

## **BUSH BABY**

**By Chikodili Emelumadu**

Somebody is banging on my gate.

At first, I think it must be the wind. I want it to be the wind. The clock on the bottom right hand corner of my laptop reads 21.54 and the last thing I need, with a deadline looming over my head, is visitors. Nigerians are masters of the Drive-by Salutation; ‘Oh, I was just in your neighbourhood and I said let me come and greet my big sister’ and next thing they’re there for hours, reciting a litany of ill fortunes which only your imaginary “forex” can solve. It doesn’t matter that I’ve been home for a year and a half, that my entire savings went into making sure my father was buried properly or that I’m working two jobs to make ends meet. Relatives still think I have pounds stashed away, to which naturally, they’re entitled.

The power is out again, and I’m working fast, listening, and watching the dwindling levels of my battery. My generator is only for emergencies. Since the presidential campaigns started, the price of diesel has tripled, thanks to pessimistic marketers hoarding fuel.

‘Bang. Bang.’ The sheet metal of the gate resonates as if the person outside is whacking it with a stone.

‘Na who be dat?’ Idi shouts from the gatehouse. His belt clinks and I can tell he’s pulled on trousers over his boxer shorts. So confident is he in his ability to speedily despatch the knocker that he doesn’t fasten it; he’s still clinking as he stomps to the gate. Ever since Idi’s new bride joined him from Borno, he’s been extra short with unwanted guests, choosing to spend his day off in the gatehouse with the girl than hang out with his boys down the street. Idi’s habits are as familiar to me as my own. For a while, it had been just the two of us in the whole compound. Idi had come with the bungalow, straight from my father’s service and into mine. He’d eased my transition back into society somewhat; queueing for fuel under the scorching sun in my clapped-out Volvo station wagon (also inherited), getting the right workers when things broke down (which they often did), and keeping the compound spick-and-span.

The white beam of light from his rechargeable radio-lantern wrecks what is left of my concentration. Words scatter in my mind like flies, disturbed from a bounty of excrement. I’ve

always hated the harshness of battery-powered lamps and I look up, grinding my teeth. Idi stands right outside my mosquito-screened window, calmly plucking at his hairy navel.

‘Na madam brother,’ he says, in his usual uninflected voice. The lantern points respectfully on the concrete floor outside and his skin is so dark and oily that the light reflects off his bare chest.

‘Okwuchukwu?’ My brow furrows. ‘Open for him, now.’

Idi shrugs as he saunters off, and I know what he is thinking, why he had to make sure before letting Okwuchukwu in.

In the past year, I’ve seen my brother two times. The first, at our father’s funeral, which he attended as though he was an ordinary guest, and not the sole heir of a deceased chief. Okwuchukwu did not contribute towards any costs for the burial; canopies, food and drink and money for the dancers all came out of my pocket. The night of the wake keeping, he swooped in with a posse of raucous friends, whose sole purpose seemed to be imbibing every drop of alcohol in sight. They sat outdoors, etching patterns in the night sky with weed smoke and partying as if they were facing incarceration the next day. By morning, Okwuchukwu couldn’t hold himself up to pour sand over our father’s coffin.

People haven’t stopped talking about it in the village.

The second time was on a Wednesday, a month ago. I remember because I was supposed to be going on a date that evening, and the guy stood me up. I’d driven past Chizzy’s, a popular eatery on campus, and clocked my brother, in his six foot five, broad-shouldered glory, surrounded by skimpily-dressed students. One of them plastered herself to his body like a tattoo, fiddling with his belt buckle. Okwuchukwu’s car had been parked haphazardly and it blasted a syrupy R&B, something young that I didn’t much care for. I’d gripped the steering wheel and averted my gaze, feeling every inch the staid English lecturer.

A shadow lurches towards the house, breaking my reverie. My irritation increases.

*The foolish child is obviously drunk again*, I think. But something about his gait, the small, careful, steps of an accident victim, alarms me. My heartbeat resounds in my ears.

‘Okwy?’

His silhouette pauses and I can see something is not right. His head is too big; the collar of his shirt hangs around his neck like a noose. I jump up out of my chair and grab one of the kerosene lamps standing in the hallway. Its yellow flame dances, casting wild shadows over the wall. A twist of keys in the wooden door and I'm in the enclosed patio.

