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The Neighbor Woman Who Knew Things

THE NEW OWNERS ARRIVED IN MARCH 1992, on a Saturday morning near the cusp of the rainy season. The harmattan winds had just begun to cease. The fine desert dust still sat on the shrubs and grasses, browned by the drought; when the downpours began in Ibadan that year, too early and too suddenly, they startled rather than roused the city out of its dryness. It rained for three days straight. On the third day, the Saturday that the new owners arrived, the widowed woman who lived across from them stepped onto her porch as the rain dwindled to a stop and took in the aftermath of the storm. The ground was a marsh of loam and dead grass, but the plumeria trees in her yard seemed more verdant.

Beyond the trees, the widowed neighbor woman saw that they were finally moving in. She withdrew into her house and returned a minute later with a pair of bifocals and a leather-bound volume, which she pretended to read as she watched her new neighbors. She had not met them yet, but she thought that she knew, from her observations over the past few months, everything that she needed to know for the time being. Last August, when they'd bought the house, the man and woman had spent hours—almost an entire day—touring the rooms and the compound, and afterward they'd lingered under the flamboyant in the front yard and talked for over an hour. Because it was only reasonable, and because of the way the woman touched the man, frequently, casually yet affectionately, the neighbor woman concluded that they must be husband and wife.

The husband showed up only now and again after that, even when the renovations began in September. It must be because he worked; his wife, who was there often and at all hours with instructions for the contractor, probably did not. By mid-September, when the school year resumed, the wife began, whenever she came by in the afternoons, to bring their two sons along. One was a toddler. The older son, barely a teenager, wore the navy blue blazers and red-and-blue checked trousers that were the school uniform of Saint Werstan's College, an expensive private school in Bodija. They were wealthy, obviously, and their wealth surprised the neighbor woman, given how young the husband and wife were: so young that

it was remarkable to her that they could afford that house, but just young enough that it did not shock her, the brutal changes they had made to it.

In October, the neighbor woman had watched in righteous consternation as the ceramic roofing tiles were stripped in favor of corrugated metal. The chimney was torn down days later. And by January, when they began to paint over the redbrick walls, she could not help wondering what havoc must have been wreaked on the interior. It was tasteless, she thought, this modernization of a stately colonial into another one of the gaudy mansions that were springing up everywhere these days. But she would not say this, obviously, not to anyone, least of all her new neighbors.

Her son, Dayo, would tell her, in that playfully dispassionate tone with which he masked the edge to his words, that she should mind her business; she was not old enough *yet* to assume the role of the neighborhood busybody, who concerned herself with the comings and goings of everyone else because her own life had ground to a state of banal stagnation. It was true that the neighbor woman was not that old. Perhaps, at fifty-two, not even old at all. But she did feel, especially when Dayo and his twin sister, Dami, were away at boarding school in Ikirun, as though her life were stagnant and banal. The vast rooms of her house felt, more than empty, hollow in their absence; sometimes she thought she could sense her husband roaming about in the silence.

Across the way, her new neighbors seemed calm, safe on the patio from the rain, which had resumed in a light drizzle, and the mud through which the movers had to trudge. The neighbor woman saw that the wife made the men stop, just before they entered the house each time, to take off their rain boots. Of course they did not want mud on the floors of their expensive new home. Or, she assumed since she couldn't really see, covered as they all were in tarpaulin, their expensive furniture. She watched her neighbors until evening, when the movers finally finished and the husband handed them a wad of cash from his pocket without counting it. As she rose to go back in, she saw the entire family—husband, wife, and both sons—climb into the Mercedes that had been parked under the flamboyant tree and drive off. The neighbor woman measured out three cups of beans and soaked them in cold water. Then she prepared her dinner and settled in front of the television to eat.

The next day, she visited her neighbors, bearing the basket of moi moi wraps she had made from the beans. She was let in by the older son, who informed her his mother had left for church before leading her through a hallway into the living room, where his father was on the phone. The neighbor woman took a seat.

“We just moved houses, as you know,” the man was saying into the receiver, “so I’m a bit short of funds right now.” He paused. “Yes, yes *sista mi*, I’ll definitely send you a check as soon as my bonus comes in.”

