from Wunmi to mask.

The night before, Amina's mother, Abagbe, bore witness to her daughter's sorrow when she found her kneeling under the *iroko* tree, in front of their house, planting her tears into the

soil. For a moment the elderly woman assumed that her daughter had gone mad as it was unlike Amina to behave in such a manner. Amina was always the first one to go to bed; first to retreat to her bedroom to either study or observe her devotion with God as soon as she finished cleaning the kitchen. There she was, past midnight, under the *iroko* tree, perhaps hoping that somehow its roots would have mercy and assist her in plotting an escape.

“My daughter, *ki lo se le?* What is the matter? You are fortunate enough that your father has exhausted himself with palm wine tonight otherwise the entire village would be awoken by his cries if he found you here. It is not befitting for an engaged woman to find herself where you are. If I was not your mother I would say you have arranged for a man to meet with you.”

Abagbe’s eyes wandered with suspicion, hoping that the shadow of a young man’s libidinous penis would not be found hiding behind the bushes. With aid from the moonlight upon her daughter’s face Abagbe’s heart was wounded by what she found.

“Mama Why do I have to marry that old man? Am I not worth more than this?” Amina cried. “What have I done to you to receive such a devastating fate?”

Abagbe, unsure of how to console and rebuke her daughter simultaneously, inhaled a deep whiff of the dusty air. She believed her daughter would be a fool not to realize the advantage of being chosen to marry Chief Olasegun.

When her own husband showed up at her compound thirty two years ago with his palm wine, she remembered the flourish of excitement that overcame her, that a man had chosen her to be his wife, his slave. As a mother however, Agbagbe could not allow herself to ignore Amina’s broken spirit. She pulled the side of her brown and blue *ankara* wrapper around her chest to loosen it and re-tied it to hold it tighter to protect her breasts from exposure. She grabbed a stool on the concrete corridor of their home and brought it to the tree where she sat in silence as she

watched her daughter weep in harmony with the dead saturnine air. It was as though the crickets were aware of Amina's suffering, for even they refrained from their chorus.

The next morning Amina was awakened by the song of her sisters. They danced around the room and their excitement for the day was evident.

"Geeet uuuup!" Demi sang, tapping harshly on the bride's hip. "Don't say because you are now getting married that you won't sweep this room before you leave us."

Amina rolled over, grunting like a pig; perturbed by the sleep she deprived herself of throughout the night.

"Leave me alone, I'm still sleeping," she said, pulling her wrapper over her head and turning back to her comfortable position of lying on her right shoulder with her left hand beneath her head.

"*Sistah* you can't sleep o," Wunmi said, smiling from ear to ear, "me I go marry the chief for you if you don't wake up."

Annoyed by the comment the youngest sibling had just made, Demi yelled at Wunmi, instructing her to leave the room immediately and boil some water for them to bathe with.

Wunmi obeyed apologetically and excused herself from the bedroom.

"*Oya* wake up, wake up," Demi said.

"I said I am not getting up! Tell Wunmi she can marry that old *agbaya* for all I care, I would rather die than to be a third wife to anyone."

"*Hei!*" Demi exclaimed, placing both hands on top of her head, an expression made when a terrible thing has happened. The same expression she made as she witnessed her husband, Tunde, take his last breathe. The same expression she made while the other wives stood there

laughing at him because they were yet to realize that his life was gone and that they had just committed murder.

It was all just meant to teach him a lesson, one that he would not live to remember because four of his wives would be the ones to end his life in their jealous rage towards their him for marrying a fifth wife. A few moments prior it seemed to Demi as though the wives were delighted to welcome her as they helped to carry her bags to her new room. While in the act of consecrating their union, Demi was the first to hear the other wives marching towards their bedroom with cutlasses in their hands and Tunde in her mouth. They claimed that they wanted their own share and that he was wrong for adding another wife to a home that was already suffering from a limited food supply. They sought revenge. The first wife wished she had thought of killing him sooner. Demi feared for her life and Tunde laughed as though it was a regular episode. They demanded that he took them all at once.

“*Shebi* you want to have fives wives. You will learn how to fuck five women at once,” the third wife said.

Since that night all Demi could remember was the four women running out of the house in bare feet and into the forest. She would be standing there alone, blood in her hair, a bride and widow in one day. Soon after, Demi returned home to her sisters and parents wearing a black gown and black slippers. She lived there ever since.

“Oya wake up,” Demi said, tapping her sister again.

She walked over to the door and picked up the broom that was behind it. She held it tightly and used her hand to beat the palm branch made broom to even out the stalks and handed it over to Amina.

“*Nah wah* for you *o*. Instead of you to be on your knees thanking God for giving you a husband, you’re here complaining. I think say the chief refuse me because I’m a widow. You *betta* get up now, clean this room and get ready for your wedding today.”

Reluctantly, Amina rose and took the broom from her older sister. The fact that she was getting married that day did not negate the fact that she was still a teenager. She still had to respect her older sister and do what she was told.

Amina found the bucket of water that was placed in front of the bathroom by Wunmi. She felt it to be a bit cooler than what she would have preferred but was not in the mood to ask Wunmi to boil more water. She carried the bucket into the bathroom, holding her sponge and bar of soap in the other hand. It was her first time using the soap and she regretted taking it from her parents’ bedroom. The soap was pink and round with a French word she could not read inscribed on it, different from the black soap she normally used. It was one of the many gifts the chief had brought to her family the day he came to ask for her hand in marriage. The soap was brought in five cartons, along with biscuits, kola nuts and chewing gum. Not to mention the ten thousand naira which her mother eagerly pocketed between her famished breasts.

The palm wine the chief offered her father was said to be the best he had ever tasted. Amina could not comprehend, however, the idea of being paid for with foreign soap and intangible edibles. Massaging the soap on her skin, dark as prosperous soil, her memory escorted her back to Ifedayo, Demi’s best friend from secondary school.

Amina could recall the empathy she felt for Ifedayo when she was forced to marry a school teacher from a developing city in Ondo State. Ifedayo was only sixteen and was just about to complete school when she was then forced to withdraw during her exams and trade her education for a life of pounding yam daily and bearing children.

Never could the sorrow she beheld on Ifedayo's face that day escape her memory as she sat with Demi who plaited Ifedayo's hair in preparation of her husband picking her up from her parent's home. The man was too poor to afford a big wedding so he spent all of his savings on her dowry and took her away quietly in an attempt to avoid gossip. Ifedayo was fortunate enough to have been the first wife, Amina was certain, even if it would only be temporary. As poor as that man was, Ifedayo would probably be the only wife after all, she believed. Scrubbing between her toes, Amina wondered if Ifedayo had children by now and if they took from her swordfish eyes as they all predicted years ago.