'Sister,' says Okwy, smiling at me from the other side of my burglary proof bars. At least I think it's a smile. Through the green netting it could be a grimace. I hold up the lantern and stifle a gasp, fumbling for the padlock. Tears blur my vision and I am grateful for the momentary respite from the horror in loose clothing, two steps below, staring at me with what seems to be half its teeth decayed.

The lock snaps open and Okwy is falling up the stairs, into me. He exhales, arms wrapped tightly around a bundle held to his chest and instantly becomes unconscious. A terrible odour wafts up from his body; a combination of the rotten-eggs smell of dye pits and the rich moistness of loam.

'Idi!'

Idi slams home the bolt on the pedestrian side of the gate and helps me move Okwy into the sitting room. We lay him down on the sofa.

'Wetin do am?' Idi gestures with his chin.

My forehead creases as I consider that we've just lifted a thirty year-old man who is supposed to weigh ninety kilos, without breaking a sweat.

'I don't know, Idi.'

In his sleep, Okwuchukwu appears to revert to the baby I adored, once upon a time. My brother's eyes might be sunken in dark hollows but they're still fringed by bovine lashes, brushing against newly-visible cheekbones. His mouth is a pout. In my mind, I see it clamped over my mother's dark nipple, greedily sucking, the milk running out of the corners of his mouth. A lot of the time, he swallowed too quickly and it went down the wrong way. My mother would try to take him off and clap him on the back, chiding him for being such a glutton. Even as he choked, Okwuchukwu would refuse to let go of her breast.

I hated being an only child. Every one of my friends had siblings, more than they knew what to do with. I pestered and nagged until my normally gentle mother snapped one day, 'We're trying our best you know!' which made my lips quiver and a lump of unshed tears sit heavily behind my face. I did not understand why she was so annoyed.

Not long after, her stomach swelled and swelled. She lay in bed, dressed in long, cotton nightgowns, resting swollen legs on a stack of pillows. My mother's face glowed, with an inner light and yet she looked so frail. She reminded me of a princess. In the afternoons when I returned from school, I played pretend that she was Sleeping Beauty and often kissed her to wake her. Sometimes she opened her eyes, but mostly, she just slept and slept.

A few days past my sixth birthday, Okwuchukwu was born. A tiny, warm bundle of beautiful, brown curls. Not for me, the sibling rivalry which plagued my peers. I was totally smitten. And even after he grew up spoiled and revealed facets to his character that I could frankly do without, he was still my baby brother. Selfish, charming, reckless baby brother.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I reach over and brush a hand over his beautiful beard, so out of place on this emaciated self. Okwy mumbles something, snuffling into my hand like a new born animal, seeking warmth. My heart thumps against my ribcage. What trouble has he got himself into this time?

An electronic beep pierces the quiet. Okwuchukwu wakes with a start.

'What is that?' The whites of his eyes take up the entire top half of his face.

'It's just my laptop. The battery is dying.' Surreptitiously, I withdraw my outstretched hand and turn up the wick on the lantern which I'd placed on the floor. Animation strips my brother of the façade of innocence. The amber light does nothing to soften his terrible appearance. His shoulders are drawn inwards over the package he's still clasping to his chest; it's dark, stained in places like rags from a mechanic's workshop. The shirt he has on must have been white at some time, but there are thick, brown lines on the collar and wrists, like smudged crayon marks made by a toddler. A patch of sweat shaped like a light bulb stains the cushions he'd been lying on and his fingernails are crescents of grime. Okwuchukwu licks his lips, scabbed over and crusty in the corners. I pour him a glass of water from the jug on the stool and hand it over.

Okwy exhales and fingernails tinkle against the tumbler as he receives it.

‘What time is it?’ His voice is hoarse as if he’s been crying.

‘I don’t know. I left my phone in the room when I came out to open the door.’

‘Don’t you have a clock here? I hear ticking.’

The question comes out desperate, laden, as if he wants me to reassure him of more than just the time. He glances about the room, peering into the darkened corner where my display cabinet of souvenirs stands. I want to ask him to lie down again, because the way his head is shaking on his giraffe neck, makes me all sorts of nervous. I half expect it to break off and roll down the corridor.

‘Okwy, what the hell is going on with you?’

