A Small Blip on an Eternal Timeline

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**EMEKA AND I** built our kingdom in a slanted row house on a patch of green grass in Highland Park, Pittsburgh, PA. Our floors creaked, our toilet growled, our heater hiccupped and often went out for the night, but it was our kingdom. Ours. Our little hideaway where time stopped for us, stretching into forever at our whim. It was where I could paint pomegranates and daffodils and portraits of an eager-eyed girl without feeling like I was wasting my life away. It was where Emeka could beat his *igba* to the Afrobeats of Fela Kuti and dream.

It infuriated me the way he hunched over his desk into the early morning hours, squeezing his head with sweaty palms. Huffing through the names of pathogenic organisms and their virulence factors for med school, chasing a fantasy that wasn’t even his: shadows of a dead throne in a dusty village in a land far, far away that his father, its long-lost king, wanted to bring back to life. Lurking in these shadows were tales my mother used to whisper in my ear. Of war and corruption. Aunts, uncles, and cousins who took weekly Sunday–Sunday medicine so they wouldn’t drop dead from disease. *There was a time when you took this pill, nne.* Of chosen people whose divine purpose was to journey into the heart of the other world to save home. My family came to America when I was one, and in my tiny luggage bag my mother stuffed dreams too large for me to carry. I would pull Emeka away from his desk and into bed when the taste of bitter became too much for me to bear. Our arms and legs would entwine like thirsty vines, and heat from the blood rushing through our veins thrilled us. After making love, we cupped our hands to each other’s lips and whispered our deepest fears into them. With a flourish of our fingers, we released them into the universe.

It was a cool night in April, five years after I left my mother, two years after I met Emeka, and nine months after I moved in, his wandering concubine of twenty-three, when he grabbed my waist at 2:00 a.m.—my heavy eyes wandering in the dark—and told me that he did not want to be with anyone else. “You will paint and I will play the *igba* forever.”

I went cold. Then hot. Real hot. An aching fire devoured me. I turned to him and cooled. He looked at me with eyes so large, so gentle. So forgiving. A week earlier in a drunken rage, I threatened to leave him. Smashed a wineglass on his drums. Tore down the Christmas lights strung on the walls. I split the skin on his bicep as he fought to hold me in the house, shushing me so that I wouldn’t alert the Ghanaian grad students on the other side of our left wall or the Indian med school couple on our right. Ha! How uncouth of me! How selfish I have been! I did not deserve him. I knew this. I’d had enough of being subjected to phone calls from the potential wives his parents were arranging for their hallowed son.

“When will you tell your parents about me? About you?” I whispered.

He wove his fingers through mine. I caressed the raised flesh of his wrist where he had just gotten his first tattoo. Earlier, we’d been running back from a U2 concert, smashed and happy like the rest of the folks who attended, me leading him by the hand, weaving our way through bodies still screaming, still dancing. The rumble of the ground underneath our feet lifting us. He was singing “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” at the top of his lungs in his beautiful, rugged Igbo accent, botching the words, when he suddenly pulled me into a tattoo parlor we were passing. While waiting for the artist, Emeka’s light dimmed when he spoke of home. He went on about President Buhari’s lies, how he was only out for himself. “He turns a blind eye to corruption to guard his cushioned seat while the Naira grows thinner. One dollar to three hundred fifty-nine Naira. Unemployment—” I grabbed him by the face and told him life only comes to a person once. “Don’t we have a responsibility in this unforgiving world to find our happiness before we die?” He took a long, deep breath. When the tattoo artist was ready, Emeka pointed to the tattoo on the back of my wrist, of a tiny phoenix with wings of fire, and asked the artist to copy it. Later that night, Emeka roared, “This is me! This is me!” I held his palms, caressing the calloused skin that came from planting and carrying yams on his grandfather’s farm in Ogidi before he left for America at the age of fifteen to pursue his father’s dreams.

Hanging above us on the ceiling was a painting Emeka helped me make of two yellow daffodils reaching for the heavens. We stared up at it. I squeezed his fingers tight. So tight I felt I was bursting.

“Do you like it here?” I asked.

He nestled his bristly, hot cheek in the nook of my neck.

“In America? Of course, my sweet.”

“I mean with *me,* dummy.”

He chuckled. “You know I do. So much. So, so much.”

He placed his other hand over his head.

