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**APS 24: GOD'S CHILDREN ARE LITTLE  
BROKEN THINGS BY ARINZE IFEAKANDU**

FICTION / ARINZE IFEAKANDU

## GOD'S CHILDREN ARE LITTLE BROKEN THINGS

*We are the miracles that God made*

*To taste the bitter fruit of Time.*

—BEN OKRI, “AN AFRICAN ELEGY”

- I. You met in your second year. At the stadium one cloudy evening when you played against his department. He was not a player, he was too small to be one, even though you knew that bigness wasn't the stuff anyway. But he was so small, so fragile, you were dead sure he had never kicked a football.

He reminded you of Dave.

You walked up to him at halftime and told him he reminded you of someone. The way he smiled, his eyes lingering briefly on your sweaty chest and then on the ground, made you certain that he was one of them. Dave was one of them too, and he had almost put you in trouble.

I wanted to tell you that you reminded me of someone, you said, with what you knew was a weak smile, and then you were gone.

You lost the game to his department. On your way home, you called Rachael and told her you loved her so much did she know that? She giggled over the phone and you told yourself again that Dave had almost put you in trouble, Jesus!

You met him again. At Christ Church Chapel where he played the organ so well on Mothering Sunday, the entire church was filled with a tender light, the women burst into tongues in the middle of hymns, and the chaplain for once didn't say, First and last verses only. You couldn't believe it, that his legs could strike the pedals so strongly. He did not look fragile on the organ.

After the service you lingered around the door of the choir room, until he came out and said, Hey.

Hey, you said, scratching your head and glancing at the floor. That was great, what you did up there.

T-thanks bro, he stuttered. I wasn't sure at first, b-but then...

And you learned that day how well he could talk and not bore you. (Later,

he would tell you that he had been afraid you would walk away again, so he'd talked and talked.) You exchanged numbers, and you whistled on your way home, skipped by the roadside like a little boy, so full were you with giddiness.

But you did not call him. He called you, twice, first to know how your day had been. You said, Fine. The second time he called, he told you that his piano instructor was OCD, the man didn't give him any breathing space, and you said, Really?

Yes, he said.

After that, he stopped calling, and you did not call either. Not until the night Dumebi texted you that Mum and Dad were quarreling, could you please call them now? You were asleep when the text message came in, and when you woke up at midnight, you had eleven missed calls. You tried to call her back, but she wasn't answering. You started to dial Mum's number but then stopped. Then you dialed his number. His voice was rough: Hey, Lotanna.

You sat on the bed, running your fingers through your hair. Hey, Kamsi, you said. Didn't expect you to be awake.

I'm rehearsing my exam pieces.

I see.

Then you told him everything, how every time Mum and Dad would quarrel, even though it was in low tones, the entire house seemed to reverberate with their bitterness. How it hurt you in the chest so badly you couldn't breathe; shit, you couldn't breathe. Then, because he was so quiet, you said: I'm not even sure why I'm telling you this. I hope I didn't disturb you.

No, no, he said. N-not at all.

Okay, you said, and then asked how he was doing, and what were the pieces he was playing?

The next day was Saturday. The girls from your department had a football match with the girls from his. The match was already on when you came, and you walked straight to him after shaking hands with your friends. He folded his arms across his chest, smiled so widely it made you happy simply standing there, saying, How'veyoubeenbro?

You sat with him on the racing track. He was wearing three-quarter shorts and an Arsenal jersey, the hair on his legs and arms black and curly against the light brown of his skin.

You have nice legs, you said. Let's run.

He said no, weakly, but you pulled him up, called him lazy and laughed at his pout. He did not run a hundred meters before he stopped. He bent over, his hands on his knees. You walked to him, laughing. His classmates were laughing: Mozart, you dey fall hands oh. He was panting. He collapsed on the track and lay on his back.

Lazy, you said, smiling down at him. Is this how you do your girlfriend?

He arched an eyebrow, stared at you.

You did not hold his gaze, merely chuckled. And then you sat on the ground beside where he lay.

II. You thought of him often. Stalked him on Facebook, squinted at every update ancient and modern, and told yourself that you found him interesting. Simple. Sometimes, you would lie in bed trying to visualize Rachael from last time. Her lips, what did they taste like the last time? Lemon mint? TomTom? What would his lips taste like? Like TomTom too? Or like nothing.

You told him Rachael was the best thing that ever happened to you. Told him she saved you.