‘Nothing,’ he says, sullenly. Then he smiles at me, one of his old smiles that I’ve seen him wield like a weapon against people’s defences. It’s a smile that’s got him exactly what he wants on many occasions. Only now, he seems to have forgotten the blackened teeth. Despite telling myself not to flinch, I do and his lips come down over them like blinds over windows.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean—’

‘No problem. Only four more days now. Four more days and I will have all the money I want. I’ll buy myself new teeth. Gold teeth. Diamond teeth!’ he laughs then quickly sobers. ‘You have to let me stay, sister. There is concrete everywhere here. He won’t catch me.’

*What on earth?*

‘Are you on drugs?’

‘Drugs,’ he scoffs, sipping his water.

I take a deep breath, bracing myself. ‘Are you sick? You’ve lost a lot of weight.’

‘I don’t have AIDS, God! You’re just like dad, Ihuoma.’

Okwy grunts when he stands. He paces my living room in the same shuffling motion, which is even more excruciating to witness up close.

‘I’ve always hated this house,’ he says.

‘It was mum’s *idu uno* gift from her father. We lived her for a while before you were born.’

‘I know,’ he says wearily.

My brother has no shoes on and with each footstep, his long, curved toenails dig into the carpet, pulling out the fibres with a sickening, ripping sound. ‘I’m glad nobody left it to me in their will. I’d have knocked it down. Or sold it.’

*Like you sold the others.*

‘Well, I like it,’ I say, defensively.

‘It suits you,’ he replies. I consider bristling under the implied insult, but his voice is so faint, he could have been talking to himself. ‘And it’s concrete,’ he bares his teeth again.

The bungalow is a modest size—it only takes three strides for Okwuchukwu to reach the end of the living room, but I am proud of what I have done with it; the curtains are cream chiffon, embroidered with purple flowers and ties, made to order, as are the cushion covers of green, purple and pink print. My sofa and armchair are cane, made by King, one of Idi’s craftsman relatives, as a thank you for letting him squat with Idi in the gatehouse before he found a place of his own. My house is cosy and welcoming and I love it and can’t bear to hear anyone speak ill of it. I don’t understand my brother’s sudden obsession with concrete.

‘I don’t think he will come,’ he mutters.

Okwuchukwu paces and I watch him with growing impatience. I now know he is on drugs. Isn’t the first sign of addiction denial? Part of me wishes I’d been shocked by the realisation but my brother is not exactly known for restraint. It would be just like him to try a drug once and get hooked for life. He doubles back around the centre table, ignoring my eyes and stops in front of a reframed photo of our parents, leaning against the bar which I now use as a bookcase. The picture is old; moth-eaten and water damaged.

‘People say I look like him,’ he says. Ever the narcissist, Okwuchukwu’s eyes find his reflection in the glass.

I shrug, unsure what to say. The person standing before me bears no resemblance to my father. Not anymore.

‘What time is it?’ he asks again. ‘If it’s past midnight, then I’m safe.’

‘Fine, let me get my phone.’

‘No! Wait a little longer. I’d hate for anything to happen without you here to see. I need you to believe me.’ He scratches the back of his head. ‘After, I will tell you everything.’

‘Tell me what? What is “everything”?’

The lantern on the floor flickers and goes out.

‘Damn it. I’ve run out of kerosene.’ The other lantern glows dully from the hallway. ‘I’ll find some candles,’ I say.

‘It’s not the kerosene,’ he replies. ‘Check it.’

Okwuchukwu’s voice floating out of the darkness, quakes.

Rolling my eyes, I let the warmth from the globe guide my hands in the darkness. As soon as I lift up the lantern, I do not need to shake it to know there is more than half a tank left.

‘See? I told you,’ Okwuchukwu says, breathing raspy and loud. He coughs as he makes his way back to the sofa.

The other lantern starts to flicker.

‘It’s him. He’s coming. But there is concrete everywhere. He shouldn’t be able to...’ His voice tails off in a sort of whimper.

I scoot over to him from the armchair and place what I hope is a soothing hand on his shoulder. ‘Who do you think is after you?’

Okwuchukwu grips my hand. His palm is rough, spongy like chewed up coconut flesh. He squeezes until it hurts.

‘Ow! Stop it, biko.’