The neighbor woman let her eyes roam around the room. She thought that the interior was surprisingly well done, considering what an eyesore they’d made of the outside. The settees and drapes and cabinets: soft cream damask and mahogany that glowed gently in the light of the chandelier.

The man laughed. “*Sista mi*, it is not a competition. Your daughter will have a spectacular wedding.” Another pause. “OK, OK, more spectacular than Brother Giwa’s daughter’s, I’ll make sure of it.”

The neighbor woman glanced outside at the backyard, through a small slit between the drapes. She noted with gratification that the mango tree in the back was still standing. She’d feared for it, that it might be cut down. Most people these days had taken to paving their backyards for some reason.

“Enough to cover all the expenses, yes. And as soon as my bonus comes through, I promise.” The man said good-bye and hung up the phone. The neighbor woman noted, because her eyes were on him now, that he sighed quietly, almost plaintively, before he turned to face her. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting,” he said.

The neighbor woman smiled. “Please don’t worry about it.” She gestured toward the basket. “I thought I should bring you a little housewarming dish. I’m Mrs. Bakare, but everyone calls me Mama Ibeji. I live right across from you.”

“That’s very thoughtful, thank you.” The man smiled. “My name is Antar.”

“Welcome to the neighborhood, Antar. I hope your family will love it here.”

“I have no doubt that we will. Great neighbors,” he said gesturing toward her, “make a great neighborhood.”

She laughed. “I think it’s interesting, by the way, what you’ve done with the building. It’s very . . . vibrant, now.”

He seemed puzzled for a small moment, as though he did not know that anything had been done to the building. “Oh . . . I wish I could take credit for that, but it’s all Patricia’s doing. If it were up to me we would have left the old thing as it was.”

“Well, it *is* the woman who rules the house, no matter what you men like to tell yourselves.”

“Of course it is. Actually, my wife, Patricia, will be back from church any minute now if you’d like to meet her.”

“I’d love to,” said the neighbor woman. “But I really must go. You haven’t seen the last of me *sha*.”

“I hope not, especially if you always come bearing moi moi that smells so delicious.”

The neighbor woman smiled, grabbing her now-empty basket, and made for the door. But then she stopped. And for the briefest of moments she considered holding back her words. If her son were here, he would most probably remind her that she was not old enough that her presumption could be easily pardoned or dismissed as a consequence of senescence. But Dayo was not here, and she did not hold back her words. “You should have said you’ll try,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

She took a small step forward. “To the person you were speaking to earlier. On the phone. You should have said, ‘Maybe,’ or, ‘I’ll try,’ even if you’ll eventually give her what she wants. It’s a bit foolish to just say yes.”

The air in the room stilled. Antar’s face shifted from bewilderment to amusement before it found anger.

“It’s often good to show a bit of reluctance,” she pressed on. “Unconstrained generosity makes people feel entitled. They get too comfortable asking you for large favors. And then, someday, if or when you have to refuse, they will resent you for it rather than understand. It is the way the world works.”

Antar opened and closed his mouth a few times, unable to form words or otherwise unable to say them out loud.

The neighbor woman winced, feeling a sudden wave of self-reproach. “I’m sorry. I should not have eavesdropped,” she said.

“You were just about to leave,” he said.

“Yes, of course. Please extend my regards to your wife.” She turned around again and almost walked into the woman in the doorway. In the uneasiness of the past few minutes, neither she nor Antar had heard the car drive in, the doors being opened and shut. Patricia, the wife, glided into the room in a cloud of perfume. Her *gele*, recently pulled off her head, hung limply from her left hand, and she clutched a Bible in her right. Her gold earrings and necklace caught the light of the chandelier as she turned her head in mild surprise, looking from the unexpected visitor to her husband.

Antar stepped forward. “Patricia, this is Mama Ibeji. She lives across the street.”

“Ah, Mama Ibeji, *e kaasan ma*.” Patricia curtsied slightly, a breezy, absent-minded motion, and laughed. “I hope we will get to meet the Ibeji, your twins, soon.”

The neighbor woman found herself pondering, of all things, the younger woman’s laughter. She had heard the word musical used too often to describe laughter.

