

Maybe Now, Maybe Never

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December 21, 2022



Three years after my divorce, on the very eve of my divorce anniversary, my sister Oge texted. At first, it was a call. I was in the kitchen staring at the fine china my last mother-in-law gave me on my wedding day. It was my ex-husband's favorite—a set of sixteen plates and bowls and saucers that were free of dents, just white, the soulless white of our brief union. My phone buzzed, followed by a text from my sister. "Uche, Ifeoma is pregnant," she said. "We can't keep it. Would you take care of it for me? I will call later."

I reread the message, sat on the kitchen stool and reread the message, and struggled to understand why Oge could not see cruelty in her message. That she, my only sister, could ask me to "take care" of what I desperately longed for; she, who knew why my two marriages failed; who saw, firsthand, all I endured in the past years because of my inability to give my two husbands children. I felt betrayed, the text seeming more like mockery, as though she was cackling all the way from America, reminding me how fertile she was, how fertile her daughter was; both mother and daughter leisurely plucking fruits from the tree that had remained out of reach no matter the ladders I had climbed to reach it, no matter how far I had stretched. For a moment, I considered blocking her number, deleting her from my social media, from my life. Then I put the phone away, showered, and went to my shop to finish the dress I began making last night; doing all I could to forget the text message, the content of it, the despair it spurned. By mid-morning, the shock, the horror of it all, had dulled to a throbbing ache in my temples. When my phone rang later and I saw it was her calling, I clicked the silence button, chucked the phone into my bag, shoving her and the ghosts she had ferried in away from sight.

It had been a few weeks since I spoke with her daughter Ifeoma, the little girl I had always adored. But look, despite my anger with Oge, I was worried for Ifeoma. Ifeoma, who lived alone at Uli State University, her mother far away in America, chasing dreams; her father prowling the streets of Aba, chasing small girls; her only sibling, Emeka, holed up in a boarding school in Umuahia as if forgotten. My beautiful niece, how feisty she was, how fearlessly she used to speak her mind; this child who, when she was only five years old, ordered me to reprimand the neighbor next door, an older man of about fifty, who, in that playful, unsettling tone of entitled Igbo men, had dared to call her “my wife.” “I don’t like that he calls me that,” she had said to me, and I was impressed, not because of what she said, but how she said it, her brow and face knitted in rage, her words firm, not in any way puny like okra tree in harmattan winds. Now, it was that face, full of grit and dimples, that haunted me, prickling the hair on the back of my neck, daring me to turn my back on her.

She troubled me all day, those eyes, the way she would pinch her mouth in frustration, how she would curl into my hands in sleep. Feeling the need to lie down and rest my head, it was impossible to avoid that face, those thoughts, the insensitive way my sister ruined my already-difficult morning with this news. I resisted the urge to sit down and cry and cry. Closing my shop earlier than I used to, I gathered the fabrics I had cut, the styles I had sketched, hoping but knowing I could not corral the helpless feeling in the pit of my stomach with work. When my phone rang again, it was Oge. And my helplessness burst at the seams.

Once, when we were in secondary school and had both arrived late for the morning assembly and were supposed to be punished, Oge knelt, held the hands of the teacher, and cried. Oge cried away her punishment. I stood there, perplexed. Perplexed, because while walking to school together, we had laughed at our neighbor Nkiru, whose scruffy sandals were too big for her charcoal-stained feet. Oge’s laughter was crackly and easy and long, and so I wondered—where did the sudden sobs come from? That was Oge: quick with emotions, her tears the weapon she wielded to get whatever she wanted. And of course, the teacher flogged only me, twelve strokes in total, the whip—a double-tongued horsetail utal!—swirling in the air and landing with a force that lifted my skirt. I flailed and begged, but my hoarse cries appeared to anger him further because he brought the whip down even harder. Oge stood and watched until he was done. Then she followed me to the assembly ground, saying nothing.

I sat down and took her call. “Oge, kedu?” I said. “I’m just seeing your message.”

And she began to cry. “Uche nwanne m, the world has gathered to laugh at me. My husband’s people who are not happy with me because of this America I came to, are going to laugh at me.”