From what? he asked.

You won't understand, you said.

You were seated on a step at the stadium, watching the sun, once white, fade into a calm yellow, and all you could think about were his hands, how they tapped rhythms on his knees as he tried to get the words out of his mouth. You wanted to take them in yours and rub them until they were warm, and then blow on them, in circles, until he giggled.

Don't conclude so quickly, he said. But I understand if you don't want to tell me.

You put your hands in your pockets, stood up. It's getting late, you said. We should start going.

You had noticed certain things about him. Little-little things. How his stutter became obvious only when it was cold or when he was emotional. And how when he told you about his relationships he looked you bold in the eyes, teasing, Does my story make you horny? Though he tried to sound flippant and cool, the shyness still billowed in his voice. And how he liked to sing whenever he was in the bathroom, you often heard him screaming, *ekuro la labaku ewa...* and it made you laugh because he sounded so much like Justin Bieber screaming

*baby baby baby oh*. Nobody sang Davido with that kind of voice.

One morning, he came to your house and flopped on the bed facedown. You were seated at the table, trying to make sense of your History of Nigeria lecture notes. You watched him for a while, and then you asked, What is it?

When he stared at you, his eyes were red. His lips quivered. I h-hate e-every. One o-of them. I've met, he said.

What happened? you asked.

He grabbed your bedsheet, bit his lips so hard, you thought he would draw blood. I. Told him. No, he said. I t-told him. No.

He covered his face with the bedsheet. He was shaking terribly.

You sat beside him on the bed and held his hand, rubbed it gently. He was still shaking. But as you rubbed and rubbed, he began to calm down. You rubbed and pressed, rubbed and pressed. Better? you asked. He nodded, sniffled.

Who was it?

Kent, he said.

All his friends had funny names: Kent, Klay, Vinny. Like names on body cream bottles—Kent, Light & Lovely. I thought you were just friends, you said.

He nodded, blew his nose. Your stomach felt full of hot anger. I want to bathe, he said.

Later, he refused to dress in front of you, yelled, Stop! at you when you teased him about acting like a girl, why couldn't he dress in front of you? And, as you sat on the veranda, waiting for him to be done, you shocked yourself by how hard you wanted to punch Kent.

It was in the days that followed that you learned the definition of the word *gentleness*. He was delicate, always lying in bed eating plantain chips. Sometimes, he woke up in the middle of the night kicking. You learned to hold him close, to press his head against your chest and whisper, It's okay, I'm here. It's okay.

You called Rachael and told her that you couldn't wait to return home for the holiday, you missed her so damn much. But the truth was, your heart beat too fast when his head rested on your chest. And you wanted too much to bury your nose in his neck and sniff the talcum powder he wore when going to bed. And then, every time you saw the tears in his eyes, making them look silvery in the darkness, you wanted too much to tilt his chin up and kiss him hard and gentle.

Exams came in July. Nsukka had this funny weather: sometimes it rained all night, and you had to wear a sweater and socks as you read. You asked him

to bring his keyboard to your house. No, you didn't mind the noise, you could cope. He smiled and said thank you.

One night it rained so hard, it sounded like pebbles hitting the roof. You shut the windows, but the wind still filtered in. You stopped reading and eased into bed beside him. You had to spoon against him because the blanket was small. Your nose was on his neck, and you whispered, Kamsi, are you awake?

Yeah, he said. I want to practice the Sam Ojukwu piece for my exam, but I'm feeling so lazy.

He adjusted slightly, his back warm on your stomach. You held his hand and pressed it, then pressed your nose so closely to his neck, you could smell him, clean as air, through the talcum powder. When your hand eased under his sweater and rubbed his stomach, he whispered, I thought you would never decide.

Decide what? you asked, moving your hand upward and upward, until you found his nipples, two tiny hard grains. He stifled a giggle (you would learn later that he did that often when he was turned on, stifle a giggle, so that it sounded like a snort). He tilted his head backward to look at you, and you pressed your lips, tentatively, on his. He tasted almost of nothing. You sat up, helped him out of his sweater and inner shirt, put your hand into his trousers. Your eyes closed. Your lips and tongues dancing. He had given himself up so easily, so gently, and then all of a sudden he was shaking. I c-can't do this, Lotanna, he said.

You had his hands pinned down, his legs wrapped around your waist. You leaned forward. Just relax, you said. Relax.