He’s panting, letting loose a smell of hot sewage in my face. ‘Promise me that once it starts, you won’t let me go to him. I’ll fight you. But you can’t let him take me.’

I jerk away. ‘Who? Who is coming?’ I’m trying not to shout at him. Okwuchukwu either charms his way around things or stubbornly digs in and right now, he is all out of charm.

The other lantern goes out. Okwuchukwu is hyperventilating, rocking on the sofa. I clutch him to my bosom, close to tears myself.

‘Okwy—’

Something alters and this gives me pause. A silence has settled on the house. I notice that I can no longer hear the usual hums of life and habitation; no far-away horns from traffic on the express, no generator sets, nothing. It is as though we have been cut off from the world.

A wail rips through the house. My brother goes rigid in my embrace.

The sound is a balled fist, slammed into the gut. It is bottle tops, scraped against pebble dashed walls; the jarring sensation of happening upon a stone in a dish of beans, which wasn’t cleaned properly. My mouth fills with saliva, my stomach roils and in that moment I will give anything to shut the noise off.

It is the cry of a baby being tortured.

Okwuchukwu yells.

The crying seems to be bouncing off the walls, building as it travels through the hallway, waves upon waves, making the hairs on the back of my neck and arms stand on end. Okwuchukwu claws at his ears, making guttural noises as if he has lost the ability to speak. The crying grows until it seems to be coming from all around us, seeping out of the floor, pressing down on us from the ceiling. The pressure in the room is the type you get in an aircraft cabin; my head becomes as tight as balloon and my ears pop. Something wet and sticky spreads all over the carpet. It’s cold, numbing. When I try to move, I find I can’t. I am rooted to the ground. My heart beats in my head, pushing hot blood and adrenaline through my limbs. Everything feels tainted, infected by fear. Okwuchukwu crashes through the coffee table.

‘Okwy!’

I cannot hear my own voice above the wailing baby, even though I know I am shouting. I *can* hear my brother’s screams. He rolls on the floor but my legs are held fast and I



can't move. Something is burning. The air changes, filling with smoke so thick, I can grasp it. Just when I think I cannot handle any more, the wailing shuts off, abruptly.

'Okwuchukwu?!'

I can hear myself, so I shout his name over and over but he does not move from his spot on the floor. Struggling against whatever is holding me captive, my legs kick out suddenly and I fall to the floor, freed. The carpet is sticky, sodden. It squishes as I crawl to my brother. Glass cuts into my hands and knees.

The house starts to fill once more with night-time noises.

'Okwy!' I place my ear to his chest but realise it's his back and turn him over. He stinks even worse than before and his heart beats faintly, stuttering inside his ribcage. 'Okwy?' On hands and I knees I feel for the jug of water on the stool and dump it in his face. He doesn't move.

The siren connected to the power grid shrieks and power comes back on. My beige carpet is covered in what looks to be viscera and blood and... soil? I scoop up some of it and sniff. It smells burned, like the underside of an iron, tripod pot.

I feel movement behind me and turn. A dark cloud drifts away towards the backyard.

Okwuchukwu coughs, spits. He feels around for the parcel even before he opens his eyes and clutches it to his chest.

'Ihuoma?' he squints at me.

Everything in me is rattling, shaking, as if the nuts and bolts that hold me together are going to come apart. My teeth chatters. Okwy sits up, dragging himself painfully with one arm, to lean against the wall.

'Three more days,' he says. 'Three more days.' There is pride in his voice. Then he bends over and vomits onto what's left of the carpet.

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Idi is waiting for me outside the front door the next morning. Gone is his usual impassive expression, replaced by a clenched jaw. His flared nostrils tell me he is angry, but his eyes are scared. Terrified.

‘That ting wey come na *gwei-gwei*. Your brother carry am come our house.’

I stare at him. I’m drained from a night spent pulling glass out of my skin and my brother’s, cleaning him and dressing his wounds. There’s a ringing in my ears. My eyeballs feel gritty from lack of sleep; Okwuchukwu snores kept cutting off and startling me into wakefulness the minute I nodded off. Twice I was certain he died.

‘I no go do gateman if *gwei-gwei* come again.’ He turns and marches off to his house.