His most prized prospect was someone named Amaka. A law student from the University of Pittsburgh, where he went to school. I made him show me her Facebook page. There were pictures of her all dolled up in custom-made halter tops and form-fitting skirts of the finest Nigerian prints. She was runner-up for Miss Nigeria. Started an African Coalition for the Humanity of Lives. She came from the same ancestral village as Emeka in Ogidi. Members of his family knew members of hers. She called him last week to meet in person for lattes at Tazza D’Oro (our favorite spot). He agreed. After the call, I took his phone and hurled it out the window into the bushes.

I tried to pull my hand away from his. He tightened his grip.

“Do you think I like what I am doing to you? To me? I hate it. If I had my way, I would leave school-o. I would. I would live my life playing music. I am not as brave as you, Soma. I am learning. *Abeg,* give me a little more time. I will tell them,” he said, his face pressing into my neck.

The toilet growled.

“I’ve given you two years.”

“Help me, *biko.*”

“I *am* helping you.”

“Apply for one grant. One. One fellowship. Get your GED and go to a visual arts college. Show my parents that what you are doing can move and shake, then we have some leverage.”

He had said this a week ago, and I had told him to never say it again.

I felt the heat in my body rise to a boil as a familiar sense of doom came over me.

I yanked my hand away from his and sat up.

He sat up.

“Isn’t this what you’ve always wanted?” he said. “To do the extraordinary? How can you do it if you sit around this house, painting for an imaginary audience?”

“Are you a figment of my imagination?”

He sighed.

“Are you?” I repeated. I grabbed his face and squeezed his skin like it was putty. I squeezed harder. He pried my hands off, gritting his teeth in what I knew was anger. In the dirt-stained window I caught my reflection, dark as night, all sharp, angular lines jutting out into the world, scattered and dangerous.

“Prove your mother wrong,” he said.

According to my mother, I was never right with the world. She had let it out when I was nine in a fit of hysteria after finding me at the fridge tasting sips of my father’s beer. I had been born an *ogbanje* child, she’d yelled. A child who dies young and returns again to torment her parents only to be called back to the spirit world. She had lost her first child in the womb, so she had a native doctor do a rite on me before leaving for America, one tiny vertical slash on my right cheek to keep me in their world, her new beginning, her new hope. I never got the grades she wanted, never felt anything like a god watching over me. I didn’t understand why I was born where I was born to the mother who birthed me. “You are on a path to misfortune,” she cried the night I left her. “What woman lives a good life playing with crayons and opening her legs to men?”

“What am I doing?” I whispered, shutting my eyes. I took in a slow, deep burn of breath.

I opened them and saw Emeka smiling at me. His fingers grazed the spikes of my hair.

I cooled.

“Somadina the great,” he whispered. “When will you let the world see what I see?”

“You’re being a hypocrite,” I whispered.

A spark vanished from his eyes.

“Tell me, Emeka the great, how will you chase your dreams with me if you’re stuck at that desk or in the library with your nose sniffing those silly books? You are not so innocent.”

He nodded slowly, cautiously. “I will chase my dreams with you.”

“You are not so innocent.”

A vein running down the left side of his forehead began to pulse. I cupped it in my hand.

I imagined him in the future sitting on a newly made golden throne as the *Igwe* of Ogidi. Daily items on his agenda: fix the potholed roads, renovate the compounds, mend civil disputes, modernize their health facilities, pour his heart and soul into their happiness while that vein in his forehead bulged like mad. His father, a village doctor turned big-city doctor, wanted a new Ogidi. A new Nigeria, really, and believed only the best of the best were worthy of being on the front lines, which included Emeka’s wife. His parents lived in Texas, but their leash on their son was short and tight.

He squeezed his head with both hands and screamed. I screamed. The walls around us shook. He kissed me hard and climbed out of bed. I crawled to its edge. His pants were like silk the way they clung to the contour of his thighs. All tight muscle, rippled and lean. He was different from my other boyfriends, the good-for-nothings my mother despised. Emeka was smart. He came from a good family. He was going places. We were going places. We met at an art festival on the great lawn of Point State Park under a blazing sun. He wasn’t too hard to miss with his salmon-colored shorts and multicolored dashiki top. It was my oversize Bob Marley shirt that got him talking. He told me that the boy in him had dreams of being a musician. He said that the boy was still chasing him. That the boy wanted to go on tours like the rock star Fela. The great Fela, the freedom warrior who waged his own war against the system. The great Fela, who once said he had death in his pouch. He could not die.