I waited, swallowed spittle, conquered the temptation to put the phone down. I wanted to ask if she had forgotten what today was, what tomorrow meant to me. Last month was my birthday and she didn’t call, didn’t send a message. Did she not remember that? But then, her sobs, the way they poured, the stark hopelessness in her voice; they clawed at my walls, hounded me with guilt, and, too soon, I found myself apologizing to her, consoling her, promising to help with Ifeoma’s matter, yet angered by the cries. And jealous too; jealous because I lacked this feeble quality that came naturally to her. She looked pretty when she cried, while my face twisted up in unflattering folds whenever I sobbed.

“Thank you, Uche nwanne m,” she said at the end of the call. “I love you.”

I love you. The words were rubbed flat from overuse, bled dry of dense emotions. She should try something better, I thought, like calling often and not only when she needed help. The last time we spoke, two months ago, she wanted me to make her a set of ankara dresses and send them through a friend who was visiting Nigeria for the holiday. When she received the package, she was fast with the

call, quick with her thank-yous, hurrying like she would rather be elsewhere. Now, she wanted something else, and she knew she had me. She had always known she had me. That all she needed was to use her voice, to shed those tears, to mention the name of the one who I could never desert, and I would come running. This sister of mine, how easily she peeled me down to that upbringing Mama pounded into me all my childhood. "Echefu kwana nwanne gi," Mama once told me. "Don't ever forget your sister. Don't ever turn your back on your people." In Mama's eyes, Oge was a dove, and I was the eagle under whose wings she must find succor. Once, out of frustration, I asked Mama who she brought to care for me; if I, too, was not worth protecting. "An eagle does not look up when it flies because there is no bird of prey in our village big enough to hound it. That's what you are," she said, her tone biting. "You will always stand, but your sister? She'll wash away easily, like apiti in a flood."

As children, Mama's words made little sense and I had refused to acknowledge the jealousy I felt for my sister, how small it made me feel. Mama laughed more with her. Papa called her his eye. Our neighbors said she was the prettiest. And rich men lined up at our door, offering her marriage, a lavish wedding, and later she had a quick, quick pregnancy and labor that lasted only two hours. Her labor was easy. She gave birth to a daughter who bounced and talked as though the world was made to submit to her. And next, in less than two years, came her son, Emeka, the quieter one. "I'm done having children," she said after Emeka was born, with the finality of the privileged, at a time I was struggling to get pregnant, miscarriages pooling in my underwear until I couldn't differentiate them from my endometriotic periods. Years later, after my first marriage failed and the second one was quivering on broken legs, America came knocking, welcoming her into their hallowed halls with full tuition and a generous stipend. Her husband did not object. My second marriage crumbled, and America denied me my visa application when I tried to get my foot in their door. I had spent years staring at my sister's glitter, how all the light in the room gathered and beamed on her, while I skulked around in the shadows. She was lucky. Or maybe she was just born in easier times, when our parents could afford all the luxury she demanded. And this luck trailed her into adulthood, a woman for whom life was sifted clean of sharp stones.

And so, when she ended the call saying, "I love you," I was filled with rage. Rage at the world that raked my feet over thorny bushes. Rage at all the struggles I had known—struggle to find joy, which always eluded me; struggle to fit into my body, whose desperate longings I must now, with my own hands, and without question, scrape from the body of my beloved niece.



Illustration by Yemisi Aríbisálà

I stamped hard on my Singer sewing machine, the needle piercing into the ankara fabric at the speed of light, the electric whirring rippling in the air. The fluorescent lamp blinked and brightened, the power surge speeding up the sewing, and the fabric snagged at the end of the backstitch. As I reached for it, tugging the edge of the cloth, my feet still pressed hard on the electric pad, the needle snapped and flew into my face. It missed my left eye by an inch, scratching the skin beneath. “You will not kill me, Oge,” I muttered to myself, pulling away from the machine, overwhelmed with the need to yell at someone, to cry and cry.