Okwuchukwu is asleep on my bed, his entire body exposed in the light of day. My breath hitches in my throat as I survey the wreckage; a dewlap previously hidden behind his thinning beard. I could lift him by his collarbones if I desired. He’s wearing one of my bigger t-shirts which stops just under his navel, before the twin peaks of his hip bones and the inky bruise discolouring most of his midriff. The air whistles through the gap in his mouth, where yesterday, he had teeth. My brother’s once proud nose, so reminiscent of our father’s, seems to have caved in on itself and his eyes...

... are open.

I jump back, embarrassed to be caught in my scrutiny, and straighten my wrapper at the foot of the bed.

‘I’m dying,’ he says. ‘Aren’t I?’

I cross my arms over my chest. ‘Have you heard of something called a *gwei-gwei*?’

Okwuchukwu licks his lips. His saliva appears yellowish, gluing his lips together. ‘Who told?’

‘Idi.’

‘Fucking cattle-rearer.’

‘Don’t be daft, Okwy.’

‘I might as well tell you.’ He moves, pulls the bundle from under his pillow and unwraps it. I make a face. ‘I know, it’s really awful but if it smelled nice, it would be easier to steal, wouldn’t it?’

‘Steal? You stole this? From whom? Ugh! It is disgusting.’

‘Not “whom”. It’s a “what”.’

Okwuchukwu discards the outer wrapping with shaking hands, and opens the cloth inside. My mouth drops open, the more he unties it.

‘What... is... this?’

‘A mat. It belongs to the bush baby. It’s what it was after last night.’

‘Bush baby?’

‘Bush baby... gwei-gwei. It’s not an actual baby. It just sounds like one to torture people.’

The mat is a thing of beauty; it is crimson and black and gold, stiff like asoke straight from the loom. Its tassels are fine threads of gold and white thread. My brother strokes it as if it is the hair of his beloved. Just looking at it, makes me suddenly light-hearted. I forget my sense of foreboding. The mat affects Okwuchukwu too; his smile is dreamier, unselfconscious. When he turns to me, it is with the expectant air of a child waiting to be praised. The effect in his old man face is grotesque. I blink my tears away.

‘They said if I helped them steal this, they would give me the houses back. I lost all three,’ he adds sheepishly. ‘I thought the game was a sure banker.’

‘You *gambled* your inheritance away?’ The gossips got it wrong then. He hadn’t made one *kobo* in profit because there’d been no sale.

He sighs and the smell of damp, old socks fills the room, carried along on a current of hot breath. I sense him tapping into the reserves of his stubbornness.

‘And what happened?’ I ask quickly.

‘They told me I could get my properties back if I did one thing for them. It was a small thing. There was a man in the forest and I had to find him and get his mat for them. They said

they were going to use his mat for *juju*, he was a powerful medicine man. They'd get rich, I'd get my houses back—well, two of them.' Okwuchukwu pauses. 'Only it isn't a man I stole from. It's a forest spirit.' He swallows and his voice takes on a faraway timbre.

'It was so easy. The hardest part was the journey into Ikenga forest. Thirteen hours it took, I timed it first by my watch and then when it got too dark to see, by the light of my phone. The mosquitoes... the mosquitoes! They were as big as bees. I looked under all the *ukpaka* trees as I was told and I did not find the man or his mat or lantern. He was supposed to live in the forest... harmless old hermit. How was I to know?'

Okwuchukwu is talking to himself at this point but I just let him ramble on, while I try to play catch up, to make sense of it all.

'He wasn't at home but there it was, this mat, at the last tree with the hole in its trunk. What was I supposed to do, leave it there? They told me what would happen if I did not come back with it. Everything under the tree as described; the mat and the lantern lit low, and I cannot see anything else the darkness is so thick. Drink's worn off at this point so I am sweating and my mouth is full of sand and my hand is shaking when I bend over to pick it up. Only it starts to reek, my God! I should have let it go then. I should have...' Okwuchukwu's voice trails off and he catches himself as if he'd been about to nod off. He rubs a hand over bulbous red eyes. My brother's fingers remind me of Terminator's skeleton, the knuckles distended grotesquely.

I keep quiet. Inside I am wrestling with my mind.