Never did Amina think that she would have to wear the same cloth of misery years later, barely two months shy of her sixteenth birthday. Tears welled in her eyes, it took every breath for her to hold it in. Crying was not going to save her this time. The same tears she used to call her father to her rescue when she was younger and was about to be beaten by her mom for stealing Christmas chicken from the pot of stew would not be the same tears that would dissuade him from handing her over to the chief.

The soap lathered profusely as Amina continued to rub it on her sponge. She nearly swallowed her throat when she looked down at herself and saw the bareness of her pubic hair. Her mother shaved it with a razor the day before. Taken by disgust at the thought of the chief yanking at her breast with his mango teeth and caressing her body with his ashy palms, she nearly vomited on herself.

Amina took much pride in her figure. Of her two sisters, her buttocks were the roundest and the village men would always make it known when she would go to the market with her them.

"Sistah you dey fine oh, your ikebe robust and sweet," they would say.

Her sisters never received the same comments. To think that chief would own her by the end of the night was a waste of sweet *ikebe*, she was sure.

It was meant to be the happiest day of Amina's life. To marry a wealthy man was all she and her sisters ever talked about, nights when mommy and daddy were not home. It was difficult, however, because instead of being married she was being given.

Her sisters escorted her as her face was hidden from the public with a bedazzled white scarf. On her was the most exquisite *iru* and *buba* she ever wore and Demi had managed to tie her *gele* well enough to pass the message that Amina was ready to marry a Big Man.

The music was almost deafening to her ears. The drummers beating louder upon her arrival as her sisters tagged along behind her in their green laced *aso ebi*, singing and swaying their hips. The master of the ceremony, the *alaga ijoko*, introduced her. Amina's face was still covered so she was yet to see anyone. She could hear the clapping of children, and their chants of praise poems in Yoruba.

“*Oko e oni sonu!*” They yelled in accord.

Contrary to what they were saying, in her mind she did hope that her husband would get lost and disappear.

Amina was seated gently on her chair as the music and cheering gradually subsided, her face still covered. She knew the chief was sitting right next to her. She could tell by his annoying grunts and the stupid hissing sound he made while trying to push meat out the corners of his teeth with his tongue.

Once again the drums rolled as Amina was ready to reveal her face. The scarf was lifted and her rason-toned skin gleamed as she wore a big deceptive smile. The crowd cheered.

Food was served and drinks were offered. Amina overheard a young girl with a plastic celebration cap on her head say, “*Iyawo fine, oko ko fine.*” and she concurred. She was certainly better looking than her husband.

Amina stood up and knelt down on both knees before her husband and bowed her head. The crowd cheered some more. Then she rose and gave him a kiss on his thick crusty lips. She imagined she had gotten a splinter from the kiss and giggled silently within herself. It was time for the praise poetry, to begin.

Amina went first with her prayer poem and chanted in Yoruba:

“The father-in-law I will meet will not be my enemy

The mother-in-law I will meet will not be my enemy

The CO-wife that I will meet should not be my enemy

Goodness, so that I will not have Abiku”

My destiny will not allow me to have a child that I will bury,”

The crowd joined her at the end and shouted ‘*Ashe*’, in agreement with the prayer, just as Christians would say, ‘amen.’

She then knelt before her parents and recited:

“My father, my mother, thank you so much

Profit will be yours.

Thank you for taking care of me

Thank you for providing my needs

For covering me with wisdom

That is more valuable than cloth

Slaves will care for you

Indentured servants will produce children for you

My children will care for you,”

Ashe!

From her parents, she walked to Demi and Wunmi and held both their hands tightly. No longer could she hold back the tears from gushing out of her sockets.

“My sister, I ate pounded yam with you

I ate yam flour with you

I tied wrapper with you

But when it came to shift up, shift on the mat

It became me alone

Only a crazy person would say that we were separated by a husband

We were not separated by a husband

It was a child that separated us

Surely, when we meet again, child of the wealthy we will see.

Sickness won't have space in your home

May loss and sickness only reside in the jungle

And may wealth and many children reside with us,”

Ashe!

The festivity continued with more music, more dance and more food. Amina tried to avoid her heart from showing on her face. She was truly disturbed but there was nothing left to do but to accept her fate. The chief's first and second wives approached Amina and greeted her with warm embraces.

“Our home will not be a house of war,” the first said.

“We will enjoy our husband together,” the second promised.

Although they spoke Yoruba, their dialect was strange to Amina and she knew they had to have come from a place she had not heard of. She was too distraught to engage in conversation and ask from which town they were from. She simply nodded in agreement, “*Ashe.*”

Amina sat motionless in her new home, subdued by the events of the day. The chief had enough money to place each of his wives in their own homes, but his house was close enough for nights he needed to have one of them. Her mind was consumed with so much that she could not balance her own thoughts. She longed for the chief to arrive soon so they can get it over with. She remembered the soothing words of the other two wives and wondered if it was just part of their plot to murder the chief as was done to Demi’s husband, perhaps to murder her as well, she prayed against it immediately.

All she had on her body was the wrapper her mother handed to her as Abagbe sobbed hysterically as Amina departed from the compound. She told Amina to wear it that night, and that the chief would find her exceedingly attractive, assuring her that the bright orange pattern of the material complimented her midnight-night skin.

Amina did as she was told. She wore the same beads around her neck and wrist that was worn for the wedding. She sat on her new bed, which by the way, felt very comfortable, she thought, comparing it to the single mattress she shared with Wunmi on the floor. Demi slept on her own mattress because she was the oldest. Now Amina had her own bed. The room was dark due to the frequent power outage of the area. She hoped that in this part of town in Ikoja, NEPA did not take light for too long. Amina played with her beads, accompanied by her kerosene lantern as her only source of light. She sat and waited for the chief to arrive, quietly singing to herself:

“I arrived at the compound

I arrived at the compound of my lover

My wrapper fell

My waist beads scattered

Take them to my mother-in-law

This is the month I will get pregnant

This is the year I will carry a child on my back,”

Ashe.

A Concrete Jungle

Wuraola's hands and legs shook feverishly like a child distressed with malaria. Exhausted, yet irritable from the lack of sleep she was forced to become subjected to, when she was awakened by the absence of the man with whom she fell asleep just two hours ago. Conflicted by how she *should* feel; she did not know whether to be worried or enraged; disappointed, for lack of a better word. After all, this was not the first time she would find herself waking up alone in the middle of the night.