The qualification had never rung true, never convinced her. But now she thought that there was no better word to describe what she'd just heard, this laughter that reminded her of things that tinkled.

"Mama Ibeji stopped by to welcome us and bring us some moi moi."

"Ooh . . . aah . . . that is so nice of you. You simply must stay for lunch!"

"She was actually on her way out," Antar said. He sounded almost alarmed, the neighbor woman thought.

"Leave, *ke*? No, no, no. You *have* to stay for lunch, *yor*. It'll be ready in no time at all. You know what our people say: cooking only takes long when you don't truly want to feed your guests." Patricia laughed again.

The neighbor woman smiled gently, even though she felt somewhat wary.

Patricia dropped her *gele* beside the tray of moi moi on the dining table and said, "Thank you again for this." She moved forward, gesturing with her hands at these words, and the neighbor woman almost recoiled, fearing she might approach for an embrace, this woman who literally oohed and aahed.

Patricia bustled out of the living room and disappeared into the house. Her voice floated back into the room seconds later, just before she did. She was still dressed in her church clothes but missing the jewelry and high heels. "Darling, did Sista Bisi call back yet?"

"Yes."

"What did she want? She wanted money, *abi*?"

"She needs some help with her daughter's wedding, yes."

"I thought as much. Did you give her what she wants?"

Antar darted an uncomfortable glance in the neighbor woman's direction before he replied. "I told her I would, just as soon as I get my bonus."

Patricia sailed on, heedless of her husband's discomfiture. She was fussing now with things around the room, righting a photo frame that seemed fine to begin with, centering a vase on the cabinet. "You shouldn't let these things drag on for longer than they must. I mean, how much can their village wedding cost? It's like pastor was saying in church today: 'Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days, you'll find it again.' Why delay to assist when we can afford it? *Abi*, Mama Ibeji, what do you think?"

The neighbor woman was caught momentarily unawares, an enthralled spectator suddenly realizing she was part of the performance. She started. "Yes," she said. And it occurred to her that these were the first words she'd uttered since Patricia arrived. She wondered if the other woman noticed this; she doubted it.

“See?” Patricia said to her husband.

The neighbor woman clutched her basket tighter, reminding herself that she still had a lunch offer to refuse. Now she considered accepting the invitation, in spite of the husband, but also *because* of him. She wondered how he lived with such a wife: so arrogantly oblivious.

Reduced again to a spectator, the neighbor woman let herself observe Patricia. Already, she disliked the woman and pitied her, unfettered as she was by discernment. Patricia was the type of person who, too vital to be described as vacant, was still empty. But the neighbor woman was drawn to the husband, Antar, who now appeared to have retreated, unwilling to contradict his wife. Yet she decided it would be unseemly to stay. “It is kind of you to invite me to lunch,” she said. “But I really must be on my way.” Then after a brief pause, “I’m expecting some visitors,” she lied.

“Aw . . . OK,” Patricia said, clasping her hands together. “But you must visit us again sometime soon. We *must* see you again!” She laughed.

Antar said nothing.

Three weeks after they moved in, her neighbors got a dog. She hadn’t spoken to them since her visit, but she’d learned more about them from what she observed in passing. She knew, now, that Antar was a “weekend husband.” He left very early on Monday mornings and returned on Friday evenings, the back seat of his car bursting with gifts: toys and clothes and sweet foods that his children carted into the house excitedly. It was on one such Friday evening that Antar returned with the dog, a small, hyperactive dachshund that the children chased around under the flamboyant.

Viewed from across the street, her neighbors’ lives resembled a sort of idyll: the providing husband, the dutiful wife, the contented children. And especially on Sunday mornings, when the husband and wife sat together, eating breakfast on the patio before the children awoke, the neighbor woman was reminded of her own marriage, the early years of it that she and her husband had spent in London, buoyant and besotted, unassailed by the realities of home.

For her, it had begun to end in December 1966, on a blustery winter’s night just before Christmas, when her husband arrived from work and announced, standing on the threshold of their flat in Lambeth, that it was time they return to Nigeria. He was shivering, despite being bundled in multiple layers, a pea coat and sweater and jacket, and she decided he was joking. Or numbed out of his senses by the cold.

