

For When You Wake

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First you must imagine everything in sepia.

The big fight. The broken bottle. The fire, all of it. I can't even feel guilty, that's the evil in this, even if what I meant that night was taken off the edge of the alcohol. What were you saying? Did it matter? Do the things we say on nights we are so drunk matter? Do they matter so much we have to fight and scream? What is this desperate urge we have to be right, to defend ourselves? So we scream louder than each other so that we can be right. We scream and scream and scream.

You are not an idiot; and if I once called you one, I can repent. I don't know why I said that. Maybe I was projecting myself on you. I've been seeing a therapist, you would absolutely love her; she is just divine. She says I project a lot. It's strange how nouns turn into verbs in her mouth. *Project*. She advises me to take some responsibility so here goes, I am the greatest idiot in the world. Now I know you would say I am rambling, you would ask me to talk plain talk but why did we have to talk all the time? Remember that weekend in the ranch, Obudu Cattle Ranch, everything was green on the ground and everything was blue above; the air so clean we wouldn't violate it with talk. We would just lie down on the patio of our apartment, just lie down in the evening and touch hands like they do in the movies, just lie down. I miss just lying down with you.

I was the happiest those weeks in Obudu and I know you would say it's because I grew up in Newyork with streets suffocated by huge skyscrapers that nearly blot out the sky but it wasn't that, I was the happiest because I was there with you. The evening chill would meet us spread beside our pool and we would walk into the flat, me feeling so full of you, so full of the sky, this sweet heaviness

in my belly that would only melt with our lovemaking. Deny all you want but after Obudu and our baby you never touched me the same way again. My body had become more than woman, a home where our baby once lived and so you entered softly with that reverence I will always detest, detest.

I didn't mean for the baby to die, I mean I had fantasized it happening sometimes, after all those lukewarm suffocating months in Abuja I was open to real feeling, something that would take my breath, even grief. And your family made it too easy; your mother took to the baby as if she had cared for blonde haired babies all her life. I can take some guilt for the baby's death, maybe I had held on to the thought too long. When they disposed of her I really was relieved, I said to myself 'that's that' but you never came back to me. Alette, you know Alette at the embassy? Yeah she introduced me to Folarin. Yes you were meant to find out about Folarin, it wasn't a mistake. Somewhere in the backwaters of my heart I planned it all even though I wasn't conscious of what I was doing. A White boy trainer is the polar opposite of you and I knew I could use the excuse of trying to get back in shape to get over the baby's death; hell, it seemed fate was moving my hand. You must understand that at first I wanted to get back in shape, for you, I thought maybe you would stop respecting my body; Folarin could give me a perky butt and my swollen legs could once again go on forever. Folarin is not an asshole I assure you, he really is Folarin no kidding, it's really his name, his father was a Nigerian lecturer in Ohio back in the eighties, adopted him when he found his wife couldn't keep a baby in her womb. When he retired at the end of the military regime they came back to Nigeria together. He is a celebrity trainer based in Lagos but he plans to contest as councillor or something for his father's constituency no kidding. He has big dreams.

So this has nothing to do with homesickness my love, you must believe me, I didn't go looking for a white man because I miss America. I settled here in Abuja with you for so many years, I assured my therapist that it could have been anyone, it just happened to be a white man. And besides he is not really white, you should see him pound yam, he speaks Yoruba fluently and ever since his parents moved here he hasn't gone back, education, everything he did it here in Nigeria. A part of me did fall for him; that was the only way my half-plan could work. Of course it won't reveal itself till the very end when the Viagra failed. Now I didn't intend for you to find out about it. And to be honest I didn't come up with the idea all by myself, it was inspired by Aunt Rose, remember my Aunt Rose? The tall ageless blonde with apartments in Manhattan. Surely I must have told you the story, how she used Viagra on her husband when the doctors confirmed he was dying so that she could get an heir from him? Well that's how she won those apartments, that's how Luke who you are so fond of came along. If you look at his face hard enough you would see the smirk of the dying Greek man etched in forever. I just wanted to feel something, not to feel like I was this big delicate mansion that housed you when you came into me; I wanted to feel the thunder and torque of those silent nights in Obudu.

I know what you are thinking, yes you may be in coma but I know you are hearing me and thinking 'Christina is drinking again' Well it is not your wine. You stopped buying and I'm making my money now so I can drink what I want. Of course this is the last place I want to be, but the doctor insists that talking to you would do you good and I don't want to make your mother suffer too much, she deserves a daughter-in law from heaven, I know how other Nigerian mothers treat foreign wives, Mama has been too good to me. I can't wait for you to wake up so I can go, you love me I know but we both know I have always been too damaged. I thought I came to Nigeria to pursue a story but now I know I came to feel something excruciating, something real, and something painful but I found you.

Now I've ruined that Folarin boy's life, he truly believes he won't be able to fall in love with any other woman, and I keep telling him he is so young. The walls are burnt and the carpet is doomed but I got everything fixed, that naked watercolour woman and deer-like figure got burnt too. Thank goodness! All those men from your office always thought we were hedonists or Satan worshippers; thought we were crazy. I told you but you wanted it that way. You asked me as we stood admiring

the bizarre thing after sending everyone home after dinner last Christmas 'Is it their crazy?' and I laughed, we both laughed and I felt something.

I know I love you when you hold me like that all of a sudden and tell me stupid things or some nights when I wake up to pee and see the rise and fall of your small pot belly you detest so much, ah you would never know how many times I kissed that belly while you slept. I love you and that is how I know I would summon the courage to kill myself one of these days if I remain here. You'll be grumpy for a while but you'll get over it, I foresee a classy middle aged Ibibio woman in your future haha! Me I'm done with love. I'm what now, forty-eight? I'll go to Barcelona. Remember that holiday we went and I took photography lessons while you studied the Catalan culture? Well there is this thing our instructor told us that I never told you because it sounded stupid then and it still sounds stupid now but she said when you put your eye to the view finder you must still all the colours and sounds in the world and imagine it all in sepia.

Now when you wake up, re-imagine that night this way if you can. Home as a house with an entrance you would always hate because your wife insists on giant flower pots holding stupid looking green plants. A watery woman watercolour and her deer with no true purpose in this home hanging high above the flat screen. She seems to be running away from the deer or running to it? Moans floating from your room. Now be careful to make sure this sound doesn't stiffen your spine, flood your mouth with bitter water, it could be a hum in the night. Do not fight the spasm that stops your body at your bedroom door. Do not see the man on top of your wife as the White man you feared she always secretly wanted, do not concentrate on his fit young body, instead think of him as some sort of animated prop that would help your loving wife accomplish something. Look beyond the lust and hunger on her face and I promise you, you would find a woman who loves you. This image is the best I can do, it has to be enough. That's that.

TJ Benson is a Nigerian writer and visual artist whose work explores the body in the context of memory, African Spirituality, Africanfuturism, mythology, migration, utopia and the unconscious self. His work has been exhibited and published in several journals like Harvard's *Transition Magazine*, *Saraba*, *Jalada*, *SSDA Migrations*, *Catapult*, *Bakwa Magazine*, *Isele Magazine*, *Iskanchi Magazine* and shortlisted for awards; coming first runner-up for the 2016 SSDA Prize and making the top five finalists for the Saraba Manuscript Prize for his Africanfuturist collection of short stories 'We Won't Fade into Darkness'.