No, he said. His legs around your waist slackened.

Come on.

No, he said, shaking his head.

For a while you towered over him. Then you rolled over and lay beside him, staring at the dark ceiling, your hand on your forehead.

Was this what happened with Kent? you asked.

No, he said quickly, like he had been expecting the question. I d-don't like K-kent. I didn't even want to k-kiss him.

I see.

The next day, after your History of Nigeria exam, you said to your classmate, Pascal, I have this babe who was hurt, and it's affecting her sex life badly.

Pascal nodded. She no wan' give you, eh?

Something like that, you said. Pascal was the perpetual lover boy in class,

he had to know some stuff.

Give it some time, he said. Keep trying, small-small. No force am oh.

God forbid! you said. I no fit try that one na.

Later, you searched on Google. You had said the word in your head, *gay*, and had typed it. And now that you needed someone to talk to so badly, there was nobody who would certainly understand.

III. The first time you quarreled, it was because he did not tidy the room after he returned from school. You returned home that evening to the sound of Beethoven's "Für Elise." (You were beginning to know the names of his favorite pieces.) The room was dim; the only light came from the dying sun. The bed was unmade, your clothes scattered on it just like you both had left them in the heat of last night. The room still had the air of morning rush—two empty cups sat unwashed on the cupboard. His schoolbag lay open on the floor. You picked it up and hung it, together with yours, on the wall beside your clothes rack.

Normally, when he was on the keyboard, you did not talk to him. But today had been bad, and the sound of the keyboard felt like someone was sticking pins into your ears. You returned since afternoon, you said. How could you have left this room like this?

He played two more notes of the music, and then there was utter silence. Lotanna, he said. Good evening.

Why didn't you tidy the room?

I was rehearsing for my recital, as you can see, he said. He sounded rebuked, confused. But there was also a hint of testiness.

You stood in the middle of the room, watching him fiddle with the collar of his polo shirt like a child.

You began to pick up things. He stood to help you, but you said, No, please, and took the rag from him. He stood there, watching you. Then he took his schoolbag and left the room.

All through the evening, you stood on the veranda waiting for him to return. The evening turned from orange to blue and then to gray-blue, but he still did not return. When your lodge mate, Henry, put on his generator, you rushed to charge your phone, waited until a bar came on, and then dashed out to call Kamsi. The voice came through, soft and sweet: *The number you're calling is currently not available...* You boarded an okada to his house. He wasn't

there. You returned home and sat on the veranda, waiting.

You wanted to tell him about the phone call you got at school today. How Dumebi had sounded like she had been crying all day. Mum was going mad, she had said. Mum was hurling things at Dad, the television was on the floor now, broken, and Chisom was crying, and she, Dumebi, was crying, but Mum wouldn't stop—Mum was going mad. You wanted to tell him how when you called Mum and she did not pick up, you felt all these tiny insects crawling in your head. How when, hours later, Mum called you, she did not sound mad at all. It's your father again, she said. And this time it's with my friend's daughter. How her voice sounded nasal and tired and shaky.

You wanted to tell him it's called *transfer of aggression*. That you'd had a bad day. But he did not return that night, nor the next day, nor the day after. And you did not tell him.

The next time you quarreled, you flung words at each other. Quietly, so that the neighbors wouldn't hear. He wanted you to end it with Rachael, and you called him selfish. He said, No, it's you who is a liar, stop fooling the girl. You told him, See who's talking, you knew I had a girl, and you still came to me. He snorted, I didn't come to you, dude, stop lying to yourself. You bit your lip hard and called him a fucking child, and he looked at you with tears in his eyes and yelled, I am not a child! He flung a pillow at you and stormed out of the room.

You lay in bed. The ceiling spun so fast it was about to fall on you.

IV. He liked to say this prayer:

God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.

He said it on mornings when there was no lecture rush. He sat on the chair in front of his keyboard, his hymnbook open before him, his Bible closed. His hands clasped in a praying posture against his chest, and his eyes closed. He muttered the words softly-softly. You woke up those mornings to watch him. Sometimes the sun drew fine lines on his face, and his lips became redder, his skin brighter, his aura more childlike.

V. It was on the day of your last exam that you heard that Mum had fallen in her restaurant and had to be carried home by some of her customers. You rushed home after your exam, threw some clothes into your travel bag. On your way to Peace Park, you called Kamsi. I won't make it to your piano recital this evening, you said. My mum fell sick.

