

FISHERMAN'S STEW

JOWHOR ILE

FISHERMAN'S STEW

JOWHOR ILE

Nimi locked the front door and secured the slide bolt. She turned off the kitchen and hallway lights leading to the room in which now she'd slept for a year. A lumpy shadow of the old Singer foot-pedal sewing machine, heaped with fabric, fell across the narrow bed. Drawing the curtains and sliding open the lower window louver failed to stir a breeze. The wrought-iron window protector still gave off heat.

The lights were going off in her neighbor's house, and the low rumbling from their generators diminished. It was past midnight—no car creaked up the road, no gate slammed shut, no dog, not one voice raised from the stalls outside—everything was as still as it must be on the moon. After Nimi settled into bed she felt a supple movement that lifted the curtain and scattered the fading aroma of supper. That was when she heard the shuffling of feet outside, by the kitchen

door, and the sound of someone breathing, waiting patiently. She knew at once that Benji, her husband, had finally returned. The lock clicked. Benji still had his keys. He didn't turn on the light when he entered. Belt buckle clanking, zipper running, and the rustle of clothes falling to the ground: when you are sixty-seven years of age and have shared nearly fifty of those with the same person, you can tell his intentions by the sounds he makes. The carved cupboard of Sapele mahogany and the wall beside it caught Benji's shadow shifting in the lantern's low-trimmed light. It seemed to her that he stood in the gap of the screen curtain, his eyelids heavy with fatigue, as if he'd paddled through miles of smoky streams to get here. She'd always known he'd return, she'd waited for him to come home, as he always did—straight from the workshop, pausing before joining her to check on little Alice; or, perhaps, after a brief stop at Uduak's drinking table where, with his friends, he would knock back shots of schnapps imbued with medicinal roots, bark of trees known to restore vitality and provoke desire in men young and old. With his clothes hooked on the back of a chair in the hallway, he would walk into the bedroom naked as day, the old scar on his arm gleaming.

She shifted on the bed and made room, and Benji met her—loose, sprawled, arched, with parted lips—and then pressed his body against hers. She caught the whiff of dry wood, sweat, and handsaw grease. His calloused hands slid round her neck, then cupped her face. His lips shook as his eyes hovered over hers. She took his lower lip into her mouth, calmed it. He was caressing her face with one hand, and with the other he undid the wrapper tied around her waist and

flung it into the dark where a clatter followed the tumbling items on the nightstand, then lowered his head over her belly and navel, making his way down the soft trail of hair.

He stayed there until she retrieved herself with a sharp moan, turning sideways, like a bitch shrugging off her young. She turned and, pressing his shoulders until he was on his back, descended on him. With his balls secure in her mouth, she held Benji until she heard him plead, his voice drifting out the window. She relented, and then raised herself until they were facing each other, breathing the same air. He turned sharply as she slid beneath him. With her arm hooked over his neck, she drew her knees up, and held her thighs open like a funnel. In countless heated strokes that ran along the channels of her body, he came in a roar. Afterward, in the deep dark, they lay silent.

He was gone by the morning. When she rose, the pale green walls of the room seemed unfamiliar. She glanced at the old sewing machine, piled with plain cotton and linen, rolls of muslin and gingham, yards of blue-black adire. The handbags on the wardrobe were still untouched in their nylon wrappings. It all came back to her. Alice bringing gifts every time she visited, gifts Nimi hardly touched. Hollow days. She had moved from the bedroom and slept instead on the narrow bed in the sewing room. Last week, when Alice visited with her husband Asari and their two boys, Nimi prodded them to leave some clothing behind so they could travel light on their subsequent visits. Alice and Asari had asked again

if they could find her a new place, somewhere closer to where they lived at Wimpey, but Nimi had said no, she did not want to move.