Never would she complain about it. With much of the favor bestowed on her by Olu and his family, the least she could do was to keep her mind shut and enclose her fears in the pit of her childless womb. The third call she made became three times too many. The first call she made the phone rang three times but the second rang twice. Then the third call, which barely rang the first time as his high-pitched voice appeared before it rang completely.

You have reached the voice mailbox of 'David', please leave a message after the tone.

She never understood why he called himself David. Olu was his name. It's easier to pronounce in America, was the explanation he gave her, but she still did not understand. After all, 'Olu' was much easier than Wu-ra-o-la. She did not mind repeating it several times for someone to at least attempt to pronounce it correctly. Anxious by the fourth time when there was no ring but just a voicemail.

She wished she could drive out to find him but still being short of a year away from home and into the *oyinbo* village they called Brooklyn as she had first called it, she was too afraid to even try though she had just gotten her NY license a week ago. She still had not mastered the

‘art’ of NY’s transit system and quite frankly, did not really care to learn. All she had was Olu and according to her father, he was all she would ever have for as long as she ‘chose’ to live.

Taunted daily by the words of her mother at the airport in Lagos, pleading with her to behave, begging her with tears to not bring their family to shame, Wuraola was torn.

“If he wants to share his penis with other women, just *farabale*, okay my dear, relax,” she would say. Now all she could think of was how much she has lived up to her mother’s plea and yet could never manage to get her husband to reciprocate the same loyalty.

The clock struck four and Olu still was not home. Hunger was gripping her stomach like twins fighting in her womb. Her appetite left her as barren as she had been for the past seven years of their marriage. So much grief she had been given by Olu’s family before she moved to NY. She hoped that uniting with her husband would put an end to the abuse and she would finally be able to enjoy her matrimony with him. Instead, she found herself entangled in the arms of a beast.

The beast, who never called from work or thanked her for his meals yet devoured her at his discretion and humiliated her for her inability to bear him a child.

Wuraola yearned to go back to Ikeja but Olu would forbid it as there was nothing according to him to go back to.

“Who will welcome you empty handed?” He would say to her.

Hating the fact that he was right she tried to ignore such comments but the same words would revisit her at night, the same words replacing the arms of her husband, embraced by fear

and tears dried with discouragement was how she ended her nights and rose to her mornings. Perhaps he already had a child, she would wonder.

Tired were her eyes and exhausted was her heart but Wuraola rose quickly to the sound of the door when Olu arrived. All of the words she reserved for him that she meditated on for hours in front of the mirror were now gone and she was faced with her husband, the tyrant to whom she no longer had anything to say. “Welcome.” was the word that came out of her mouth and “Fuck you” was what she held within.

“You’re still awake?” Olu responded.

“Olu is everything okay?” Wuraola asked her husband, though she knew he was fine.

She examined him thoroughly for signs of a mishap but none were found. Her glare met his left finger on which there should have been wedding band but she noticed it was bare.

“Please tell me you were mugged because you’re obviously missing something,” She said with her hand on her forehead.

“What are you talking about?” Olu asked.

“Where is your ring?” Wuraola yelled, grabbing his hands and then throwing them down.

“Quiet down,” said Olu putting his four fingers over his mouth, his eyebrows thick as wool.

As the only Africans living in their six-story building, he was always cautious of the noise that came from their apartment, afraid he would confirm to his neighbors the notion that all Africans were loud and inconsiderate.

“Don’t tell me to quiet down!” Her voice got louder. “Olu where have you been? *Ni bo lo lo*? I’ve been up worried about you and you have the guts to come home without your wedding ring on!”

“If you must know, I was called by the bishop. Apparently one of the new brothers in the church has been on drugs and he lost his home yesterday. With the bishop away in Canada this month, he called me to help the brother move.”

Wuraola began clapping her hands. But not in the way one would clap in acknowledgement of something good. It was more of a facetious gesture like her mom would act whenever she caught her father in a lie.

“Well done Mr. Jesus! Who is this *broda* self that you *dey* help past midnight? *Abi* he has no family?”

Wuraola was very well educated. While her sisters lived their lives in preparation of finding a soul mate, one that would care for them and her family, she lived for the books. With a masters in chemical engineering everyone she knew back home in Nigeria thought she had found the right man in the States that would complement her self-established life. Though her parents provided her a very affluent lifestyle and she received the best education possible, pigeon English was never something she was ashamed to speak, especially when she was upset.

“Calm down. His name is George. You probably don’t know him,” replied Olu. He was right. Although Wuraola had been going to church with her husband for almost a year she was yet to take the time to get acquainted with anyone. Apart from the random phone calls she would get now and then from women from the women’s ministry, she really did not know anyone. She certainly was unable to put a face to ‘George.’ Olu shoved his wife aside lightly in order to get

past her and into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and brought out the half empty bottle of vodka he kept in the corner. He poured himself a bit and turned back to his wife.

“My ring is right here,” he said, pulling it out of his pocket and showing it to her, his eyebrow raised and his sheepish smile.

“Why is it in your pocket and not your finger?” Wuraola replied, wondering to herself how foolish he really thinks she is.

Olu was no better than his wife. He was raised in Ado village and Wuraola knew that village well. Ado was where she served after finishing her six years in University. With all the strikes that occurred at her university in Lagos, she was excited to serve anywhere besides Lagos. If not for the American Visa he was miraculously granted to attend NYU, he would still be in Ado hawking walnuts on the busy highways. She thought she had caught a Big Man when her Ibo roommate, Nkechi, pointed at the fine ‘American man’ across the bar who had asked Nkechi to introduce him to Wuraola. He was visiting Ado after two years of being in America.

“He’s not my type,” Wuraola said to Nkechi, who insisted that she talked to him even if it was just to get some money for the next two months of rent.

“You’re wasting your *ikebe*,” Nkechi would always say to her, while she would slap her behind.

Wuraola was not sure at which point she decided to love him. It was either before or after she realized that her degree from Lagos State University would only land her a mediocre job in the government and that she would have a better chance if only she could make it to America. Olu was the best option she had to achieve that. America was to be the place where she would

‘find herself’ as the Americans would say; although she didn’t quite understand such a statement as she knew exactly where she was and to ‘find herself’ would mean she was lost.