Where are you now? he asked. I'm c-coming.

He met you at the motor park. W-what happened? he asked.

They said it's hepatitis B, you said. I don't even know what the hell that is.

He sat beside you on a bench. You both watched the hawkers and agboros. Most departments were through with their exams, and the park teemed with students. Something serpentine crawled in your stomach. You'll still travel tomorrow, right? you asked.

Yes, he said. My b-brother will meet me at the airport.

Okay, you said, moved closer and held his hand, you were trembling so badly.

You need a sweater, he said. It's going to g-get cold by the time you approach Kano.

I have a sweater in my bag, you said. He had his hand in yours, hidden from view by the way you both sat so closely.

You had never said it to anyone before, but now you told him, how sometimes you were afraid that Mum would die suddenly, just like her mother, and then you wouldn't be able to buy her all the cars and clothes she didn't have now. It's like mourning someone many years before their death, you said.

He squeezed your hand. Everything will be fine, all right?

All right, you said.

Moments after he'd left, you stared out the window as your bus ambled out of Peace Park, ignored the girl seated beside you who wouldn't stop giving you the eye, called Dumebi to ask how Mum was faring. Nsukka glided past, rusty roofs and red dust, the evening turning gray-blue so quickly—Kamsi's recital should be on now. You blocked your ears with earphones. The song was Asa's "So Beautiful."

VI. Only three months, and Kano looked changed and new. You opened the window and devoured the sight. The sun shone remorselessly bright. Houses, tall and short, ugly and beautiful, stood side by side. And people. So many people. People who didn't care whether you said good morning to them. People who

were I-don't-care like that. *Ba kwomi*. That was the word: *I-don't-care*. Nsukka had reminded you of another word, *solitude*, with the town's dusty red roads and old houses scattered between farms and bushes. But Kano, big ancient Kano, Kano of merciless sunniness, Kano of wide-road and coffee-smelling Bompai, Kano of slang-and-decay Sabon Gari. Kano reminded you of the word *be*.

In Sabon Gari, the air smelled of decaying refuse. The roads had holes like bushmeat traps, the houses were like discolored matchboxes strewn around by adventurous children. And so many people speaking Igbo and Yoruba and pidgin. And no okadas.

Yes, army pursue okada, Chisom said, searching your bag for the toy car you had bought him.

Why? you asked.

Boko Haram, he said. Boko Haram use okada to bomb.

You reclined against the sagging sofa and noticed without trying how the living room seemed so small, so square, so artless, with the fading blue walls covered with pictures bearing everybody's stories, from Mum and Dad's wedding to Chisom's first birthday; and how the neighboring house blocked much of the light.

At the hospital, Mum could barely talk. She lay in bed, too bony to be Mum, Mum who had always been described as full. You sat on the bed and touched her hand gently. The room smelled of cleanliness; it was remarkable, how this hospital managed to keep the hospital smell away. Dumebi sat on a mat spread on the floor, her legs stretched out in front of her. A man in a too-ironed ankara stood up and said, Brothers and sisters, the devil came to steal, to kill, and to destroy. He waved a huge black Bible in the air, spoke with an authority like he could kick open locked doors and storm dark rooms and make them super bright. As he spoke, everybody hummed; it was like he was pulling them with an invisible string. Even Mum grunted. When he said, Rise, *rise*, let us pray, *pray*, the room filled with voices high and mighty, and you stood reluctantly, worried that a nurse would storm into the room and yell at everybody to fucking shut up, they were too damn loud.

Later it was just you and Dumebi and Mum. She smiled, her eyes tired. When she said, How is school, in a voice so thin and cracked, something inside you broke.

Dad came in with Chisom. He shook your hand and asked, Nwoke, a na-

eme kwa? You left the bed and sat in a chair. Dad sat on the bed beside Mum, saying something softly to her. She nodded now and again, and once you caught a smile on her face, and the broken thing in your chest began to collect itself.

Leave that thing, now! Dumebi said to Chisom, who was trying to get the bottle of Lucozade Boost on the refrigerator.

I want to bring it for Mummy, he said in his three-year-old voice. The way he stood on tiptoes, struggling to get the bottle, looked comical. Before you could rush to help him, he had already taken the bottle. He turned and faced all of you, smiling.