Now she sat up in bed with her back resting on the wall. Her neighbour Ibifuro was singing in the courtyard, a melodious and militant church chorus. Ibifuro lived in the flat across, with her three children and husband Enefa—a safety technician on an oil platform in Bonny. Nimi parted the curtain and peered at the tall woman. She was bent over a basin, hands vigorously washing clothes, and her swirling voice trembled: *I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider thrown into the sea.*

Nimi let the curtain drop. She got out of bed and slipped her feet into the plastic sandals she reserved for the outside. The door whistled on its hinges when she pulled it, and the day swung open before her. The yard was already swept. Normally she rose early to do this and some other chores before her neighbors got up.

You are sleeping well these days, Ibifuro called out.

You are washing, she replied warmly but in no mood for playful banter. How was your night?

We thank God, Ibifuro sighed.

Nimi waited as Ibifuro dunked the striped shirt in her hands back into the basin's foaming water and began to hum the same church chorus, gravely.

You know that woman Dauta, Ibifuro said, that one who calls herself a caterer. You know I introduced her to my friend whose son was getting married.

Nimi could not recall hearing about this Dauta, but from Ibifuro's tone she could tell the introduction had now produced undesirable outcomes.

So imagine how I felt, Ibifuro continued, when I woke up this morning to see messages from my friend and voice messages from people I don't know, that the caterer I brought spoiled their occasion, that food did not go round.

I hate when I'm at a wedding and that happens, Nimi said.

So I called Dauta to ask what happened, and you won't believe it, the woman told me it's not her fault that they paid her to cook for only one hundred people but expected the food to cover nearly three hundred guests present at the reception.

Is that the bad tongue she used to answer you? Nimi asked in disgust.

Ibifuro clucked, as if still shocked at the woman's rudeness. She was not the type of person to stand by and watch her integrity and good name get sullied.

No need to make trouble, Nimi cautioned.

Ibifuro waved it off with a carefree hand. She said, I am going to the pharmacy later, on my way I will stop by her house so I can hear all she has to say to me, and then I'll know what to do. I don't have time to make trouble.

Nimi imagined the wedding reception, held outdoors on a field with colorful canopies or a large tent, a highlife gospel band in full swing, guests in their best clothes, while the bride and groom sat smiling on their special seats, passing a flute of champagne to each other and unaware of the shortage of food and the quiet departures, the cars turning out of the parking lot, taxis flagged

down in haste, the small groups walking toward the nearest bus stop. Very unpleasant, Nimi thought. Even at funerals, eating and drinking carried on through the day and into night.

Benji returned to me last night, she said.

Ibifuro's head was down facing the basin. She did not turn around or ask any worried questions. Instead she retrieved a submerged shirt, squeezed and dropped it into another basin filled with clean water.

Nimi, undecided, weighed if she should repeat what she'd just said.

Ibifuro had been there the day the news came about Benji. The two women were shelling egusi in the yard when Chima and Chidi, two men who ran their metalwork stores next to Benji's, arrived to say Benji had been hit by a motorbike crossing Ikwerre Road and was in the hospital. They were remarkably short and stout and good-natured, these men. Nimi and Benji often spoke about them, how they possessed good names in the wrought-iron business, how they plied their trade to complement each other's skills, did not quarrel over customers, how their grit and ambition never excluded warmth. Together the three of them sped along in a taxi towards Braithwaite Memorial Hospital. They did not explain to Nimi why they avoided the main entrance to the hospital and led her instead towards a bungalow at the back. The pathway was lined with hedges of ixora, bloodred and radiant. Her nostrils flinched at the strong smell of formaldehyde. The two men

stopped walking as they came in full view of the building, and Chidi placed a hand on her shoulder.

What is happening? Nimi asked.

She got no response.

The flower hedges slipped fast before her eyes, the ground was giving way beneath her, her hand slammed against Chidi's chest and grasped his shirt collar tight. His eyes were bloodshot. Madam, madam, he kept saying to her. Chima tried to restrain and console her, but she broke free from them and ran to see where Benji, wearing the shirt Nimi had made from adire cloth with circular patterns running in blue and dead-leaf green, lay lifeless on the stretcher.