Emeka took a seat behind his *igba* splattered with wine and beat a hard and rapid and painfully soft tune on the animal hide. “What am I doing-o?” he whispered, his eyes looking to a far-off place inside himself. He landed them finally on me. “Come,” he said. I came. And danced, gyrating my hips and stomping my feet, trying to forget my worries. Trying to keep my mind on our little haven that I vowed would never slip from my grasp.

**On Sunday,** the following day, I was off from work at Bruegger’s Bagels. I swept every room and corner of our house waiting for Emeka’s return. I scrubbed the rust around the drain in the porcelain tub until it shone bright, my nails cracked and knuckles bleeding. I flipped through Internet catalogs of home decor, envisioning an upscale kingdom for real adults. Couples with children who had careers of instant value. I saw all the glass tables, islands in the kitchens, glossy state-of-the-art appliances and realized that it didn’t matter where I was as long as Emeka was there. Our small wooden kitchen table carried our meals okay, held us just fine too; so what if we had to light a match to get the stove to work. I just spent hours cooking the tastiest fucking pot of *egusi* soup, which he taught me how to make on that stove. Baked an apple pie too. His favorite. Emeka loved our house. He loved it.

I sat at the window staring at the clouds drifting by, the sun blazing then slowly burning out to a rusty orange. When our Indian neighbors wearing their matching navy-blue scrubs walked to their car laughing, carrying their heavy book bags on their shoulders, I snapped the curtain shut. I peeked out through a tiny crack. The girl always looked so happy. Like something far beyond our reach had been taking care of her and would continue to keep her in this world happy. Like all the potentially rotten things about a person’s nature had been sucked back by the universe, never to fill her up. I wondered where she was going with her med school degree. Where was she going with her long, shiny black hair and light-brown skin? The soft, confident lilt of her Bengali? The graceful pride in her walk whenever she wore her sari? How many phone calls did she eagerly make to family in her home far away? I wondered what kind of tales of India her mother told her where she played the starring role of Perfection.

When I saw two Ghanaian boys carrying book bags march across our lawn to the bus stop, I began to paint the final touches of my sea of daffodils to keep my mind from running into the woods. That’s what I was known to do, run into the woods.

Nine years before, when I was fourteen, my mother found me wandering the street in the middle of the night like a stray animal. A week earlier, I had broken my virginity with a skater with sideswiped golden-brown hair who smoked blunts and drew lusciously cool versions of me in anime after he saw my tulips à la Van Gogh’s *Irises* from art class hanging in the hall. He passed a note to me that read, “You are going places.” A dam in me broke, and I floated on the upswell. He called my character Princess of the Night Sky. In social studies one day, when the teacher skipped Africa, he blurted out, “Why?” The teacher said that Africa wasn’t relevant to what we needed to know to be upstanding citizens of America. Golden boy glanced at me. I looked down at my dark hands, at the bitten-down nails I’d been picking raw for as long as I could remember. I felt somewhat grateful to have heard his voice. We hung out at Pamela’s Diner. He taught me how to skate. He gabbed about his family in Michigan, Ohio, California. Asked about the tiny scar on my cheek. There were always gaps of silence he wanted me to fill. I was grateful he never pushed. God, I remember feeling so lucky, basking in his presence. An erasure had finally come to wipe out my past. I gave myself up in the back of his brother’s BMW. He was kind. Timid. We giggled a lot. He told me I tasted sweet. Afterward, we avoided each other. Entirely. I dreamed of being his girl, but I didn’t think he was that type of boy. A week later, I told my mother about it because I didn’t know what to do with the guilt that was chewing my insides raw. I knelt down at her feet, and after the words spilled out of my mouth, I found myself on the floor, a searing burn on my cheek.