Finances were not a big part of discussion before her marriage. If he was living in America, he had to be living a better life than even the one she had in Lagos, she assumed, and her family agreed. Seven years of a long-distant marriage, she could only look forward to finally living with Olu in his big American home. It took some time before she would get used to their one bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, its size no bigger than her kitchen in Lagos.

“I told you I was helping him mo--” Olu paused. “Wait a minute. Why am I even entertaining this right now? Goodnight!” He picked up his glass and headed towards the bedroom.

“Don’t you walk away from me,” Wuraola said following him, her *ikebe* bouncing from behind, “Shebi you want to be Mr. Jesus. Why not start by saving your marriage. I am this close to packing my things and flying back home,” she held her index finger and thumb close to each other demonstrating how fed up she was.

Olu began laughing at her, “What are you going there for?”

“To leave this sick marriage I find myself in. Olu this is not the first time I would wake up and find you missing. Do you mean to tell me that all those other nights you were helping a brother in the church?”

The vodka kicked in rapidly with Olu and in a desperate effort to diffuse the confrontation quickly he tried to shift the mood in the room. He smiled at her and pulled her closer. Standing breast to chest, though irritated by the smell of alcohol from his breath she felt more at ease as

the outcome she had been hoping on from the moment she woke up a few hours earlier was about to take place.

“You’ve been waiting up on me this whole time,” Olu whispered in her ear. Wuraola closed her eyes, overcome by the warmth of his touch she almost completely forgot about everything that bothered her.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

“Wura,” Olu said softly, caressing her hips and rubbing his nose on hers. She loved it when he called her by her full name. That was an indication that he wanted her. All she really ever wanted from him was to be wanted.

“Yes,” she replied faintly.

“Don’t you want your husband to become a leader in the church?”

“Yes,” was all she could say. He was all she could think of and no longer did she care about his late night out or the relocation of his ring from his finger to his pocket. He kissed her and she surrendered.

A few moments later, now both in the bed with Wuraola beneath him, Olu’s phone rang. He picked it from the dresser and answered. In that moment Wuraola snapped back and remembered how Olu did not answer any of her phone calls but was now able to pick the phone on the first ring in the middle of making love.

“Hello,” he answered breathing heavily, “Yes I’m home. Okay I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Bye.”

Wuraola looked in her husband's eyes, dry and red; furious from what she had just discovered.

"That did not sound like a George to me," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"That was a woman that just called you," Wuraola pushed him off of her and got out of bed.

"Are you cheating on me? Were you out with a woman tonight?"

"No. That was George's wife. She just called me to say thank you."

"Oh really," Wuraola said.

"I swear. Wura look just come back to bed, I'm not finished."

"Well I certainly am," Wuraola stormed out of the room while Olu remained on the bed with the only regret of having the phone call come in before he could reach his peak.

"Wura!" He gave a disappointed shout.

She came back into the room and sat on the bed.

"Look I am not going to stay here and have you cheat on me."

"I wasn't cheating. Must you always accuse me of something? I mean, even if I was cheating, where are you going? What other man is going to want you?"

"So is that what this is about?" Wuraola asked. "You are so worthless. Has it ever occurred to you that just maybe you are the one that can't give me a child?" She folded her hands and looked at him feeling the resentment that overpowered her emotions.

“Wura, there is something wrong with you. In fact, I am just as fed up as you, *gon self*.”

“Be fed up!” Wuraola yelled.

“Where are you going to go? You have no one here but me. So you better start acting like it before you find yourself on the streets. I’ll turn you into one of those Senegalese women in Harlem begging people to let them braid their hair.”

“Heh!” Wuraola exclaimed putting both hands on her head. “What are you telling me? Look I will divorce you before you divorce me, I can assure you.”

Olu laughed at her, “Do you hear yourself? Wura? You go back home and all you will be faced with is ridicule. They will say that I left you because you did not have a child. Is that what you want?”

Tears flowed down her cheeks as she stood and watched him go on and on about her infertility and her state of hopelessness.

The night ended and the morning began and Wuraola was back to where she has been for the past seven years of marriage and eleven months with him. The night ended and the morning began with Olu lying beside her asleep. Where the conversation went she could not remember. By ten am she awoke to washing his semen off in the shower and preparing her his favorite breakfast-- yam and *igba*. Wuraola had no job to go to as Olu had promised her father he would not make her work. The only job she had she was yet to fulfill. Olu also promised her father he would love her. Somewhere along the line his words had been forgotten. Olu was right. She really had nowhere to go.

Lobster

You moved to Flatimore soon after you graduated from college and a month before your twenty-third birthday. You could not imagine going back to live with your mother after four years of being on your own.

Four solid years of coming back to your apartment after a night out with your girls, having sex on your bed with the liberty of yelling as loud as you felt without any concern that you were going to get caught. Four years of smoking weed on the balcony.

The thought of washing the dishes at her time and not yours, cleaning your room and laying her bed disturbed you. So you kissed your mother's cheeks, dampened with tears, licked the salty fluid from your lips and you waived good bye.

Your intentions were not to return to Hillrise for a while. You wanted to start afresh. Live in a new home, find a great job and possibly, if you were lucky enough, a cute guy.

Yea right-- you could never love a man at the great expense of your heart. You lived your entire life adoring the mysterious back of the man whom you were told was the man who 'knocked your mama up--' with you!

"We made you in a projects stairwell," Mama would always say to you, laughing, oblivious to the fact that it was statements like that which always reminded you that you were a mistake; not just any old mistake were you, but a cheap one. Really? The projects?

A mistake that could have easily been swallowed instead if mama sucked your daddy a little better but she wasn't as gifted.

So you were born. You could never get yourself to remember the face of your father because he left when you were three years old. The only thing you remembered seeing was his back as he

walked out the door. They were wide and bold as a lion. He had honey-toned skin and a really flat ass.

He didn't kiss you goodbye or promise to return. On second thought, you didn't remember if he ever did that to begin with. Mama was screaming from the other room, cursing at him. You thought you cried because you were hungry, but then again it was such a long time ago so you're not sure. With all the noise mama was making you probably couldn't have helped but to cry; you were a baby. What you did remember was his back.

"I'm gonna invite your father to your graduation," Mama said over the phone.

You could hear her chopping the red bell peppers. She explained that she was trying to make some soup for her new boyfriend that moved in three weeks ago.

It was just like mama to always get so excited to have a new man living with her that she would start cooking for him more than she cooked for herself.

"I think he's coming down with something, that's why he hasn't been going to work," she defended, "but anyway, back to what I was saying, yea I'm thinking about inviting him. Aunt D said she saw his picture up on Facebook or something, said he look old and washed up."