“For Christmas?” she asked lightly.

“No,” he replied. “For good. I handed in my notice today.”

She drifted through the days that followed, stupefied by the suddenness of the change they were about to make, the finality of his decision. But even then she did not feel surprise; her husband could be impetuous. She’d thought this endearing when he’d proposed a few years earlier, right after they both graduated from Leeds, despite the disapproval of the family he’d never introduced her to. Since they got married, they’d lived the lives of carefree lovers, strolling through the park on starry nights, their fingers entwined, and jaunting from the theater to nice restaurants on the weekends. He had a job that paid well; they could afford all this and an apartment that was heated in the winter; for any African immigrant in 1960s London, this was beyond ideal. And so it made no sense at all, this sudden decision to uproot their lives and return home for good. But once he had proclaimed it, her husband pursued his decision with a frightening single-mindedness. By the end of the week he’d sold half of their possessions, some of them wedding gifts. What was left, he boxed up to be shipped without her help. A fortnight later they were on their way home.

She wept on the flight from Heathrow to Lagos International, while her husband dozed, snoring gently beside her. Then she wiped her tears and told herself she was simply being selfish. After all, it was easier for her to relinquish life in Nigeria, being the only child of a widowed mother who had herself passed away four years before.

Later, her friends—the first few she’d made upon their return to Nigeria—would tell her that her husband had no doubt been drawn home by his family with *ogun* prepared by a witch doctor—and not a very powerful one, if it had taken them two weeks to return. Then they exchanged stories of university students who had walked out of class and taken the very next flight home, sometimes without packing so much as a pin. “Our people get troubled when they think their children are forgetting home,” her friend had said. “Sometimes, they do these things to bring them back.”

But the neighbor woman would not so easily resort to her friends’ supernatural explications. Her husband’s family had made him return, she knew, but not with *ogun*. It was with something else, a preeminence in his life that, if they possessed, which she suddenly realized they did, she must have lost—or have never possessed at all. Marriages were delusory things. She knew this now, of course, so that it no longer surprised her that a couple who sat smiling and sharing breakfast while they

watched the sun rise, regarded more closely, could resolve into this: an encumbered husband and a wife who was too busy with too many small things to notice.

Four weeks after they moved in, they got a fish tank. It was large—she saw it being carried in—large enough that it took two men to install. The neighbor woman was not sure, at first, what it was. But the afternoon after it was brought in, Patricia showed up, smiling, at her door. The neighbor woman was accustomed, by now, to Patricia's smiles. Patricia smiled and waved at her often (whenever she was outside as the younger woman drove back from dropping off her children at school or from a trip to the supermarket) with more enthusiasm than was necessary.

Once, while the neighbor woman was raking the fallen petals beneath her plumeria trees, she saw Patricia gesture with her hands as she drove past that she would come around as soon as she'd parked her car. The neighbor woman pretended to have misunderstood. She stowed her rake, hastened indoors, and drew her curtains, leaving a narrow slit between them, through which she peeked at her approaching neighbor. Patricia had looked puzzled to find that she'd disappeared. It seemed as though she might stop by anyway, and knock on the door. She did not, and the neighbor woman was relieved.

But now here was Patricia, standing on her porch, beaming like a child. "Good evening, Mama Ibeji," she said. "I hope you've been well. I feel so ashamed of myself—I hope you'll forgive me—we never did get around to having that lunch we planned." She reached for the neighbor woman's hand. "If you're not doing anything right now, there's something I'd like you to see."

Moments later, the neighbor woman was standing in front of a fish tank. The glass case was flooded with light, and the background image of a coral reef against a turquoise sea tinted the water blue. Attached to the side of the tank, a small gadget hummed. Four small fish swam languorously around, lingering sometimes near the bubbles that rose from the gravel substrate.

"They are black moors," Patricia said. "I had them imported from China."

She was excited, and the neighbor woman realized that Patricia expected her to be excited, too. Or impressed. She stared at the fish, unable to understand the attraction. They were too small to eat—she knew, obviously, that Patricia had no intention of eating them—and too unsightly, with their coal-black scales and large, protruding eyes, to love. "They're lovely," she said.