Evening came too quickly, and I stared out at the river of traders pouring out from Ariaria Market; their faces, in that orange glow of the evening sun, were oily with fatigue. My blouse was dripping with sweat and my mascara, I was sure, was smudged by my tears because I felt the weight of their oily patches sitting under my eyes. I remained in the store, listening to the world outside: the drivers jostling in the traffic, the bus conductors calling out their directions, church speakers blaring out terse sermons and songs, melding with the gaggle of generators, which coalesced into a symphony that was peculiar to this city. The air was heavy with fumes. And the noise was welcoming for once, a fitting distraction from the despair beading my mind. I found in that chaos a comforting music, frenetic like the talking drum, whose intent was to soothe the lonely, to pull them from their misery and thrust them into the boiling belly of this restless city, so they would never feel isolated.

The streets had settled, occasional highlife music spitting from the speakers of the open bars nearby when I dialed Ifeoma’s number. She took a while before picking up the call, during which a young girl walked past my store, tall and lanky, with skin that was draped in the gold of the dying evening sun. She looked at me and smiled, her eyes alight with laughter. She looked like Ifeoma on any day—girls who grew too quickly, their waist flaring too early, drawing leers from badly-behaved men who roamed the street, seeking children to swallow. My heart painfully pushed against my chest,

panic turning the dial on my headache, before Ifeoma picked up the phone and spoke in a drowsy, tear-rimmed voice. "Aunty," she said. "Mommy told you?"

"Darling," I said, "Why didn't you call me?"

"I didn't want you to be disappointed in me."

"Disappointed? You're not a disappointment, Ifeoma. Do you hear me? You can never be a disappointment."

She sobbed her thanks, said her days had been a nightmare; she had stopped attending lectures and was always checking her underwear for blood spots, much afraid because she had come down with a fever and was suffering a strange stomachache.

Her energy, her laughter, were gone, as though something had fallen and sucked her dry, thrusting her into the shadows of this community of ours that was merciless to young girls. An image came to mind: my maternal aunt, Uju, a feisty woman who used to lead our village dance troupe, her yellow so brilliant it cut the eyes of men, filled their wives with bile, made her the talk of the village. But then she got pregnant in her final year in secondary school, and our grandfather thrust her into a marriage with an aged widower—our community's way of punishing girls who bring children into their father's house. Her life crumbled like an old cloth, then frayed by years of the bitter marriage, before she succumbed to death, a tired, scowl-faced corpse that looked twenty years older than her thirty years.

"Darling," I said to Ifeoma, panic threading my fingers, "how late are you?"

She began to speak but only tears came. "I am so sorry, aunty."

"Stop apologizing. How late are you?"

She sucked her breath, and when she spoke again, her words came in rough breaks, in sharp peaks, in quivering falls, and I urged her on, keeping my voice calm: She had yet to see her period, she was one week late, and although she was sure she didn't fully have sex with the boy, her classmate, eighteen years old like her, the delay, the aches, and even the odd spittle that gathered in her mouth yesterday, had begun to bother her. It was why she called her mother.

"What do you mean you didn't sleep fully with him?"

"He entered just once, I swear aunty, just once, and I told him to stop."

"He didn't finish?"

"I didn't let him finish."

"When did this happen?"

"First of August."

"And you're sure he didn't finish."

"Yes, aunty, I'm sure. But I'm very afraid."

She began to cry, and the years fell away like a curtain. I was there again, standing by her cot while my sister slept. When she was born, I was the first person in our family to hold her. I washed her

myself, fed her formula and glucose water because Oge's nipples were still inverted and her breasts were lazy with milk; Mama was ill and Oge's mother-in-law was long dead, and so the onus, the responsibility of *omugwo*, of being the doula our community obliged new mothers up to three months after childbirth, fell on me. Now, this girl I had raised, my child even though she didn't come from my body, was despaired and I felt a sinking guilt for dwelling on my frustrations when my beloved suffered.

"I will come to you in the morning, okay? Now, go and take your bath and eat something."

"I am not hungry, Aunty."

"Ifeoma, go and bathe and eat. And drink Panadol for that headache. I will get on the first bus tomorrow morning and bring you what you need."

Before she ended the call, she told me she loved me.

"I love you too," I said.