This thirst. My hunger. Is it just how I came into this world? Or did it seize me when I was a little girl alone in my room, wilting in the loveless silence that came after words no child should ever hear were thrown between mother and father in their bedroom. *This marriage was a mistake. Everything about it, a godforsaken mistake!* Me, reaching my hand out to the stars, not knowing exactly what I was searching for. Just wanting. Desperately. The day before I ran away for good, my mother and I screamed things that we most definitely believed of each other. I was a sorry excuse for a Nigerian daughter. A selfish slut. *There are loved ones, you know, who are suffering while you are entertaining yourself with idiotic things. What good are you? Look at how your spirit is bumping around a dark place!* I hurled a book at her. Told her she was a no-good African mom who couldn’t keep a family. Her home was not a safe place for me. It was a filthy place. It stank of incompetence. As I hid behind an oak tree shaking, I saw her drive by calling my name, wailing like a wounded animal.

I tiptoed away from my painting of daffodils and into the kitchen, the floor creaking softly under my feet. The nutty smell of cooked *egusi* sitting confidently in the air. I lifted the lid and proudly took a whiff. I paced around our kitchen, my eyes fixed on my phone. Emeka was at the library. He had texted me six times asking me things I liked to hear: how were my daffodils coming along, don’t forget to add more light to the landscape; was there anything I wanted him to pick up; what was for dinner, it’d better be his favorite-o.

I marched back into the family room and took a seat in front of my flowers. I gritted my teeth as I added more texture to the sky with quick, circular brushstrokes across the page to make swirls of royal blue. I studied the picture. *Not right.* I added two birds in flight. *Not right.* I added light cascading from a source outside the canvas. My yellow daffodils took on a lighter tint. I took a few steps back and stared at my work until my eyes lost focus. *Something isn’t right!* I could see my mother standing there with her hand pressed against her chest, her tongue clicking in utter disappointment. *An artist’s life is not the life you want to live, nne.* I grabbed the painting and dumped it in the corner of the room. It fell with a thump. Streaks of paint smeared on the cracked wooden floor. I paced back and forth. Who was this Amaka to intrude on my life? I went to the bathroom and washed my face. I applied foundation to conceal the lack of sleep under my eyes, the mark on my cheek. I applied red to make what I kissed him with pop. I took a selfie in three-quarter pose, puckering my lips and widening my eyes, which was something I never did. Emeka was into the natural look, so I thought. I texted him the photo with this message: *Egusi soup is ready. The best you’ll ever eat. Take a break from studying tonight. Let’s go to heaven.* He texted back immediately that he was thinking of me. I relaxed.

When he walked through the door that evening, I was standing there waiting. He wrapped his arms around me. His eyes were bloodshot. His back was bent over slightly from the weight of his books. His shoulders were tense. His breath reeked of roasted coffee beans. How many shots of espresso that day? I held him until the cadence of our breathing matched. I gave him gentle rubs up and down and across his back. He relaxed.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a piece of paper, and found my hand. It was a flyer from a lounge called Speakeasy calling for musical acts for after-dinner hours. In his eyes I saw resolve.

“Show me your painting?” he asked.

I pulled the mess from the corner. He sat down, sinking into our threadbare sofa, and propped it on his lap. I caught a glimpse of the bird on his wrist. He rested his eyes on the painting for what felt like forever.

“Fine. So fine,” he finally said, snapping out of his trance.

“Do you think?” I said, my voice shaking.

“Of course, baby.”

I shook my head and pointed like a madwoman to different spots on the canvas. “Look. Look at how the light isn’t hitting the flowers quite right here. That petal. There. It’s awkward. You don’t see that? The lines are too crooked. The daffodils, they need more magic. They need more pop.”

“They are popping. They are popping.”

He placed it on the easel. My sea of daffodils. It wasn’t a Njideka Akunyili multimedia piece or Chinwe Uwatse’s *Impossible Dreams.* I did not paint pictures of Nigerian landscapes. I did not delve into cultural or social themes. The first time Emeka saw my work, he squinched his face and asked in a scholarly tone what it meant. What kind of commentary was I making as an African woman drawing fruits and flowers? I had a teacher once, in a continuing ed studio workshop, who asked me the same thing. He told me that I would have a hard time competing with African artists who were making bold statements as a result of living in a state of existential urgency. He did not realize that my flowers were also coming from existential urgency. I asked him why my paintings had to mean something. Why they couldn’t just make me feel something. Something indescribable. Why couldn’t they just open a door for anyone to walk through and experience an existence that’s greater than they will ever be but also in this strange and relieving way, a part of them. An alternate reality that is ours. Isn’t this what we all want? To find that magical place in the midst of our tiny, broken-up lives? The teacher gave me a B. It took Emeka time to warm up to my flowers and fruits. As he began to appreciate them, I realized that all along what I truly wanted was someone special to see what was special about me.