'Bastards! They told me when I came back, laughing in my face. Of course it had been too easy. The spirit lets you steal its mat, so it can torment you. Seven days it punishes you...' His voice breaks and he clears it. When he wipes his eyes this time, there are eyelashes in his palm. He scrutinises them, indifferent, before blowing them away. 'You survive, you get rich. You don't, you die. What kind of people condemn a man to die over a few measly debts?'

'Can't you just return its mat?'

'No.'

'Why not?! It's simple. You can live here with me, get a job for once in your life. Let those foolish men keep your properties.'

‘Do you think I have not thought of that?’ Okwy coughs as he talks. He’s breathing heavily again and even though I know I should not exert him, all my anger at his happy-go-lucky existence comes to the fore. Three properties by the age of twenty-eight, one a four-storey building packed with tenants and he still manages to blow it all. Our father will be turning in his grave.

‘You should have come to me! What are you doing gambling anyway? When did that rubbish start?’

‘What else is there to do in this godforsaken town?’

‘Then move. Find a job elsewhere and do that.’

‘What, like you? Eh? You that went for your masters and came back eleven years later?’ Okwuchukwu coughs again and wipes his hand on my t-shirt. It turns slightly grey as though smeared with dirt. ‘You left me alone with a widower—what was I supposed to abandon him too?’

‘Please.’ I kiss my teeth.

‘She was my mother too, not just yours.’ Okwuchukwu pounds the bed with his fist and his lips tremble. ‘You’re not the only one who lost someone. I lost my mum. *Dad* lost his wife. What is this thing that has always made you think your claim on her is greater than ours?’

I turn away from him and towards the window, staring out into my backyard with its peeling terracotta wall, which seems somehow altered in a way I cannot fathom.

‘Jesus, you still blame me for her death don’t you?’ Okwuchukwu throws his hands up.

‘I did not say that.’ I shrug. But I am thinking it. *She was never the same after she gave birth to you.*

‘And how is that my fault?’ asks Okwuchukwu, not fooled in the slightest.

‘Fine, whatever. It’s not your fault. I’m the reason you’ve not done anything with your life. It’s me that drove you to gamble your life away. I’m the one who made you show up to your own father’s funeral with a whore whose breasts were falling out of—’

‘Don’t call her a whore! She’s studying accountancy.’

‘Great. She can handle the books in the brothel. A promotion.’

‘Dad would have wanted me to have fun. You don’t know.’ Okwuchukwu’s eyes blaze. ‘You weren’t here.’

The accusation stings. ‘Return the mat, don’t return it,’ I retort. ‘I don’t care.’

I can’t believe I’m saying the words even as I speak them. Okwuchukwu doesn’t seem surprised by them. He is silent a while, then his lips curl downwards, exposing the wasteland of his mouth.

‘There are no returns,’ he says, resigned. ‘I either last the seven days or I die. All this time it’s been living in the forest, starving. Now, it’s eating me.’ Okwy’s tirade comes out speckled with saliva. ‘Give me your phone. Where is it?’

I grab it from my bedside unit and hand it over. He taps it, each one more forceful than the last. ‘How do you not even have Facebook?’ he sighs, tapping some more. ‘Look.’

It’s a photo of Okwuchukwu as he normally appears; his smile is wide and the camera’s flash glints in his well-oiled beard. He has his hands round two girls, a bottle of Heineken sneaking around the waist to his right.

‘Check the time stamp’.

It was a week ago. My stomach turns. It hasn’t settled since last night and feels tender. I grit my teeth until it settles. I can feel Okwuchukwu watching me, his gaze mocking my unease.

I gulp. ‘Why did you think my house would keep it away?’

‘Oh. Apparently it hates things like that. Electricity and modern stuff,’ he sounds sleepy, as if the act of offloading has weakened him. ‘The sprite only comes out in areas close to forests. Dunno why he came... this whole ugly house is concrete...’

A thought occurs to me. My voice comes out slowly, hesitantly. ‘Not the back. The man who was building there got into trouble and abandoned the house a few years ago. The real owners of the land knocked it down and it’s steadily been going back to bush.’

I walk to the window. That's what's changed in my backyard. The creeping vines coming over from the other side seem to have thickened overnight, choking the razor wire on my fence. Tendrils are growing as I watch, in slight unobtrusive movements, but growing nonetheless. By dusk we'll be overrun.