On my way home, it occurred to me that I no longer reciprocated that declaration of love when it came from Oge's mouth, that I would mumble something incoherent or nod absently and end the call, refusing to entertain hope for words that left me adrift, words that made me feel like a thing to be used and discarded.

At St. Michaels, the traffic was tight as a bottleneck, Okada riders jostling on the sidewalks with passersby. Freddy's Chemist was still open, the lights powered by the small generator that trembled by the entrance, churning up extra smoke into the foggy atmosphere. Freddy, the store owner, always brightened whenever I visited. "Nwanyi oma," he would call me, slanting when he spoke, as though he perpetually wanted to collide with me. He talked a lot, his voice greasy with suggestions, but I entertained him because he sold me drugs at a discount, and original drugs, too. "That's fake Artesunate," he said the first time I visited, pointing at the pack of the malaria drug I brought for a refill. My head was splitting despite completing the dosage a pharmacy had sold me. He held my empty packet against the one he fetched from his shelf, pointing out their differences: the font size, the font type, the glittery insignia, the texture of the packet; differences that were so minute I could never tell one pack from the other. "All these stores, and even those big pharmacies you people go to, sell both the original and the fake at the same price. I am poor o, but I am not that desperate for money. I will tell you the truth, especially you, Nwanyi oma," he said with a self-assured grin. My malaria disappeared after I bought the brand he offered, and in the following months, quickly did my typhoid, my stomachache, the common cold; seasonal illnesses that were rampant in our city.

Now, he walked toward me, a small, wiry man in tight-fitting jeans and an earnest face, but the smile disappeared when he took a second look at my face. "Nwanyi oma." He sat on the bench, his face mere inches from mine. "Is everything alright?"

I told him I was pregnant and I didn't want it.

He leaned back, a new stiffness entering his voice. Above him, knocked into the wall facing the entrance, was a browned, laminated photo of a blond Jesus. "Why would you want to kill a child?" he asked.

For the first time, I was nervous around him. There was no need to subject myself to this questioning; I could walk into the next store with a pinched face and ask for abortifacients, which were illegal and which they surely sold under the table, at an expensive price. But the thought of explaining myself to another stranger was agonizing, and the possibility of being sold fake drugs

knotted my belly with tension. "I made a mistake," I said. "I don't know anything about the father or where to find him. It was a one-night thing."

His tone softened, and in his eyes was the confirmation of his great kindness. "I am a Christian man," he said, "but I will help you. You only made a mistake. I don't carry that kind of thing anymore, but I will get them from my friend's store down the street. He sells original medicines." He stood up. "Wait here for me."

Sitting there waiting for him, I was warmed with relief, glad that I, too, could receive help; that I, too, could share my burden with someone trustworthy, someone capable. I sat straighter. Then I ached for more of this, a time of bliss, where people lined up just for me, offering perfect solutions; a small slice of this life my sister had led.

The traffic had lessened at the junction and the nagging of the frustrated drivers had faded. Over, across the street, women stood behind charcoal stoves, roasting corn and ube, which they wrapped in old newspapers. And strapped around their waists were aprons swollen with the money they'd made from their sales. Mere meters from the entrance of Freddy's store was the breadseller, a young woman who always giggled when she spoke to him, often leaning into him, her eyes wet of wistful yearnings, while his voice bore a distant, fraternal lilt. She looked so much like my sister Oge—same build, same face. I always wondered if he knew she liked him, and if he entertained her, humored her, so as not to hurt her feelings. If he knew that his detached politeness was why she avoided my eyes, ignored my pleasantries, and hissed each time I walked past her table. She caught my gaze at that moment and quickly looked down, her face a fresco of frustration. She only looked up again when Freddy returned with packets of different drugs wrapped discreetly in black nylon. She said something to him and he mumbled a terse response, hurrying to meet me. Her face folded. He sat on the bench again and I shifted closer, our shoulders touching. He smiled, looked away; shy. And she glared at me, her face crinkled with disdain. I held back a laugh.

"My friend has everything we need," he said. The way he said "we," as though we had become a team, it lifted something inside me. He was unknitting me and he was not aware of this, not aware that he was offering a soft landing which I must now covet no matter how too forward it would paint me in the eyes of the world.