Emeka ate his soup ravenously. He broke big pieces off the mound of *fufu* on his plate, sculpted them into balls, dipped them into the soup, and swallowed them whole. It was as if America were a hunting ground and he had just come home starving, wounded, and shaken from chasing a wild, shadowy beast. I wanted to tell him to slow down, relax. We were home now. I put on Pachelbel’s Canon in D, another piece of me he has grown to love. When the soft, sweet sound of the piano began to skip lightly into the room, he stretched his long legs out underneath the table. Our toes touched.

“My food good?”

He nodded enthusiastically like a child licking his favorite ice cream. “Yes, Ma. You will make a great wife to a blessed Nigerian man one day,” he said, laughing. *“Dalu.”*

“You’re welcome.” I took tiny bites of my *fufu* and soup. I never enjoyed it when I was with my mother. I was more of a spaghetti and meatballs, steak and potatoes kind of gal, but I was learning.

I eyed him. He still looked jittery. Too jittery. I wondered how his whole day went. What all he had carried into our house. I cleared my throat. “Are *you* taken, Nigerian man?”

He stopped chewing his food and curled his lips to the side. “Not at the moment.”

“There’s no one but me in your line of vision?”

He looked up at me. His eyes grew wide. They were drowning in what looked like heartache. “Nope.”

“You know what I mean?” I asked, raising my voice slightly.

“Hear my plan,” he finally said. “I’ve decided that I will have coffee with her again, out of respect.”

I pushed my bowl of *fufu* away.

“Hear me, please,” he said. “Out of respect. I will tell her then that it won’t work.”

“When? When will you have coffee with her?”

“Next week sometime.”

“Have you scheduled a time?”

“Soma, please.”

“Tell me.”

He broke off another piece of *fufu* with a snap of his wrist.

“What have you been hiding from me?”

He put his ball of *fufu* down slowly.

“On Tuesday. I will see her on Tuesday.”

I felt faint. “This Tuesday? In two days?”

“Yes.”

“And you weren’t going to tell me?”

“Look at how you are reacting.”

I got up with my bowl and plate and dropped them on the counter. Soup splattered everywhere. I pressed my palms against my forehead to stop the room from spinning. I turned around to face him.

“What else are you keeping from me?” I clenched my teeth to hold back tears. “Did you meet with her for coffee today too?”

He pushed his plates away from himself. “Be reasonable.”

“You sound like your father. Like father, like son.”

“Selfish. This is what you are that you can’t understand. You are free, Soma. You can dance around and do what you like. I’ve had a whole village relying on me since I came to this country. Do you want to know what this is like? For once, stop thinking about yourself.”

“Your father has the stupid little throne. It’s his. Stop letting his bloated dreams drag you into a mess you can’t fix. Let him go back to Nigeria and save them his fucking self.”

He bit his lower lip. “Tell me one family member you keep in touch with. One.”

My heart tensed. “That has nothing to do with anything.”

“You are talking about people’s lives.”

“What about yours?”

“Their pain is greater.”

“You’re wasting your life, Emeka.”

“Don’t say that.”

“The boy is chasing you. It’s like a death. It will kill you.”

“Stop saying this.”

“*You’re* the one making this a problem.”

He pointed a firm finger at me. “Bring more to the table than Amaka does and there won’t be a problem.”

My breath left me.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “Please forgive me.”

I walked out of the kitchen. He didn’t come after me.

When I entered our bedroom and heard a loud bang from the kitchen like a foot striking the table, something inside me snapped. Who was he fighting? Me or Amaka? I emptied his book bag and scanned every single thing that fell out of it. His notebooks. Planners. Crumpled receipts and flyers. I went into his desk drawer. Flipped through his checkbook. Sticky pads full of sketches of two birds in flight. Grabbed his phone. Stopped myself. My heart beat so hard I could feel it pounding in my ears. I kept going. I scrolled through his text messages. Nothing. I took a slow, deep breath. I exited his text messages, pressed the phone icon, and went to his call history. My heart stopped. I saw a list of phone calls between him and Amaka other than the two I knew about. Five other phone calls to be exact. One was this evening. It had lasted for thirty minutes. He had called her.