Patricia laughed. "They're the only kind of black goldfish. Antar thinks they are ugly. Because of their 'telescope' eyes."

The neighbor woman said nothing.

“I think there’s something inexplicably beautiful about their eyes. Especially considering they are almost blind. Eyes so large and virtually useless.” Her own eyes sparkled. She moistened a spoonful of flakes in a small bowl and emptied it into the tank. The fish converged, their elaborate tails lashing, upon the food.

“And you had them brought here all the way from China?”

Patricia nodded. “They are subtropical, of course, so I keep the water cool. They’ll survive if I don’t, so it seems unnecessary that I should. But I do.” She looked at the neighbor woman as though she expected this warranted some sort of response.

“It’s an interesting choice, *black* goldfish,” the neighbor woman said.

Patricia laughed again.

She seemed thoroughly amused, and the music of her laughter once again riled the neighbor woman. She wracked her brain for an excuse to leave soon; Patricia’s exuberance wore on her.

“There are no truly golden goldfish. But no one questions orange goldfish, or pink goldfish.”

Somewhere in the house a phone rang. Then a door opened and closed, and seconds later Antar walked in, their three-year-old, Femi, balanced in his arms. He paused in the doorway, surprised to see the neighbor woman.

“Darling,” Patricia said. “I was just showing Mama Ibeji the fish. She thinks they are lovely.”

“Does she?” The child reached for his mother, and Antar placed him gently on the tiled floor. “Someone is on the phone for you,” he said. “Someone from your church.”

“Oh! I’ll be right back, Mama Ibeji.”

The neighbor woman saw her chance. “That’s all right,” she said. “I should be leaving soon anyway. I’ll show myself out.”

Patricia looked disappointed, but she said good-bye. She picked up her son, kissing him on the forehead, and left to take her call. Alone, the neighbor woman and Antar stood in awkward silence. Antar shifted on his feet. In the end, they spoke at the same time:

“I hope you’re enjoying the neighborhood,” the neighbor woman said.

“I could walk you out if you like,” Antar said.

She smiled and said thank you.

They walked together through the hallway, out to the patio, and Antar told her

that he liked the area. It was quiet and safe, which was good for his family since he worked in Lagos and could only be home on the weekends.

They said nothing more as they walked past the flamboyant tree and toward her house. The tree was in full bloom now, ablaze with the bright red flowers that earned it its other name: flame of the forest. Antar cleared his throat. "I suppose I should apologize," he said. "I might have been a bit short the last time you came to visit. Your . . . suggestion, it was a bit for me to take in—not that it was bad. But it's my extended family. It's somewhat more complicated than you'd know."

The sun had turned a deep orange as it melted across the horizon; somewhere near the path a lone cricket chirped, zestful in the gloaming. The neighbor woman sighed as she and Antar crossed the street. She thought of the weeks that followed her return to Nigeria, of her husband and their marriage and the things that changed: suddenly there was his extended family, an inexorable, hovering presence for which the London years hadn't prepared her.

It began with one of her husband's aunts pulling her aside one day, while they still lived in the family house before renting their first apartment, to tell her that it was a bit unseemly—didn't she think so?—the way she called her husband by his first name. "A man needs honor," the woman had said, "even if it's in small measures." The neighbor woman had been amused. She had forgotten, in fact, to mention the incident to her husband. When she eventually did, he did not laugh, as she expected, and tell her it was a ludicrous idea. He'd sighed instead and said that perhaps she should do as they said, in order to please them. "We are in Nigeria now," he told her. "Our people take the husband-is-your-head thing very seriously." So "Samuel" suddenly became "my husband." It seemed a small concession. But it was enough to confirm what she had begun to suspect when they moved to Nigeria, that she was confronting the first fissure on a surface that used to be smooth.

The fissures would spread over the years. And her marriage would be fractured, always, by Samuel's family's interference, inalienable, because he thought himself indebted to them. Now the neighbor woman regarded the man who walked beside her, feeling so uniquely beleaguered. She should apologize again, she knew, for having meddled. But instead she took a deep breath and said, "They did a lot for you when you were growing up. They put you through school, probably. Paid your fees. And so you feel it would be unfair to refuse them anything. You wouldn't be where you are today without them."