He explained that I must go for a scan, to be sure that it was not an ectopic pregnancy because taking such drugs on an ectopic pregnancy could kill me. He explained how I must take the drugs, the pain relievers and antibiotics he included, just to be safe. He told me the cost of the drugs, said, "I am not getting one naira profit from it, eziokwu. I am doing this for you."

I held his hand, unsure of how to properly thank him. And it was pleasing that he was the sort of man, who, despite his financial difficulties, prioritized honesty over profit. "I would like to buy you drinks one of these days," I said.

"Yes," he said, his voice cracking. "Yes, let's do that."

At that moment his lightbulb brightened, and I saw that underneath that sweaty, leathered face born of hardship and hard work, was a good-looking man who wore his hustle with light-hearted charm. Before I left, I imagined both of us sitting in a restaurant, chatting over platters of nkwoji and bottles of stout or beer, and the image did not make me squirm.

I had just gotten home when Oge called again, tear-voiced and tense. "Nwanne m, how far? Are you still going to Ifeoma's school tomorrow?" The first thing out of her mouth. No pleasantries, no "how was your day?" Not even a small attempt at mundane talk with which she could use to pretend to

care about me.

I should tell her my mind, call out her shortcomings, brand her a user. I should say, “You went to America and forgot your only sibling” and “when are you even going to come back and see these children you left here?” But I didn’t, couldn’t; there was no point in starting a new quarrel because she knew I would always look past her shortcomings, that my loyalty to family had grown like a tag on the skin, a source of pain, but which I wore the way Mama had said I should. “I will board the first bus tomorrow morning,” I said, and she sighed.

“I love you,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, ended the call, and went to the toilet.

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The first time Oge said she loved me, she wanted me to stay with her children so she could travel to Lagos for her bank’s customer service training. The trip would last two weeks. I had just left my first marriage, my body patched with keloids—souvenirs from the fists of a husband who pummeled my body in return for every lost pregnancy. Oge had yet to find a new maid after the last one fled. Or perhaps she did not bother since I was freshly out of marriage, available and needy. “I love you,” she said that evening after I agreed to care for her children. The words, so flimsy, yet heavy with promises, wrapped me in warm comfort. I sat on her bed and wept, while she watched me, a bewildered look in her eyes.

“I love you,” she said again the next time when I agreed to shop for her children’s Christmas clothes because she was busy at work. It was the first Christmas I would spend without a husband. I understood that she needed something in return, but the words and the opportunity of taking her children shopping, what I had wanted all these years for my own children, was compensation enough despite the transactional manner with which she loved.

“I love you” fell out of her mouth again when I agreed to attend the Parents-Teachers Association meeting in her stead.

“Do you know how much I love you?” she said three months before she left Nigeria for her masters in Vermont. She had just gotten laid off from work, one month after she was accepted into the master’s program that came with full tuition and a stipend.

“What about your children?” I asked her.

“I will bring you and them over when I can, just not yet,” she said. “Could you take care of them for me?”

I stared at her. “You are leaving them with me?”

“Nwanne m, you are the only one I can trust with them,” she said, stuffing clothes inside her new traveling bag, holding up the mini dresses and bum shorts she bought for the trip, clothes she could never wear on the streets of Aba. Her eyes shone with unabashed excitement, and it surprised me that she did not pretend to be heartbroken, that she wore delight so boldly and shamelessly for a woman who was about to leave her husband and two children behind in Nigeria.

“Oge, do you see me as your maid?” I said, feeling a sudden urge to call her a bad mother, to remind her that I took care of her children more than she ever did, and so couldn’t understand why she was unreasonably blessed with them while I was left with empty hands.

She tossed the pink floral gown and sank onto the spot beside me. “Nwanne m, I love you so much. Please do this for me. Once I have settled, I will bring you and my children over to America.”



Illustration by Yémisí Aríbisálà

In the following months, after she moved to Vermont and I took care of her children, she scattered Iloveyou all over her texts, the words tacked to demands, a reward system that had begun to feel more like manipulation; a pat on the back for the one who lacked it, who longed for it. And each time I grasped for their comfort, for the warmth that was supposed to usher in such weighty words, all I reached for was nothing but air.