You remained silent. There was no stopping mama when she got to bad mouthing your father in front of you.

Six months of mother daughter therapy sessions at the Baptist church you grew up in couldn't stop her either. You were sixteen when you went to therapy with your mama, remember, when you were so convinced you were already a grown woman. Mama found a used condom your ex-boyfriend Mark forgot to flush in the toilet so she called the deacon for help.

The deacon tried to explain to mama that a lot of the behavioral problems you were displaying were due to not having a father figure in your life.

“And on top of that sister Janice, you’re having different men running through your apartment all the time, it’s like a revolving door of men,” he accused. It was inappropriate for him to chastise your mother’s relationship with men like that; especially in front of you. But you didn’t say that out loud because that would be disrespectful.

“If her bum ass father never left!” Mama shouted, “Excuse my French-- then maybe I wouldn’t be in no relationships with all these other dudes. God knows my heart and he knows I just want someone who’s gonna love me.”

You wanted to turn to mama and say at that moment that some of those men she brought to the house had tried to love you instead but you knew that would make mama really mad. So you never told her. You never mentioned how her man at the time, Jerome, claimed that he could turn you into a woman. How you ran home after school, and didn’t even wait for the bus because you were curious enough to see him prove it before mama came home from work. But what you didn’t know was that he wasn’t talking about no movie kissing. He meant the real thing. And when you tried to resist, he pinned you down to the floor and shoved his dick in your mouth so far down that it made you throw up all the sloppy jo you had for lunch on it. Then he slapped you and called you a dirty bitch.

He wiped it off and fucked you till you could no longer physically hear the sound of your own cry. That night mama made him mashed potatoes with roast beef and you sat quietly and licked the gravy off your plate. You already promised him not to tell because he promised to kill you and your mama if you did.

“I aint going back to jail over some little ho that can’t control her pussy,” Jerome said.

“Mama, how are you going to invite a man that I don’t even know to my graduation?” You complained over the phone. You tried to whisper because your roommate was on the top bunk, fast asleep.

You had two roommates in college-- the studious roommate who was always at the library and the lazy, dirty roommate who was always hung-over.

“So he can see what he’s missed out on all your life,” Mama said, “the best revenge you can give somebody is to succeed.”

“Yeah but that don’t mean I want him there. This is supposed to be a happy day for me, mama.”

“Look Kierra, I’m not gonna ask him to come if you don’t want him to. But I think you do owe it to yourself to have that man look into your eyes and apologize for all the years he’s missed. And I promise you when he sees you walk up that stage and get your diploma, he’s gonna be more sorry than he’s ever been, I promise you.”

“Fine mama, do what you want. But how you gonna get in touch with him?” You asked.

“I’m gonna tell Aunt D to show me his Facebook so I can send him a message,” Mama said.

Dear Robert, I hope you’re doing well. I just wanted to let you know your daughter Kierra is graduating in three weeks from college and she wants you to be there. It’s the least you can do for not having shown up this whole time. She goes to Clinton College right here in Hillrise, where we’ve always been. She majored in Psychology and always had straight A’s. I feel bad your sorry ass was not around to help her, and even though I could have taken you to court for

child support I figured you were broke as hell anyway. So come to the graduation, you can email me back for details and I'll let you know the time and place.

Monique

P.S. Show your daughter some respect and don't bring no bitch with you either.

Dear Monique,

My husband Robert passed away two and a half years ago. I'm glad to hear that your daughter is graduating. Robert and I have three boys together. My oldest has just started filling out his college applications. I feel terrible for all the resentment you still feel towards my late husband. He always spoke about Kierra and I believe he loved her very much. I hope one day you can find it in your heart to forgive the damage he's done in your life. I wish both you and Kierra the very best and congratulations on her graduation.

Yours Truly,

Amy Russell

Mama never did bring up the message she received from Amy. "He's not coming," was all she said to you. But that did not surprise you a bit. Although it did stick a small needle in your heart, and you felt it, literally.

You reminded yourself that if you could survive transferring to a new high school back in the twelfth grade, you could survive Flatimore. You remembered the reason why you had to transfer. It was because of your ex-boyfriend Mark who told everyone he fucked you on the first

day of school. It was your first time seeing him, though you both registered the same year as freshmen. You never noticed him, however, until senior year. He told his boys he walked you home from school and how you let him eat you. At least he let them know that you smelled good and that your pussy was clean.

Then soon after, everyone started calling you squeaky Kiki. From there, all the boys on the football team tried to fuck you. They went as far as dragging you into the boys' bathroom on the sixth floor. The bathroom everyone avoided using because it was so nasty that even the janitors refused to clean it. Joey, the quarterback stuck his finger in you, and you couldn't deny the fact that your hormones were stimulated by his touch but at the same time you knew he should not be touching you. All the boys wanted to fuck you and all the boys did. Your mama was livid. But somehow charges were never pressed. It was the football team; of course they would believe them over you. So you left Folgers High and transferred to KRIPP Charter. If you could survive that, you could definitely survive Flatimore.

So you searched for jobs in Flatimore. With a bachelor's degree in Psychology, the best you could find were unpaid internships at local private offices that belonged to small business owners that couldn't afford to hire paid assistants. So they looked for people on craigslist. People like you. Local college graduates who only wanted to work in fields they studied for to prove to their parents that medical school was not meant to be. People like you who believed that as long and they gained enough experience needed, they didn't mind working for free. They didn't need the credit either, they already graduated. But with the economy getting worse every day, they were going to need more than a foot through the door. They required a ladder.

So you took the position with Cynthia Latimore, clinical psychologist and PhD from Quail. Her office was small, but fancy. You bought her small cups of vanilla lattes in the mornings and

ordered her favorite gyros for lunch. You answered calls, greeted ungrateful clients, shredded old confidential files. You took thirty minute breaks on eight hour shifts. You tried to block your ears from hearing private conversations between her and her soon to be ex-husband as they argued over why she changed the locks and won't let him see their kids. You got in trouble when you did not take notes properly. You began to hate your job.

Within a matter of months you realized that the experience you were gaining at Latimore Inc. was not paying the bills. But you hoped that the money you saved up all those years of school loans, the money you used to cover the first six months of rent, would last until you landed the great job you came all the way to Flatimore to find.

Then you met him. His eyes were hazel and they captivated you before anything else. And then you heard his voice. He ordered a regular hot dog with everything on it. You couldn't understand how he could mean everything as everything could be anything but his voice intrigued you so much that you didn't really care anymore to figure it out. You stood on the line right beside his, but his was shorter, you probably should have been on his line.