I walked back into the kitchen through a heavy, watery haze. He looked up at me. His own eyes carrying water.

“I’m worth more than this,” I said, barely in a whisper. “I am.” I dumped the phone on the table.

He looked at it. His eyes fixed on the screen. He dropped his head in his hands, shaking it as he asked himself over and over again what to do. “I am lost. I am lost.”

It took every bit of power I had to turn away and walk. Heavy, frantic footsteps rushed up to me. The floor creaked loud under us. With my back still turned, I lifted my hand up at him. He stopped. I kept moving.

I wasn’t sure how I found my way back to the bedroom. Time must have skipped forward. I begged it to keep skipping for me. *Carry me away from this moment and to a place that is safe.* I crawled into bed and buried myself deep underneath the covers, thinking about my future. A wave of dread ripped its way up from the pit of my stomach to my chest. I shut my eyes waiting for time.

**After** running through every decision I had made in my life that got me to this point—falling for guys who didn’t give a damn, leaving school, leaving my mom—I rolled to my side, exhausted. Static from the scratchy comforter made sparks like fireflies fluttering around me. Emeka crawled into bed and under the blanket. We both lay there, silently, in a dark cocoon for what felt like eternity. Eventually he nudged me with his elbow. I didn’t turn around. He nudged me again. I needed to turn. I needed to. So I turned. He flashed a boyish grin and tickled me in the stomach. I didn’t laugh at first. He looked different now, like something alien and unsettling had taken over the body I knew. Maybe this distance was for the best. Yes, for the best. I choked out laughter. I choked it out because I needed to laugh. We escaped that night to a place Emeka liked to call *ani eze eluigwe nke uwa.* Heaven on earth. Heaven was in an old rickety house with Christmas lights strung up all over the place and paintings of fruit hanging on its walls. It growled and hiccupped and creaked, but we didn’t mind. In heaven, he unzipped himself for me and I for him.

He told me for the first time that he had recently developed chronic pain in his belly. He pointed to it with a tight fist. I kissed every single inch of his stomach hoping for a return to what I knew. I told him about the new pain I felt in the center of my heart. I pointed to it with a loose, tired fist. He rested his lips on my center and grazed it tenderly. I opened my mouth to let in air.

We then cupped our hands. He whispered into mine and I into his:

“I am afraid of my life, Soma.”

“Change it.”

“I have too many loved ones suffering that I cannot let down.”

“Are you going to let *me* down?”

Silence.

“*Abeg,* give me more time to figure this out.”

Silence.

“I’m afraid of my life, Emeka.”

“Why?”

“It’s full of dead ends. I’m afraid of what the next one might be.”

“You are not going anywhere.”

“I think that’s the problem.”

Emeka fidgeted. A firefly showed itself and disappeared.

“Do you believe in destiny, Emeka?”

“Yes.”

“If I hadn’t lived out my life the way I felt I needed to, moment by moment, we might not have met each other. In the grand scheme of things, as ugly as life gets sometimes, I haven’t made any mistakes. Am I wrong? Am I making a mistake?”

He closed his eyes.

“What are you thinking?”

He shook his head.

“Please tell me.”

Silence.

“I’m applying for grants, Emeka. A lot of them. My work is going to be in the Carnegie, the Guggenheim, MOMA, all those places. I’m going to travel the world, Emeka. My art will lift people to higher places. My husband will be proud of me. So, so proud. He’ll be an artist too. He’s going to be brave. Not a coward. Both of us will live exciting lives being happy doing what we love.”

His eyes had grown wide as if he were a plant drinking in my every word. “I remember the Andy Warhol Museum you took me to,” he said. “The floating silver pillows. For those moments that we were there, playing, I felt weightless. I could see myself beating the drum. I saw crowds in front of me jumping up and down, dancing, clapping their hands like they were flying. I saw you in the crowd, your eyes focused on me. Proud. I dream every day for heaven to exist here, where we are, and no matter where we go, it will follow us.”

“It does. It will. Just make a move. Claim your life.”

“In our hearts, it exists forever. Not in the world. At least not right now. Family means too much for me to leave it completely. You know this is what I would have to do?”

*Coward,* I thought.

“I love you. You know this? My love for you will never end.”

“Prove it,” I snapped.

“I do not want to make mistakes either.”