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In the toilet, I stared at my reflection, wondering if there was something in my face that scared children away from me. The first time I lost a pregnancy, I worried myself into an illness. And with the subsequent miscarriages, I roamed from hospital to church, crawling on my knees during night vigils, giving away my savings, donating to orphanages. My first husband called me “man” and said I was a waste of a “fine body.” My second husband spoke more with his fists. I accepted each assault, each belittling comment; another kind of abuse born of self-deprecation because I blamed myself for my inability to carry a pregnancy to term. I prayed for a miracle, just one miracle. And when that didn’t happen, it shook my faith, made me believe that God was just a mean-spirited man up somewhere in the sky, who saw our misery as entertainment.

Now, years later, my desperate yearning sat in the body of my beloved, who wanted nothing to do with it. I looked at the ceiling, searching out the face of God in the white plaster, certain that he was laughing at me, smacking his thighs and laughing. And it occurred to me that I still held small hope, still looked up to him for a miracle, still wanted to have my own child. The fact of this self-truth shook my resolve, and I took my phone, considered turning it off forever and breaking my promise to

my niece. But then it buzzed: a short video from Ifeoma. And everything changed when I clicked the play button.

"Aunty, see, I am eating. I am doing as you have said," she said as she spooned jollof rice into her mouth. She ate like a bird—barely chewing, swallowing in small scoops, a big smile on her face. She fanned her mouth with her palm; the food was hot, and she giggled while trying not to choke on the pepper. I laughed and then sent a quick video of myself. "Don't choke on the food o! It is not running away. Eat slowly." She replied with another video of her licking the plate with her tongue. "See?" she said, showing me the now-empty plate. "I have finished everything!"

I paused the video. Her eyes, slightly swollen from crying, still shone. Her brightness, her light, reached deep inside me, clawed at my fears, lanced the pus that had choked my mind these years. I sat on the toilet bowl and cried. And afterward, I felt lighter. A heavy weight had let up my shoulders and I could finally stand straight.

The bus coughed to a stop at the school junction, and Ifeoma flew into my hands, shivering, holding me so tight. Her excitement dragged tears to my eyes and I kissed her on the head and swung her around. People stopped to look at us.

"Fine mommy and daughter," a corn seller by the roadside said as we walked past.

"Thank you," I said, glad that people could look at us and see me in my niece's face.

We went to her lodge, the first-floor apartment of one bedroom and a kitchen and toilet, the floor covered with cheap tiles, the kitchen so tiny it would not fit four people at a time. But it was decent and well-kept, her books stacked on a small shelf, her bed made, her shoes arranged at the foot of the narrow wardrobe. She was grieving, but her space was organized. An image came to mind: my dirty clothes strewn all over the floor after each marriage ended, my body rank with unwashedness, how Mama cleaned up after me, reminded me to bathe, to eat, to lift myself from the bed.

I retrieved the test strips and a container from my bag and asked her to pee in it. She hurried into the bathroom and returned shortly, her hands trembling. She stood there, shifting her weight from one foot to the other as I dipped the first strip into the pee. "What does it say, aunty?"

The result stared up at me. "It's true."

"I don't want it," she said, her voice cracking. "I don't want it in my body."

"Of course, darling," I said, even though there was still a small, dimming part of me that almost asked her to keep it for me. "I brought you some drugs, but first, we will have to go for a scan to make sure it's okay for you to take it."

She sat down, slung her arms around my waist, rested her head on my chest. I dug out the old wedding ring that I had tucked in the inner pocket of my purse for years. "Wear this," I said.

She took it, frowned at it. "Why, aunty?" she asked, fitting it into her slim finger. Round and thick, its shine was washed by age, the gold now the color of rust. I stared at it, this emblem of pride I had once flaunted, which had granted me access to hallowed halls that now scorned me. "Aunty?"

"I don't want anyone to ask you us stupid questions," I said. "The ring will ward them off."