Antar turned away from her; in the waning light, she thought she saw his features stiffen.

“Our problems are rarely as singular as we imagine them to be,” she added. “People often know more about us than we think.”

For a while he was silent, then, “You don’t know as much about me as you think,” he said. His tone was cold, as were his eyes when he turned back to face her.

The neighbor woman chuckled. “Of course not. People also rarely know as much about us as they might think. One does not preclude the other. In fact, I think the latter is even truer. We all face things, are all capable of things, that few who know us can imagine.”

Now Antar seemed fidgety, unable to meet her eye. “I should return home,” he said. “Patricia will start to wonder.”

“Of course,” the neighbor woman said. She watched him head back across the street, his steps even—heavy, if they were any slower. When he arrived at his house, his wife met him on the patio. He appeared to pause, listening to her, then he threw back his head and laughed at something she said. The neighbor woman felt certain that their conversation would continue.

He came to her house the next Sunday, minutes after she thought she heard Patricia drive off to church. Her twins, Dayo and Dami, had graduated from secondary school that Friday. They were home now, awaiting their university matriculation examination results, so that when Antar came knocking, it was Dayo who let him in. He had seated himself in the living room when the neighbor woman walked in from her bedroom, and when he spoke, his words came in torrents. He felt burdened, he told her. “But you know how it is to be the one who made it. Everyone else becomes your responsibility.” She insisted that it was no reason to let his family make wanton demands of him.

When Antar left, about three-quarters of an hour later, Dayo stepped into the living room, a plate of jollof rice in his left hand, and cleared his throat. The neighbor woman lifted her glasses off her face, polished the lenses on the side of her wrapper, and pretended not to notice him. Dami emerged behind her brother, flopped onto the sofa, and turned on the television.

“So,” Dayo said. “You and the new neighbor seem to be getting along.”

“What he is trying to say,” Dami said, “is that he was eavesdropping and he thinks your talk with the man was a bit strange.”

Dayo offered no acknowledgement of his sister’s words. The neighbor woman ignored her, too, turning instead to her son. He was her firstborn, but, in Yoruba

tradition, the younger of the pair, sent on an errand by the older twin to observe first what the world of the living held. She thought how tall he had grown, especially in this his last year of secondary school: much too tall for his sixteen years. He had inherited her height. His self-possessed bearing and speech, which would be imperious if it weren't so muted, had come, no doubt, from his father. As for his sister Dami's insouciant candor: the neighbor woman had no idea where this came from.

"We have been getting to know each other," she said. "He is a nice man."

"He seemed a bit agitated," Dayo said.

Dami scoffed.

"You should not be listening in when grown-ups are talking," the neighbor woman said lightly. "You think you are too big to discipline *abi*?"

"You are changing the subject, Momsie."

The neighbor woman sighed. "The man needed someone to talk to. Problems with his relatives. You know how extended families can be."

"I know how Aunty Lade and Uncle Gbenga and the rest of Popsie's family were when he was alive. I know how *our* extended family can be."

"What he is trying *not* to say," said Dami, "is that it seemed as if you were projecting, pushing the man to . . ."

"Be quiet, Damilola," the neighbor woman snapped.

Dami shrugged and returned her attention to the television.

"I am not pushing him to do anything," the neighbor woman said to Dayo. "Take, take, take: that is all our people want to do sometimes, and the man is clearly exhausted. He needs to know that he cannot let them continue to think that he owes his life to them."

Dayo took a deep breath, setting his plate of rice on a table. "Do you think you're being a bit too invested in something that does not concern you at all? His situation . . . it isn't really your place to tell him what he should do. Or not do."

The neighbor woman regarded her son through narrowed eyes. "You have grown wings," she said. "That is your problem. Both of you. If you think you can say whatever you please, that you know more than I do just because you are now secondary school graduates, let me tell you now that you are mistaken. I will clip your wings." She grabbed her head tie from the armrest and stormed out of the room.

The neighbor woman refused to consider the implication of her children's words. She did not think that perhaps she was indeed trying to reclaim something. What that thing was—a sort of influence? And how? And from whom? As she blustered up the stairs, she thought instead of what she had lost.