You wanted a Philly cheese steak sandwich but the hot dog with everything on it sounded more delightful. So you ordered that instead. Then he stepped around you to grab some napkins and the back of your shirt got caught between the hot dog with everything on it. His hot dog stained your shirt, and he apologized. He asked if he could pay for whatever you wanted to make it up and you agreed.

Details don't matter anymore. As in most cases he ended up in your bed that night. You thought to yourself, "Damn, this nigga fucked me like he loved me and I don't even remember his name."

The next morning was a Saturday. You woke up and he was still there. You wished that he would open his eyes so you can see them again. You never met a dark skinned man with such beautiful hazel eyes. They very well could be contacts, you figured. So you allowed him to sleep because you didn't want to disturb his peace. You tip toed to the bathroom to brush your teeth and put mascara on so you could look like one of those girls 'who wake up beautiful.' You opened the medicine cabinet to grab some toothpaste, and then you shut it back. The mirror glared at you. It looked away and then it glared at you again. Your eyes looked familiar to you; as familiar as the eyes of the man that was asleep in your bed. Kids at school always asked you about your eyes; where you got them from, cause your mama didn't have them. All the boys loved you for having them and all the girls wished their eyes were just as bright. *We have the same eyes*, you thought, wishing that this newfound bond meant the beginning to a predestined relationship with the nigga whose name you still could not remember.

That one night stand evolved into a relationship. He practically lived in your apartment and he helped pay the rent. You became comfortable because you managed to keep your unpaid job while he took care of the bills. He even bought you a new phone. Mama was the first person you called on that phone. She asked how you were able to afford it and you explained that you still had some college money saved up.

Your new man was brought up somehow in that particular conversation. But not in a, "Mama I've fallen in love," way. It was more like a, "yea I met this guy and we've been kicking it for a minute," approach. You texted her a headshot just to feed her curiosity and her reply was, "*WOW, lol,*" it seemed odd, her reply. Usually she would say, "Just don't get pregnant." Or, "I hope he don't have AIDS."

Her response was vague and obscure. It didn't sound like something mama would say.

Mama was fixing her hair in the little Bantu knots all the girls were wearing. She had always wanted to be part of the ‘going natural and embracing your true beauty’ movement that became popular over the past year. She was happy that after two months of going through ‘the big chop’, she was finally able to do a little something with it. Her spirit though didn’t rest since the last conversation she had with Kierra. That was a strange ass picture she thought to herself. He was cute though, she admitted. She sat down beside her computer after tying the last knot and began to type:

Dear Amy,

I don’t mean to bother, but I was wondering if Kierra was ever mentioned in her father’s will.

She wanted to know if there was anything left for her, I mean it would really be a shame if there wasn’t. Thanks.

Within ten seconds, a new message appeared on Mama’s profile:

Monique, it’s unfortunate but Kierra was in fact not included in the will.

Mama: Then how do we know he’s really dead? How do I know you’re not just lying to try to keep him from getting to know Kierra?

Amy sent Mama a link to a website. It was meant to serve as proof of her husband’s passing. It was his obituary:

Construction Worker Died on Work Site. Robert J Mitchell III reported killed, Wednesday, April 5th, 2004.... Was an employee of Lincoln and Sons....was 38 years old.....born in Hillrise, Georgia.....survived by his wife Ann Mitchell and their three sons.....

Mama was shocked, in lack of a better word. She stared at the picture in the article as though she was dared to do it without blinking. She took her phone out of her pocketbook and retrieved the text message you had sent earlier. Remember? The one with the headshot of the man you were living with. The one who cooked your meals and drove you to work every morning. The man who ate your pussy like fresh lobster, the man whom you only called daddy in bed. The man with whom the waitress at the diner commented on how cute you both looked as a couple, so much so that you almost resembled one another.

“You know what they say--couples that really love each other start to look like each other after a while,” the waitress said.

Mama scratched her head so hard that she loosened three of the Bantu knots on the top of her head and had to re-twist them. She dialed your number.

“Yea, Kierra, what’s that man’s name you said you’ve been talking to? The one you sent me a picture of?”

“Bobby, ma, his name is Bobby, why?”

“Nothing, he just looked kinda familiar. Where’s he from?”

“He’s from Hillrise but he moved down here to Flatimore to start his own construction company. He’s making good money too.”

“Was he ever married? You know what, never mind. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Ma,” you laughed at her, “why are you calling me at this time sounding all paranoid? He’s a good man, don’t worry about me, I’m fine.”

“All right sweetie, just let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“All right, ma.”

“Goodnight.”

Mama went back to her Dell laptop to instant message Amy. She asked if Amy would be willing to meet up so they could talk. She wanted to know if the face of the man in the article was also the face of the man in the text message you sent. She couldn't sleep. Robert didn't have a twin, she said, as crazy as it sounded. And he hated when people tried to shorten his name to Bobby because he thought it made him sound like he was white. She met with Amy at a highway restaurant between Hillrise and Carolina. She showed her 'the face,' the text message face. Amy choked on her food. Amy asked if that was the man Kierra was dating. Monique replied 'yes'.

“That's my husband,” Amy said.

“But you said he was dead,” Mama replied confused.

“He is,” said Amy, beginning to cry.

“Then what's wrong with this picture here, no pun intended?” Mama said impatiently “was a body ever found?” She asked Amy.

“Yes, there was a body; we had a funeral and everything. They ran a DNA test as well. He even had the shirt I bought for him from Bloomingdales that morning. I mean is this some sort of joke?” Amy yelled.

“Listen, I didn't bring you here to waste your time. I just don't understand all of this myself. But my daughter Kierra showed me this picture and told me that this is the man she has been with, I'm sure they're even sleeping together,” Mama said, with one hand on her hip and the other hand positioned as if she was ready to slap the glass cup off the table.

You had no idea that the man you were falling in love with was your father. The man who scrubbed your back with your purple sponge in the shower. The man who ate your pussy like jerk shrimp. That man came back to be with you. He came to make up for not being there sooner. How does that happen? You would ask. That is just nasty. You would say. But even after you married him despite mama's forbiddance, you never came around to remembering his back *because the whole time he had you laying on yours.*

He bought you flowers every first Sunday. He slapped you when his food came out cold. You filed three police reports of domestic abuse against him. You laid three eggs for him too. He cheated on you again while you were pregnant the second time. Slapped you again when he thought you were seeking revenge with his best friend, Paul. He was your husband, your master and your daddy all in one. He was your God. His kingdom was your home. You stayed by his side.