Oya, go and give it to Mummy, Dumebi said, but Chisom rushed to you, screaming, Lota, open for me! You were all laughing (Mum smiled), he was damn cute and comical, standing there thinking he had fooled everybody. Later, when you described this scene to Kamsi, you told him how it made you feel hopeful, how suddenly the world was capable of tenderness.

VII. Rachael sat curled on a sofa in her living room and cried. You emerged from the bathroom and found her crying.

She tossed your phone to you. You picked it up, noncommittally, flicked it on. Kamsi's text message glared: *I'm listening to Davido right now, and I'm thinking of that night we went to Flat and the Klin Promo car was playing "Ekuro" and you said you'd kiss me behind the old buildings if I dared. Miss you, man.*

You flopped on a sofa and stared at her. Last night when Kamsi had sent the message, you had read it over and over, had searched for hidden meanings. And you had forgotten to delete it like you did the others.

Who is Kamsi? she asked, sniffled. Who is she?

She's my course mate, you said, then added quickly you'd stop seeing her. You sat beside her, held her, let her struggle until she relaxed.

That evening, when Kamsi called and told you that he had finally arrived in Kano, could you come to his house at Bompai, you said no. You were a little sick, you said. You needed to rest.

Who was that? Dumebi asked.

My friend, you said.

Kamsi?

Yeah.

She nodded, gave Chisom a mild slap on the bum—Stay one place, let me

wash your armpit—and said to you, You lied to him.

You shrugged. Well, sometimes it's necessary.

She hoisted Chisom out of the plastic bath and proceeded to wipe his body with a towel. I can't lie to Obika, she said. He'll not talk to me for weeks if I did.

Digressing, you asked, What's up with you and Obika, sef? I've not seen him since I returned.

Oh, he traveled to China, Dumebi said. He should be back next week. She paused, helped Chisom into his pajamas, then, without changing the color of her voice: He wants to bring wine to Dad; I agreed.

You laughed. But she wasn't laughing. She meant it, she really meant it. You are serious, you said.

Do I look like I'm playing? She patted Chisom's head and sent him off to watch TV with his friends—If you dirty your body you'll enter the bedroom and sleep. You watched him run off, his gait shaky, like the breeze would carry him away.

What about school? you asked. No more JAMB?

She chuckled. JAMB, kwa? JAMB that I have passed how many times. Where is the admission? I cannot continue to wait for university, biko.

You couldn't get her. You had waited three years before you got into the university, changed your course choice from law to political science and then finally to history and international relations. She had waited just two years, and there she was, complaining. Like, seriously?

She scoffed. Biko, don't forget that I am a girl. My time is short.

You stared at her. But you're just nineteen, you said.

She shook her head. Me, I have decided, she said, turned her face away from you. Besides, I'm tired of all the quarrels in this house.

VIII. The night before you returned to Nsukka, you said bad words to Dad. It wasn't that you couldn't have kept quiet. It wasn't that you couldn't have swallowed the phlegm. But as he stepped into the living room that night, laughing at something Chisom had said, you couldn't understand.

You had been seated on the bed at the hospital, playing a game on your phone, when Mum said, You see how heartless your father can be, eh?

You had stared at her. O gini?

She shut her eyes. Her cheeks looked sunken, and her cheekbones jutted

out luridly. She said, Just look at me, lying here like this, and he can't even show some respect, small respect.

She was crying. You placed your hand on hers. Mum, what is it?

Where did your father sleep last night?

You had assumed that he slept over at the hospital with Dumebi. I don't know, you said, suddenly uncomfortable. I thought he slept here?

Here, kwa? Your father, your father left me here and said he was going home to you and Chisom. Only for me to hear this morning that he was seen coming out of that useless girl's house.

Who told you? you asked—you did not know what else to say—but Mum had already shut her eyes and was shaking her head slowly.

The anger you felt roamed, hingeless. You weren't sure if you were angry because you knew it was true, that Dad had slept at the girl's house, or because someone had brought the news to your sick mother. So that night, when he stepped into the living room, laughing, you said, You're heartless.

He looked around the living room, behind him, above him. What?

How could you do this to Mum? How?

The way he stared at you, mouth open like he was going to say something, you wanted to stop, to apologize. But your heart burned like you had hot charcoal on it, and your tongue tasted like bitter lemon. The words poured out like hot water. And then he was saying, Nwoke, nwoke.