At four in the morning, I gently pulled his arm off my waist, grabbed my computer, and crept across our creaking floor, past a silly photo that hung on the wall of the two of us with our tongues sticking out, making googly eyes at each other. In our kitchen I scoured the Internet for grants for Pittsburgh artists. The requirements involved so much. Quality of work, evidence of formal or informal training, history of exhibitions, critical reviews, letters of recommendation from professionals. Under each grant on my list, I wrote, “THE BEST OF SOMA IS YET TO COME!” I shut down my computer and went for the black-eyed beans in the pantry rather than the usual eggs, pancake mix, or Lucky Charms I left for Emeka, and soaked them in a bowl of water. Then I shelled them as best I could and mixed them in the blender, adding water, onions, a pinch of salt, red pepper flakes, and other spices I tried to remember my mom using. Emeka and I didn’t have a deep fryer, so I fried the *akara* in a skillet. Sweat dripped from my pores as I stood at the stove dodging angry projectiles of grease and puréed beans. Out of nowhere, I felt the urge to cry. I gritted my teeth and curled my toes. The *akara* ended up one part burnt to two parts goopy. I nibbled on one and spit it out. Spit it all out and dumped everything in the trash.

**At Bruegger’s** that day, I was training a new employee at the counter to strive for “Best in Class”: smile at your customer, ask politely how they can be helped, cut their bagels down the middle as clean as possible, pick only the freshest-looking ingredients for their sandwiches. Be proud of how you’ve brightened their day so that your great work continues. Somewhere in the middle of smearing mayo on a bagel, I had to turn away and shut my eyes tight to keep myself from losing it.

Two years ago, before I met Emeka, the father of a childhood friend had walked into our shop and was at first pleasantly surprised to see me. When I ran away from home, I had no doubt my mom disconnected herself from the Nigerian community to keep from exposing her dirty laundry. He told me that his daughter, Ndidi, was at Georgia Tech getting her master’s in computer science. His son, Chike, was a resident doctor at University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. My uncle was so eager to know what I was doing, he leaned over the counter, his dark skin, shiny, balding head, plump cheeks, and twinkling eyes making me hunger for a childhood that had escaped me. “My dear, are you a student at Carnegie Mellon holding a job to help Mama?”

When I told him, *“Mba,”* he said, frowning, “University of Pittsburgh?”

“No.”

He then asked, “Where are you attending university then? What is your focus?”

When I told him that I hadn’t gone to college, the light in his eyes faded, and what I saw in them was a reflection of a child who would never measure up in this world. One of their own had been left behind, still standing on the shore while the rest were kicking their legs and stroking their arms with all their might into the vast ocean of opportunity and self-realization. They believed love was easier to find there. I let him down. He would tell the whole community about me, and I would let them down.

There was an uncomfortable silence between us while I toasted his bagel. I piped up and told him that I was an artist, that I had shown my work in some galleries in Pittsburgh. That sparkle in his eyes came back a little. I rattled off the list of spaces: Boom Concepts, Most Wanted Fine Art, Fieldwork, but he didn’t seem impressed. I had had a sinking feeling that I’d lost my chance to be courted by his son or someone else who was looking. I wish I had told him then that being different was okay. *I am trying.* When he paid, he said he would tell Ndidi that he saw me. Tell my mama hello. Everyone missed us. The last thing he did, I’ve tried my hardest to forget. He took me by my hand and told me that he loved me and that I should work very hard to better myself so that I got what I deserved in this short life.

I threw that memory away in a faraway corner of my mind, but like all memories, I carried it with me wherever I went. I snapped out of my reverie to a room full of bagels.

As I was leaving work, Emeka called. “I want to move forward,” he said.

I picked at the skin around my nails.

“What does that mean?” I said.

“Museums, your gallery crawls. You will watch me play onstage. We will teach our children how to paint, drum, dance, and sing. We will laugh. There will be a lot of laughter.”

Nothing more was said between us. Just a gaping silence. I wanted to ask, *Why are you playing this game with me?* He hung up.