You never left him. He left you. For a white woman who ran her own retail business on the outskirts of Georgia. Your third child, Brianna, your only girl, he's going to come back to find her too. His eyes will match hers. And he will eat her pussy like baked salmon. He will slap her when his food is cold. He will get her pregnant, cheat and then leave. She will have a girl. If not, she will have a boy. He will go to jail before his eighteenth birthday and he will meet his father there. They will rape him and he will rape as well. He will survive his sentence and come out without any hope of surviving the real world.

All because of that man. The one with the green back, who stained your shirt at the fast food restaurant. The one who made up for it by buying you a Philly cheese steak sandwich. The one who bought you flowers every first Sunday and slapped you when his food was cold. The one who ate your pussy like fresh lobster.

Friend Request

I have been poking you for hours.

Attempting to devour the enemy of your mind that has you convinced that I am nothing but a mere stalker.

Trying to elevate you towards the aptitudes of my salvation,
but you have been taken

Preoccupied with technological demons, and technically speaking--
I'm sick of it.

Because in the midst of you i-touching your ipads and your iphones,
your i-balls become blurred and the truth is obscured from what's fact, and what's fiction.

And the fact, based on as it is written, is that there is no app that you can download that gets you into the kingdom.

And what you don't realize is that this request dates back to calvary--

Two thousand years ago and I still have the holes in the palms of my hands to show the extent to which I would go to save you from the bondage of Satan upon your soul.

So why won't you accept me?

Consider yourself lucky that I, even I, would be gracious enough to

blot your transgressions and pretend they never existed,

Yet you insisted that you need more time

to deliberate your own repentance.

You should be honored that I chose you.

Because if recruiting you on my team required for you to be as blemish-free as me, I would never even consider you.

I mean, have you seen my profile?

Jesus Christ,

Born in the beginning, from the kingdom of God,

lives in the hearts of those who are willing to accommodate,

Studied

At the infinite wisdom of the most high,

Likes

To mix spit with mud to make blind men see

Oh, and also walk on water.

Relationship status?

It's complicated.

I asked her to meet me at the altar so that we can discuss moving forward,

Instead she's been avoiding my messages

She's been prostituting my temple, conversing with everyone else but me

And I'm afraid to admit but I know she's been unfaithful.

Ladies, twerking like it's hot.

Frontin' to get attention because you know it's really not.

And there are millions more like you.
 Ready to sell their bodies like slaves on an auction block,
 One dollar for a lap dance, and twenty dollars on the nightstand and
 Fifty dollars for false affection and
 a buck of infidelity with no protection.
 You would give anything huh? For just an incline of validation, well,
 What if I told you that you were beautifully and wonderfully made in my prescription for
 greatness?
 Would you smile at me the way you smiled at him? The way you grabbed his hand and made
 him your friend just after one, single poke?
 See, his satisfaction may endure for a nighttime, but
 my satisfaction is promised for a lifetime and
 unlike him, I would never require for you to get on your knees for any other reason than to
 worship me, I mean really--
 Do you even know me?
 My identity is embedded in the word of God.
 Open up the book for once and in it you'll discover that I am, That I Am.
 And if you need me to translate it a little better for you to understand,
 That means, *I be who I be and I is who I is*
 Excuse my misguided English but you don't need a dictionary to comprehend the fact that I am
 God!
 The beginning and the end, the only one who could replenish you and transform you from a
 sinner to a gem
 And I paid a high price for you.
 And as filthy as you were, it costed me a fortune.
 Not even my father came through for me as they hammered me on the cross like a Roman
 sculpture.
 Hung like an all-inclusive meal to be feasted on by vultures.
 I gave in my crown of diamonds for thorns upon my head.
 You owe me man.
 And all I ask is that you live your life like it was worth the sacrifice.
 Show me that you were worth every ounce of blood that spewed from my side.
 Take a walk with me-- through the beach, through the park,
 it *don't* matter, just talk to me.
 Hit me up sometime, keep me posted on your news feed.
 It is Jesus on your timeline so tell me what you need.
 Take time off your MacBook and let me *mac* to you.
 Remember, even in the beginning, **apples** made you prone to sin.

I mean, what more do I have to do to grab hold of your attention, you'd
 rather consume in debating on the color of my skin,
 If I was black, or white,
 Brown-eyed or blue,
 Then blame theologians for having it all misconstrued and--
 By the way, I was Jewish, but it really shouldn't matter to you.
 If my pigments were so vital, won't that have been written in the bible?

But you wouldn't know that 'cos for every casting call that is given into the kingdom of heaven,
You're too busy fixated on why your favorite singer just got knocked off on American Idol.

I created you,
in my glorious image and exchanged it to suffer in the ugliness of yours,
Are you listening?
I said I created you,
in my glorious image and exchanged it to suffer in the ugliness of yours
So I dare you to trust me.
Fall back with your eyes closed and your arms stretched out to the Lord and I will catch you.
Like the clouds embrace the sun, I will cradle you into my arms and help you to overcome every
obstruction that is keeping you from me.
Love me,
Just as much as my father loved you that he gave his one and only
So that you can have a chance to live purely.
Obey my word.
That which you would only do if you really did love me.
And even though I know you can never be perfect, at least impress me by trying, but wait--
Even with all this said,
You still have not accepted my friend request.
So *I'ma* break it down for you and put the games to rest, see,
I'll hit you up with a reality check
You see the wages of sin is death!
And best believe on judgement day, I'll be standing there like the IRS ready to collect my debt
So I suggest you choose
Wisely.
This is not a threat,
It is the truth.
Share it on Facebook and every other social network that's willing to listen to you.
I will take my word, and engrave it in the tablets of your kindled hearts,
Hopefully.
But first, you must,
Accept me.

Sestina: A Lecture on Death

Little did I know the heart of the Earth is where demons abide
Fear resting in the natural rainforest of mortal standard
Rotten plantations feast on dead bodies and lost souls of humanity
Their blood mixes with the tears of newborns' cascading waterfall
Mothers are mocked by their children in a demolished playground
Quintessential memories of hope are kept secret in a wailing ambulance

She speaks of melancholy and death and they become my playground
She hands them over to me and I feel a bit of love from humanity
She washes my hair in the tears of a baby's waterfall
A kiss on the chin and I feel Beloved has come to again to abide
A pedestrian is nearly struck on the corner by an ever hungry ambulance
Another spirit on its way to face the judge who rules all moral standard

So many of us are afraid to be judged by the ruler of humanity
Afraid because our destinies do not align with his obligated standard
Fearful for the day we discover where our souls shall abide
Afraid that we would be the ones battling for our lives inside an ambulance
Is there truly hope for a place where mothers are not mocked at the playground?
Or will we continue to drown in the tears of the newborn's waterfall?