You had almost forgotten how tall he was, how you looked so much alike, with the same broad shoulders and the same sleepy eyes and well-kept goatee. It stared you in the face like a child's taunting, this resemblance, sticking out its pinkish tongue at you.

You walked on into the looming darkness. Through Abedie and Sanyaolu Streets where the sound of Hausa music filled the night and keke napeps covered everywhere, and you remembered your days in secondary school when one night, on your way to Dave's house, a dirty-looking lady stopped you on Abedie Street and spoke florid Hausa, and when you gaped at her, she tugged impatiently at your arm and asked, You wan' poke? You wan' poke?

I no wan' fuck, you had said to her, dragged your hands away, and ran.

You walked to France Road. France Road with the streetlights beaming orange light. France Road with locked-up shops at night and with rushing cars

at day. France Road with Dave in a room of his own, chatting on 2go all day and hooking up with hunky guys, short guys, fat guys, men guys. France Road that led to Bompai and Airport Road. France Road that led to Kamsi and Rachael.

You turned around and began to return home.

- IX. The first moments at school were awkward. You staring at him, he staring at you, and the room suddenly still and silent. He had texted every day. Called every day. Had wanted to see your mother and your siblings. Had wanted you to meet his twin brother, Kosi, and his parents if possible. But every day after Rachael cried you had bounced his calls, deleted his text messages mostly unread. And now you were back to school, and he was standing at your door, and you were staring at each other.

How is your mother? he asked finally.

She's getting better, you said.

Okay, he said. I returned yesterday. Couldn't get to you. I c-came to get my keyboard.

You watched him throw his music books into his bag. And then some clothes he had left behind before traveling. Watched him lift the keyboard. Watched him walk out of the door. We'll see later? you asked, and he shrugged and walked away.

- X. Every evening you called Rachael and told her you loved her so much, did she know that? She giggled—it was what she wanted to hear. And every evening you sat on the veranda and stared into the street, cars and a few people walking lazily by, and hoped that something would fall from the sky and break the silence in the house. Sometimes you walked down to Flat because it wasn't so quiet there. Not once, not twice, you'd picked up your phone to call Kamsi. But not once, not twice, you'd stopped yourself.

You had never believed that you could love this way, your entire being absorbed in something in the air like that; that you could want someone always near you so badly it consumed you, so that when you were apart, it felt like torture.

People happen to people, Rachael once said.

Kamsi happened to you.

Then, one evening after football training, you found some students and a lecturer from your town's union at your door. You hadn't attended their meetings since eternity. You opened the door and let them in. The light from your rechargeable lamp cast tall shadows on the wall. The union secretary, a lanky guy in sociology, spoke like a character from *Things Fall Apart*, and you wanted to tell him that your heart was beating too fast, you could have a heart attack; that proverbs were cliché, and that this generation, your generation, spoke in monosyllables: She. Died.

And then he said the words, Your mother died this evening.

You watched the shadows and nodded like an agama lizard. Everybody was saying sorry, and it was like something was killing you slowly.

When everyone left, the lecturer took you in his car and drove you to Jives. You sat at a table for two. He ordered two bottles of Hero, said, That's the new drink for men.

Jives was open air, students and lecturers lounging around tables. The speakers were blaring out some fast song, and a handful of people were dancing.

Lecturer said, When my mother died twelve years ago, I was twenty. My father was already dead four years.

He had a flat nose and small lips and dirty eyes. He drank from the bottle and watched you with his dirty eyes. Then he said, And all I could think about was how much she had suffered. And also how I was going to take care of my younger siblings, all four of them.

He drank again. But somehow, God helped me, he said. Our last born will be doing her convocation next month.

He paused, stared intently. You stared away, at the people dancing.

Where do you worship? he asked.

Christ Church, you said.

Do you have a relationship with God?

Church was routine. It had always been routine. And God was just there: at Holy Communion on Sundays when the choir sang your favorite hymn, "Abide with Me." And "relationship" was what you had with Rachael, with Kamsi, with your teammates.

I don't know, you said.

He laughed, shaking his head. You chuckled. You don't know, he said, his eyes wet with mirth. I think it's God you can talk to now, really. It will help.

And, you haven't touched that bottle since.

You raised the bottle to your mouth, and the image that never left your eyes was of Mum lying there, shaking her head slowly.

On your way home you asked him to drive you to Lemon Villa. A few minutes, and you were standing in front of Kamsi's door, listening to muffled strains of guitar music.