As she watched Ibifuro peg her washing on the line, she could taste again Benji's sour morning breath on her tongue. She could still feel on her waist the firm grip of his hands, from where he'd lifted her while on his knees last night, gently, easily, and she reckoned with the words of her people that when we return we do so in the vigor of youth.

Benji came to see me last night, Nimi repeated.

Ibifuro swung round towards Nimi—the bulk of the woman, breasts swaying under her nightdress. A white plastic peg slid out of her hand, but she kept her eyes fixed on Nimi.

Mama, Ibifuro pleaded.

Nimi looked away. She knew what would follow. Ibifuro would immediately call or text Alice, and she would come over. Pastor Osagie would

casually drop in the next day to *spend time* with Nimi. The church's women's group would pick an afternoon to lavish her, cleaning and sweeping, preparing meals for her that would go to waste, while dishing out admonitions. By the weekend, the youth group would gather, singing lustily in her sitting room and offering prayers for blessings on her behalf. All of these she would receive with gratitude, but they would be beside the point.

I saw him only in my dream, Nimi said with a light voice. It gave me comfort.

She took out a napkin and dusted the Formica sideboards and the obeche cabinet in her front room, folded her wrappers and hung her gowns up in the wardrobe in an arrangement she liked. And then she swept the floor of the whole house. There was to be a meeting in church that evening so she sent word she would not make it, claiming an emergency had occurred. Nimi remembered that look she saw on Ibifuro's face when she told her of Benji's return. She thought of her own sleepy-eyed astonishment when she awoke that morning to a bed in disarray. A current ran down her spine. If it was a crack in her mind that had let Benji back into the world, she thought, then her intention was to keep the crack open, widen it. Her plan was to visit the evening market, and then make stew. She knew that if you love a person and they love you back, you can cook for them something that ensures they find their way to you, should they be lost.

It was a little before five when she stepped out of the house and into the street. The sky over Eliozu was alive with an orange light. The slanted, rusty roofs of the houses downhill glinted like gold. With her shopping bag in hand, she closed the gate quietly behind. Alagbo's sky-blue Nissan Sunny was shimmering at his gate and blocking the entrance, finally back from the mechanic after three solid months of delayed salary. Alagbo had complained about the dire state of things, the cost of a new engine block, and the craftiness of motor mechanics. Nimi made a mental note to call in later to salute him, to greet his family, and to thank God with them that things turned out fine. Chituru sat on a high stool in front of his DVD store, watching two other men play draughts, the pieces sliding and spilling noisily on the wooden board.

Out on the main road Nimi turned toward the market. It was that time just before nightfall when people were on their way home from work, when the air darkened and the figures milling in the markets and the streets may not be people at all. Her eye caught an ice-cream man pedaling home on his bicycle; he was done for the day, no bell ringing, no driving the children mad with want. She felt awake to her own footfalls, to the bright green and yellow headscarf on the woman walking ahead, to the rising murmur of the market as she approached, and to the cars tooting their horns, beetling along in the rush-hour traffic.

She weaved her way through the crowd, sidestepped puddles, steered clear of the man pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with sacks of onions and grunting,

Chance, chance. The stalls at the very end of the market were the ones she wanted.

Crabs in woven baskets were clacking away and waving their claws, the giant snails gliding in open buckets, and rows and rows of tables were laid out with tilapia, brown snapper, frozen mackerel wrenched out of misty cartons, silversides and bonga, mudskippers fresh from the river, bulgy-eyed, thrashing on the table and gasping for breath. Nimi stopped to admire a heaped bowl of peppers—blemish-free, slender, and green.

Take two bowls for the price of one, said the young woman in the shed. A nod went from seller to buyer.

Thank you my daughter, Nimi said. Even the night market was in alliance with her.