As we left for the clinic, I kept flitting a glance at the ring, remembering how the world readjusted its perception of me after I removed it. In the past, men offered me the best seats on buses, butchers

gave me extra pieces of meat, and older women smiled too widely when they spoke to me. “She is someone’s wife,” they all said, “please talk to her with respect.” But it all changed after I removed the ring; men began jostling me in buses: conductors and drivers called me “ashawo” when I disagreed with them.

A bus crawled to a stop before us and as we got in, the conductor greeted Ifeoma with an overbright voice. The man by the window seat moved farther away, creating more room for her. The older woman by the aisle smiled at the ring and called her “small madam.” Ifeoma leaned toward me, whispered, “She called me madam.” She cupped her mouth, muffled her laughter, and I laughed too. Held her hand and looked out of the window and laughed, happy in our shared mischief.

At the clinic, she asked me to join her, and we watched the screen as the technician moved the transducer over her belly, the sonogram reporting bleak images that looked like an animation done by a toddler, in black and white. And she gripped my hand tight when the man said, “Congratulations, madam, that’s your baby over there.”

She only let out a tense breath once we were out on the street.

“Now we know you are in the clear,” I said, “let’s go home and take care of you.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“You don’t have to thank me, darling,” I said. “I am your mom, too.” And although this declaration was normal among our people, it meant more to me; it felt true. With her, love came easy, and I often found myself wanting to go above and beyond for her, wanting to laugh with her, to play with her; my worries taking the back seat. On our way home, I realized that this was the closest I would get to be a mother: to love this child, to protect her, to give and give. I pushed my chest out and breathed deeply, the dull throbbing at the back of my head fading, soon gone. For the first time in many years, my skin felt right, the air felt right, and my feet were firm on the ground.

Oge called later, and I was suddenly too fatigued to sit through another call with her, this sister whose friendship I had once coveted. When we were kids and were playing power rangers in the backyard, I hopped off the fence, missed the old Suzuki motorcycle I was meant to straddle, and crashed against its body. Its rust-worn stand, pointy as a spike, dug into my shin and Oge broke into a splitting cry that pulled neighbors to my rescue. That was the sister I had missed, the one who rushed to my protection, who never hesitated when I needed comfort. But then puberty came, she grew breasts, her face smooth like an egg, and she detached from me—her awkward sister who was all squares and pimples. I mourned for years, spiteful of the puberty that pulled us apart. We had never fought, never wrestled, never punched each other like the other children in our compound. And over the years, I wished we did, wished there was a rational explanation for the maw that grew between us, for the violent separation that often left me lurking in the background, needy for attention. When my two marriages ended, she saw in my misfortunes, an opportunity for a capable maid. Never a thought, or a question, about how I felt; her disinterest in my feelings stinging like Cameroun pepper in the eyes. She moved to America and the distance provided the perfect reason for her silence. I would send WhatsApp messages asking about her day, and she would leave them unread, unanswered, her profile announcing when she was online, her status updated with frequent photos. It would take days, and one time, weeks, before she returned with a reply. “Nwanne m, I am just seeing your message. The semester has been so busy!” I stopped texting, stopped calling, and she perhaps was relieved because she went mute, until she needed something only I could provide.

I tried not to hate her, to give her a long rope of grace, to cultivate the sisterhood Mama pounded in me. I had been shrunken with concern, often raking through memories, searching for the wrong I

did her in the past, a wrong so unforgivable she carried the malice into adulthood. Once, I broke my fast and texted, “nne, did I do anything to you?” and she replied with emojis and exclamations, her response crowded with excuses about her studies. “I will call later, I miss you,” she wrote back, tossing dollops of attention off her table, which I shamelessly lapped up.

Now, she was back, her calls on repeat, itching to ask after her daughter, the reason she would call in the first place. The ringtone pierced the air, the lit screen brightening and dimming, until the call ended and Ifeoma’s phone buzzed immediately.

“It is mom,” Ifeoma said, watching me closely as she took it, muttering, “Yes, mom,” and “yes, aunty took me for a scan before she gave me something to drink” and “yes, she will be staying with me for a week” and “yes, I’m fine.” She held out the phone afterward: “Mom wants to speak with you.”

I shook my head. “Tell her I will call her back,” I said and left for the toilet.

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