You knocked. Once, then twice. Tentatively. Who's there? he asked.

It's me, Lotanna, you said.

You heard the clicking of bolts, and then he stood in front of you, a near-silhouette in green shorts and a white singlet. Mum died, you said, swinging your arms like you were in Sunday school and he was your Bible recitation instructor.

Oh my God! He covered his mouth with his palm, eyes bulging. Then he stood aside and let you in. He shut the door. When was it?

Today, you said. This evening.

You sat on the bed, and he sat beside you. For a while you were both quiet. His wall clock ticked, the walls more green than lemon in the whiteness of the electric bulb, the rug red and soft under your feet. And the room smelled of Kamsi, that mix of talcum powder and nothing. And then you told him how you had called Dumebi and wished you had not because her grief inflamed your own, how you had ignored your father's call until Lecturer asked you why, and how Rachael had called to say God cares. Does God really care?

I hope he does, Kamsi said. Otherwise what's the use of everything?

You stared at him and he stared at you. Then you touched his face, tilted his head up and kissed him hard and gentle. You heard the grunt at the back of his throat. You were a little tipsy from drinking Hero. But not too tipsy to feel all the things that you felt at that moment: relief and love and that heavy, drumming sensation in your chest that always exploded in tears.

XI. At first, he did not tell you about the boys who had threatened him. They said they would have beaten the gay out of me, he said. But that I was so cute they'll have a little fun raping it out of me. Doesn't that sound gay to you?

He laughed, like that sounded funny. He was seated on the bed, his chin on his knees drawn to his chest. He was trying to sound unfazed.

It had been going on since around the time you traveled for the burial, he said. This is not funny, you said. I think we should report it to school security.

He laughed. And tell them what? Please.

But how did they find out about you, sef? You don't even look gay, for Christ's sake.

How does one look gay, Lota? They even said what's the size of your macho boyfriend's thing. I think they're just freaks.

You grabbed your phone and began dialing a friend's number.

What are you doing? Kamsi asked.

Calling some of my teammates. They'll deal with this.

And what will you tell them? Please forget it.

You cut the call, flopped on the bed, and covered your face with your hands.

XII. You told him you wouldn't be returning to Kano for the holidays; that, since there was a strike going on, Lagos or Enugu would make sense, you had relatives there. He looked at you and said, It's about your dad, right?

At Mum's funeral, Dad had tried to tell you how it felt like sinking and sinking, and you had told him, coldly, that you never knew he was a poet. The day you broke up with Rachael, telling her you needed to concentrate on school, he had called you into his room and told you a long story about how all that time your mother had been his number one, how even though he couldn't help it, seeing some other women, she had been the one he truly loved. He'd said, I'm telling you this because you're becoming a man, and that evening, you went to Rachael's house and told her you had to end it.

Kamsi said, I think you should let go. He's your father, after all.

Whatever, you said, and continued folding your clothes into a travel bag.

Kamsi held your hands, gently pressed them to his cheeks. Then he began to blow on them, in circles, his eyes fixed on yours. The room was suddenly still, the air calm and waiting. You felt like a child stealing milk.

Wait here, he said, his eyes lighting up. He rushed into the bathroom, returned to the room with a new razor blade.

Let's have a blood covenant, he said.

Don't be silly, you said, laughing.

Yes, I'm silly, he said. Let's be silly together.

XIII. In the mornings when you watched Enugu from Aunt Oge's balcony, you saw calm, orderliness, something large and gray hovering over the faraway houses.

August. The air in the mornings was cool, a little wet, not wet-wet like in Nsukka, and not dry and brittle like in Kano. You stood on the balcony in your singlet and boxers and stared.

This morning you were standing there, staring, when a yellow taxi pulled up by the gate. When the passengers alighted, you were speechless—Dad in jeans and a baseball cap, Chisom looking bigger, and Dumebi carrying these two small bags, her stomach the shape and size of a football. At first they looked a little clueless, and then Chisom looked up and saw you and started shouting, Lota! Lota!

You did not tell me! you shot at your cousin, Somadina, as you both rushed downstairs to the door.

Mum said it was a secret, he said.

At the door, Chisom jumped on you, laughing. And Dad said, Since the mountain has refused to come to Muhammad... He smiled.

Welcome, you said, after a slight pause, and took Dumebi's bags.