'We have to move you from here.' I say, filled with urgency. My brother is right. There is nothing he's done which warrants the kind of death coming for him.

'To where? It hates technology, but I don't think it's *allergic* to it. At worst, it'll pull the trick with cutting us off from it all again.' Okwuchukwu laughter is a bark, at the end of which, he spits out a molar. It's crescent-shaped as if something took a bite out of it. My head swells and goose pimples pop all over my body. My brother opens my palm and places the damaged tooth in it.

'At least you'll have something of me to bury. Don't let that devil chop me finish.'

'Stop talking like that,' I say. 'I am going to fix it. Who are the people you owe? Where can I find them?'

My brother is nearly asleep. 'They are waiting for me to die, so they'll take the mat. I'm going to die. We are all dead in our family. Dead... dead.' He snores softly.

I cover him up and go through the kitchen and into the backyard to check the level of diesel left in the jerry cans. The generator will run all night, anything, to make sure the crying monstrosity does not return. Anything to keep my brother safe.

The tendrils snake steadily over the wall.

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The generator cuts out around midnight. Okwuchukwu wakes up immediately but he is too weak to move from my bed. The baby cries buckle the closed door and even though I've stuffed my ears with cotton wool, it's shrill enough to cut through. My brother clutches his throat, thrashing about on the bed and when I try to hold him, I find I am frozen in place. This time I cannot even call his name—my teeth snap shut the minute I try.

Even though I am prepared, I'm still shaken. My hair drips with sweat in its ponytail and I feel as though my brother's stink has imprinted itself on me. Okwuchukwu moans but

doesn't open his eyes anymore. I lift his head to put a sip of water down his throat. He's dry and light like stockfish.

Someone is rustling around my gate. The time on my phone reads 05.06 and the sun's rays are staining the sky's cheeks with a rosy blush. I tie my wrapper and grab the keys from the kitchen.

'You are leaving?'

Idi turns around. The fear in his face dissolves my belief in everything turning out alright. I'd hoped I would fix Okwuchukwu's screw up, somehow; find the guys, see a *dibia*, anything. I have never seen Idi afraid of anything. My *maigadi* is feared and respected among his boys—many migrating to our town from his village on his say so. Now...

He turns and says something in Hausa to the shadow behind him. His wife looks up from underneath the print cloth draped over her head and shoulders. She nods and opens the gate. Outside, a pick-up truck idles.

'I no do gate-man for gwei-gwei house.'

I don't know what to say. I don't think I am capable of speech.

Idi sighs. He touches my forearm. I don't think he's ever touched me before. Loneliness thrashes my soul. From the gesture, I know my brother is going to die. The extent of loneliness is staring me in the face.

'I can't bury another family member,' I shake my head. 'I can't.'

Idi glances behind him. He can't wait to be gone and I don't blame him. I smell of death.

'Kakan say, the only time gwei-gwei leave you commot be say, if you fight am.'

'Fight him? How can I fight what I don't see?' And then there was the small matter of always being too paralysed to move.



Idi looks embarrassed. ‘Na to naked yourself. You go dey naked fight am. Only person wey no want im property, na im fit fight gwei-gwei.’ He shrugs. ‘I no know. Na wetin I dem tell me.’

I have to fight a forest spirit that nobody can see, naked.

Idi says sadly, ‘Gwei-gwei too strong. E go chop una. I no fit stay.’

I nod. I understand that he can’t bury a family member either.

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I put my affairs in order. The advantage to not having much is that it only takes me three hours. I don’t bother sending an email to the university—they’ll probably find a replacement from the hordes of unemployed graduates doing the job rounds.

Okwuchukwu is still breathing; a moist finger under his nose dries, in record time. He is burning up and his flesh is greying.

‘I double dare you not to die,’ I whisper in his ear, imitating the game we played as children. I clean him one last time, dress the weeping sores. My bedsheets are soaked. If I survive, I’ll have to burn the mattress.

I don’t bother with clocks or lanterns this time, just strip off my clothes and wrap myself in the mat. It’s as if I can no longer smell the odour any more, which is a good thing. I’ll need all my wits.

As soon as the muting feeling creeps into my house, I stand and brace myself. Behind me, Okwuchukwu gasps in his sleep and from his mouth, a baby begins to screech.