**That night** I opted for homemade spaghetti and meatballs. Emeka ate his meal in his room while taking his father’s call, which happened at least once a week. I sat at the kitchen table scraping my fork against my plate, listening to all the strained “yes, sahs” flying like razor-edged boomerangs out of his mouth. His father gave him updates on the order of things back home. This cousin needed money for school fees, that aunt was sick and needed money for medicine, this uncle couldn’t pay rent. The village needed a new medical facility and better nurse and doctor training because one botched surgery was one too many. I wondered if anywhere in that conversation his father asked Emeka how he was feeling. *How are* you *getting along, Son?* He gave his father an update on his studies. All As. Aced his physiology exam not too long ago. He was looking forward to finals. They laughed over going fishing for the first time when Emeka would visit Texas over the summer. Emeka didn’t talk about me. I had never existed between him and his family. My toes curled. The topic of Amaka came up. Emeka agreed she was marriage potential, but he didn’t know if he was ready to marry just yet. My ears perked up. He wanted to focus on his studies. Dabble in other things he would later be too busy to try. “Life is too short, Papa,” he said. “Trust me. Amaka will wait.” As soon as that feeling came over me, like waves ramming into my insides, I got up, stormed into the bedroom, inserted one of his Fela CDs into the stereo, and put “He Miss Road” on blast. I stormed out, slipped on my sneakers, ran out into the night.

The maple and sycamore trees rustled in the cool breeze. I walked down Highland Avenue past Tazza D’Oro, where Emeka and Amaka would meet the next day. My cross section of pomegranates in midnight blue had once graced the café walls.

I walked a long way down Highland, trying to imagine life somewhere else. No clear picture came to mind.

Still, somehow, the farther I walked, the easier it was for me to picture Emeka and Amaka living in that house in Highland Park. I imagined them sitting at the kitchen table covered in a sea of big books as they studied together, pushing each other relentlessly to be their best. He would grow to love her. I imagined them cooking our native food over intellectually stimulating discussions and glasses of wine. I saw them planning a future where they would live in a big house peacefully, have children, and accomplish other grown-up things. They would take yearly trips to Nigeria until it was time for the permanent move. She, of course, would support his father’s mission to save Ogidi, and she, their princess, would be loved. I saw him telling her about a girl he once knew that was very dear to him, who took him to museums and gallery crawls and other such artsy things in his past. He will take her often to these places, and she will enjoy them. He will beat his *igba* for her, the way he beat it for me, maybe even thinking about me every once in a while, and she will dance for him.

I approached the house a few hours later in a daze and saw Emeka sitting on the steps. He was struggling to pull a weed out of a crack in the concrete. When he looked up, he jumped to his feet. “What happened? Where were you?”

“I took a walk.”

“My stomach. I was sick with worry.”

“It will be okay in the end,” I said as I walked past him.

The next day, I called in sick. As I lay in bed, Emeka came to me. “I promise you that I will cut Amaka off today. I am tired. I need my freedom. We will conquer the world together. The two of us. Just give me a little more time. Please.” He would make a nice Nigerian dinner, and we would eat it with merlot, then work through the next steps: true change.

“Am I a bad person?” I blurted.

“What? No, of course not.”

He kissed me on the cheek. His lips were soft and wet. The kiss lingered there. Hope flew into my chest.

As he walked out the door, I went to the window, watching him walk away and searching for a sign that I might be making the wrong decision. His back hunched a little from his heavy book bag. *Poor thing.* I saw that the obstacle would never go away. No matter how hard he tried. I kept my eyes on him until he faded. I pulled out my two suitcases from the closet and packed. I didn’t take much. Clothes, easel, palette, paints, and my art. I neatly folded the list of grants and tucked it in my purse. I left him my sea of daffodils.

When would I stop running? Running away from myself? I started to write him a note then crumpled it and threw it in the trash. It felt so final. *Make up your mind!* I pulled my phone from my pocket. Held it in my hands until I felt the weight of it. I tapped my toes until my ankles fatigued. I texted: *I’m doing what will make life easier for the both of us. I’ll send you my rent. I wish you the best. Love you forever. No mistakes.* I got up and grabbed my stuff. I heard the alert of a message. I walked forward, the floor silent under me. I heard another alert. I slipped my phone into the pocket of my jeans. My phone rang. It rang and rang and rang. I wiped my eyes with my arm. At the front door I took one more look at what once was our kingdom. The cracked-up floor. The streaks of paint on it that I hoped to one day call my beautiful failure. I pictured in my mind’s eye his *igba* sitting majestic in the bedroom. My sea of daffodils.

I took one long, deep breath, and walked into the sun.