Somadina drove everyone around Enugu—Dumebi, Chisom, and you. There was something vainly ambitious about Enugu City. A tidy city if you drove or walked through the right places; messy and rowdy if you walked or drove through the wrong places. Enugu with the wide roads and do-not-litter policy, and pretty housing estates, and ShopRite, and young people watching their villages suddenly transforming into something big and glittering. Maybe Enugu wanted to be like Lagos. Or compete with Lagos, even.

Enugu glided past you. You nodded when they asked a question, but nothing you did could pull you out of the dark hole into which you were sinking. You heard Somadina say something to Dumebi about his friend Binyelum. And then there was Chisom tugging at your arm.

Leave him alone! Dumebi snapped. He's not happy to see us. And then, to Somadina, she said, You mean Binyelum is really leaving the seminary?

You whipped out your phone and sent a WhatsApp message to Kamsi: *Hey love.*

You were not sad or anything. You just didn't feel right.

Dad had not left his business in Kano to simply visit his sister in Enugu. He came for something, and later that evening, seated alone with him and Aunt

Oge in the living room, you felt like a trapped animal.

Aunt Oge said, You must forget all that has happened, life must go on.

But how can I forget? you wanted to ask. Like, maybe I should just press a button in my head and say delete?

Lotanna, Dad said. You cannot continue to run like this. You have to return home.

He said, We can start afresh.

He said, I'm sure your mother is in a better place now, and she'll want us to forgive, so that we can all meet her again at that place someday.

All these in Igbo, which you could not speak in a situation like that. Because you had very few Igbo words. So you kept mute, kpim. So you just stared at the flower vase on the table. So you just tapped your bare feet on the floor.

Later, you called Kamsi.

Someone else picked up. Lotanna, right?

Yes, you said. Good evening.

I was going to call you, young man. Now, listen, don't ever call this number again, ever, or else...

You cut the call while he was still talking and stared at your phone.

Dumebi wanted to know what was wrong. Was it Dad? Were you sure it was just Dad?

Yes, you said. I'm sure.

Then you have to sort it out, she said. Sharp-sharp.

I'll do that in my own time, you said. He should respect that.

But every night, you slept with that heavy thing in your chest that rose up and up, until it choked you, until it strangled out a sob from your throat.

XIV. You are in Nsukka. Everything looks worn, fading. You walk to the stadium, still incomplete after all these years, and sit on a step on what should be the spectators' stand. It is getting late, and the bodybuilders are packing and leaving. A flock of herons have descended on the football field, where the harmattan haze covers everything.

You met in this same stadium where you sit now, watching the herons and the late evening joggers. You used to return here often, both of you. He used to tease you about checking out the bodybuilders, which made you laugh.

Which reminds you of Dumebi in Enugu asking how long you had known.

You sure this Kamsi guy didn't convert you? she had asked. Because, from his pictures, I'm sure he can convert even the pope.

You had laughed. So you don't think I'm handsome enough to have been the one.

Vanity, she'd said, rolled her eyes. What about Rachael?

You shook your head, stared at the street below, cars flooding the night with yellow lights.

I don't get this, she kept saying. What will people say? What would God say?

Since when did you start caring about God, Dumebi? you asked, and she chuckled and said, I be God pikin, abeg.

You still expect him to show up at your door at any moment.

After his friends came to your place, you called Dumebi and told her. I kept waiting for him to return to school, you said. I even dared it and called his number, but it was switched off. I didn't know, Dumebi. I didn't know.

You walk out of the stadium. It is getting too dark, and soon bad guys will come here to smoke, and you don't want to be there when they arrive. You put your hands in your sweater's pockets to keep the cold away. The harmattan haze is so low, you can't see the world ahead of you. You walk and walk and walk. Slowly, like you are walking with someone. Listening to their footfalls.

You create dreams in which he comes and talks with you. You talk and talk and laugh and laugh, and it feels like you are stretching a fractured arm, testing it. When you wake up the room is so fucking cold.

You want to ask him, Why?

And, Did you think about me?

And, Why didn't you just endure like everyone else?

You walk into your room. There is no power. You light a candle, and everything else becomes shadows.

You call Dad. He sounds surprised: Lotanna?

A si m ka m malu otu i di, you say.

Oh, thank you, he says. A na-eme kwa?

Ee, a na-eme.

Tonight, you dream that he walks into this room. He is wearing his Arsenal jersey and green shorts. He lies beside you and says, What happened to you, Lotanna? You look so broken.