Never ending sorrow once again treats me like I am her playground
And I feel broken like an outdated record, praying to be called by death in humanity
My hair is now braided to the exact measure of her standard
And she has washed my hair in the tears of a newborn's waterfall
My heart is restless in the bed of a raging ambulance
Unknown is the time left in this world that I have chosen to abide

I began to plant seeds in hopes that my plea will be understood by humanity
A new life has been constructed for me to run free as though in a playground
The forest is empty and pretty soon blocks will inhabit a new standard
One that proclaims civilization and an end to each troubled baby's waterfall
Perhaps then in the abyss of a joyous closed chapter I shall abide
I shall decide to rescue myself before the arrival of the wailing ambulance

My body has been defeated by the grips of a dangerous mortal standard
So I humble myself to the conforming to what is laid before me by humanity
I have found many new worlds beyond my playground
Bathing in the tears of a newborn is as cool as a midnight waterfall
Where milk is free and the heart of the Earth is a safe place to abide
I lost my life in the course of that wailing ambulance

As the newborn's waterfall emerges, there is a sudden drought in humanity
A standard that is not yet complete without the children at the playground
Death at times is easier to abide in; much easier than the hot air of a wailing ambulance

I figured, “the better I can quote them scriptures, the better Christian I would appear.”

Fifteen, I swore myself to celibacy

And me and God had a pact.

But sweet **sixteen**, he pulled up in a Benz and gave me his number

So I turned to God and snatched my life right back.

Seventeen, loose was not the word to describe me, I was untied.

Having sex with every man I slept with and still being able to sleep at night.

‘Cos as long as I was quoting scriptures, speaking in tongues, and going to church every Sunday, I was straight.

Not knowing I was never the Christian I assumed to be

I was a fish who got caught in Satan’s bait.

Eighteen, I met the man of my dreams; his father was a preacher.

He said he was going to marry me and he saw me in his future.

I was so in love with this dude, there was nothing I wouldn’t do.

And what made it better was that we were both Christians--

But we were freaks inside that dorm room.

Nineteen, Twenty, Twenty One,

Things got serious and he introduced me to his relatives.

I told him I was late one day and the test came back as positive.

So we decided to get married, it was the right thing to do.

Convinced our families to support us so

I was a wife by twenty-two.

But not much sooner after we got married though, the truth began to unveil.

We realized very quickly how far away we were from God’s will.

You see the core of the matter was that we committed a grave act of sin.

And covered it up by exchanging vows under the pretence of doing “the right thing”

Because what’s right may not always be righteous.

And if it’s good, that *don’t* mean it’s godly.

So as soon as I realized how wrong I was, I went down on my knees and asked God to forgive me.

Twenty-three, one year in

My marriage walls were crumbling.

I took my son to church every Sunday to pray because “divorce was not an option.”

Two kids later, my marriage still wasn’t getting any better.

I fought, I prayed, I begged, I tried--

I still got served with papers.

I was confused,

“God why? I thought I gave my life right back to you, I asked you to forgive me!

This wasn’t the deal, it’s getting real, God why is all this happening?

I got all saved and sanctified, I trusted you for nothing.”

I was so mad at God for giving me false promises and leaving me without a husband.

“This isn’t supposed to be my story,” I got *played* liked a Tyler Perry drama.

I was meant to be a wife and mother, not just a *baby mama*.

“God why? How could you? How dare you ruin my life!

I'm a single mother now on child support; who's *gonna* want me for a wife?
God why? Why did it have to be like this?
I'm divorced, with two kids.
I'm broke with no job
I'm tired, I'm hungry, I'm helpless, I'm thirsty, Lord
this pain is too much,
I can't take it, I just cry
I'm a disgrace, everyone hates me, I'm so useless I could die!
I've done nothing to deserve this disrespect, pain and failure.
God why have you forsaken me?"

Sounds familiar?

You see, the misconception I had about being saved
was that I would never face adversities in life.
But while I was proud to be an American--
I was ashamed to wear His stripes.
And another thing that God showed me that was important for me to know--
Is that even when you repent after making wrong decisions,
You're still *gonna* reap what you have sewn.
So now although Christ bore those lashes for you
That doesn't exempt you from his law
Shall we continue to abide in his grace and keep sinning against God?
Yes Jesus took our place, but that *don't* mean God doesn't want us dead.
'Cos in order to live in Jesus Christ, we must die first to our flesh.
So now despite the trials that come at me
I don't give up, give in or run.
I surrender, like Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane
And I say, "Lord thy will be done."
And no matter what anyone else told you, being a Christian isn't perfect.
It's a lot of work, you sacrifice
It gets bloody--
but it's worth it.
Because with all our imperfections, he perfected us through the suffering he bore.
So if we could be worth Him dying,
then He should be worth living for.
And in the word, when Christ is asked to teach them how to pray,
You know the story--
He made it clear, that we begin with worship
and acknowledge him in glory.
"Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name" is what he said.
But a lot of us ignore that part and skip to the daily bread.
He said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven,"
Not second, third or last.
And all other things will be added,
But be mindful, it might not be all you had asked.
So instead of proclaiming miracle breakthroughs,

Try breaking through to his heart.

Pick up your cross and follow Jesus, that's the only place it starts.

Thirty Eight, Thirty-Nine, Forty, Forty-One

Lashes

He took

Just to show me how it feels

to be beaten, spit upon and discouraged by life.

But thank God,

by his stripes

I'm healed.

Poetry Is...

To me, what survival is to you.

The best part of waking up is when I think of a poem.

When my fingers get to itching an instinct of creative verses overwhelms me

And I cannot wait to write them down.

In life, I find death; but in poetry there is a resurrection,

Quite like Jesus on the third day.

For me, poetry is the closest thing I have to measuring the body and breath of God.

And I am one with Him.

Intimacy with him is when in to me he sees,

Me;

Something worth dying for.

Poetry is

In the eyes of my children when they wake up in the morning

It's when they try to steal bubblegum from my purse.

Poetry is

My gift of resilience.

Creativity with words is what secures my sanity in such a crazy world.

Within this I find humor; and humor in conjunction with repressed tears of solitude.

Listen to the sound of my heart as the pen drops. Do you hear it?

Neither do I.