When Nimi and Benji were young, before Alice was born, they lived in a little house far outside of town on East-West Road. Benji's workshop was right at the front veranda. People were reluctant to commit to a young, newly arrived carpenter, and there was no denying it, to get those jobs, Benji often exaggerated his experience, inflated the number of years of practice under his belt: *I can do it, Ma. I have built that type of armchair before, sir.* And he delivered the jobs, not one complaint followed. Still, it was her petty trading that had kept them from starving or returning to the village until he started getting the sort of customers who drove in cars and dropped by the workshop with their children dressed in school uniforms. Then she sold the first set of throw pillows and tablecloths that

she ever made. She made headrests and armrests, tablecloths with placemats to match. Nimi sat and sewed, recalling needlework techniques from primary school, adding a flourish to the patterns here and there, with the sound of Benji's hammering and sawing going in the background, until evening when they packed up and turned in to nest. They stayed up late in those days, talking about she couldn't remember what, long after they had relished the crumbly purity of boiled yam dipped in fire-warmed palm oil and sprinkled with salt. When they stayed up late enough to crave a snack before sleep, Benji would, in no time at all, put together fresh corn, roasted golden, which they ate with ube, buttery and delicate. On one of those nights, while they lay in bed—this was the moment Nimi held in her mind as she scanned rows of fresh tomatoes in the market—Benji pressed his knee into the hollow of her own, slid his foot's instep into the arch of her sole, and said: me and you.

Nimi rolled over and faced him.

When I come back, he said, in our next life, I will find you.

What surprised her was that he had said the words out loud: she had found him to be a man who promised little but did much more.

I will look for you too, she said. That way it will take us half the time.

Lights began to appear in the neighbors' houses as Nimi approached the gate. It had begun to drizzle, quickly hardening into storm. Once she stepped inside her

house, she set her shopping bags down, and then she found a towel to wipe her face and arms.

Ignoring the words of the landlord, she made a fire with real firewood, opening the windows to let out the smoke. It would have hastened things to have two pots going, but she was in no rush. She took down a tray and laid out the smoked catfish, the fresh prawns, the periwinkles, the water snails, and the clams. She chopped a fat onion and dropped it into the hot oil. It spat like loud applause. She pulled a log from the fire to reduce the heat. She turned the contents of the tray into a large pot and set it aside. With the onions still sizzling, she poured in a bowl of fresh peppers and tomatoes already blended together for a fee at the market. She let it cook for a while. The aroma filled the room and tickled her nostrils. Last night while they caught their breaths, Benji had put his nose against her hair and inhaled. He had always been stirred by the scent of utazi. From the shelf, she lowered a plastic container where she stored condiments—dried mint, ukashi, uda, utazi, uziza—and crushed some dry utazi leaves into the stew. The fire crackled, and the pot boiled. She unknotted her headscarf and flung it aside. Tonight, after they had eaten the stew with slices of boiled yam, there would be time left to talk.

Early the next morning Ibifuro knocked on her door. Nimi cracked it open just enough to show she was available for a brief exchange and nothing more. Through the gap, Ibifuro stretched her hand and offered her a pack of vitamin

tablets, a gift from her visit to the pharmacy. She reached out for the pills, the door slipped open wider, and Ibifuro's eyes strayed from Nimi's face to the room behind her.

Ibifuro stood back and said: I heard voices last night.

I was watching a film, Nimi replied. Her voice resolved, like a teenager who understood the question from a parent but was playing by her own rules.

Ah, okay, Ibifuro said. Only two people talked in the film?

Yes, Nimi replied.

And just then, one of Ibifuro's children called for her mother.

Let me hurry, she said. I will see you when I return.

Go well, Nimi said and closed the door.

Nimi emerged later to sweep the yard. She found a cutlass and did some weeding out back. She washed the drums Ibifuro's family used to collect rainwater. Then she went inside, unearthed her sewing kit from underneath a pile of fabric in the wardrobe, and began to stitch a fresh pattern. Late in the afternoon, in the vanishing light, she called Alice. One of the boys picked up and shrieked hello, and before Nimi could say hello back, he passed the phone to his mother, who sounded cheerful and distracted in the din. Nimi spoke to each of them unhurriedly. All her day they could have; the night was hers alone to keep.