The jokes had been funny at first, the ones about there being two men in the house because she worked as many hours as her husband and had refused to bear any children; Samuel had laughed when his family made them, reassuring her that it did not matter whether they had children or not. This was after she had taken her first job. Newly arrived in Nigeria, more than qualified (with her European degree) for many positions, and with a lot of time on her hands, she'd begun to lecture with the English department at the University of Ibadan. Then, after her second miscarriage, her husband held both her hands in his and told her that perhaps there was some truth to what his family said. Perhaps it would be easier to carry her pregnancies to term without the strain of working. And so she surrendered and quit her job. How might her life have turned out if she hadn't? She had friends who were deans now. Friends who had stayed where she had not.

In the weeks that followed, the neighbor woman and Antar formed a delicate bond. She grew accustomed to seeing him on Sundays, after Patricia had left for church. He continued to talk to her about his relatives, whom she continued to encourage him to defy. They talked about other things, too, sitting on her porch, watching the wind rustle the grasses and cause the plumerias to sway. Or, on days when it rained, watching the earth soak up the water until it gave up, unable to compete with the torrents.

Once, she asked why he never went to church with Patricia. She knew that he must have been raised Muslim—his name, Antar, was Arabic—but she knew, too, that his Islam was not of a fervent kind. She had seen him drink, his family had thrown a party but not gone to the mosque at the end of Ramadan, and she could tell, from the way he spoke of his schedule in Lagos, that he could not possibly be praying five times a day. He was the kind of Muslim who, especially after taking a Christian wife, ultimately drifted toward Christianity, finding its demands less exacting and its observances more festive.

He told her how Patricia and the pastor at her church had tried and eventually given up on getting him to come to services. "I question too much," he said with a small laugh. "It's why I would make an even worse Christian than I am a Muslim. Absolute faith is a difficult thing to have."

Sometimes the neighbor woman went to his house, and they would sit out on the patio and talk. She always tried to leave before Patricia returned—she could still barely tolerate the younger woman, though she'd become rather fond of the children, Biodun and Femi—but if Patricia came home to find her, the neighbor

woman would strike up a conversation, because she knew it would be unseemly not to, about Patricia's shoes, or how rare it was to find a *gele* in the color that Patricia was wearing. One day she finally stayed for lunch. Patricia clapped excitedly when she agreed to, and the neighbor woman wished she could renege.

It was from Patricia that the neighbor woman learned about Antar's falling out with his relatives. June had arrived, with even more rain, and Patricia's fish were ill. She came to the neighbor woman's house and asked if Dayo or Dami might be available to lend her a hand as she medicated the tank. The neighbor woman told her that the twins were out of town, visiting their aunt in Lokoja, and agreed to help herself.

The black moors were bigger, as were their ugly eyes, but they were less active. Two of them lingered at the bottom of the tank, their eyes dull, their bodies covered in whitish spots. The neighbor woman had not thought that fish could get sick. They looked forlorn; she almost felt sorry for them. She helped Patricia lift off the lid and disconnect the filter and lights. "How did they fall ill?" she asked because she was curious. "Is it the weather? It's been so inclement these past few days."

Patricia looked at the neighbor woman and smiled. "It's funny, isn't it, how we ascribe cause and effect." She began to drain the tank into a large pail. "The idea that when two things change at once, one must be responsible for the other."

"The fish look sluggish," the neighbor woman said. "I thought it might have been brought on by the recent cold."

Patricia nodded, although she did not seem to be listening. "I suppose it's only logical," she said.

The water was still running out of the tank in a thin stream. The neighbor woman was bemused. It felt somewhat more abstruse than it should, she thought, this conversation about sick fish.

"My husband's sister phoned yesterday," Patricia said. Her eyes were trained on the fish, as though she'd forgotten she was not alone in the room. "Sista Bisi, the one whose daughter's wedding Antar paid for. Well, one of the ones." She laughed. "Sista Bisi was angry. Her son was deported from America and Antar refused to provide money to send him back. He'd paid to send the boy there in the first place, you see. He told Antar and me he was going to university. For the past three years Antar has sent him tuition checks; it turns out he'd since dropped out of school. He was throwing a house party, one of many, when he was apprehended; the neighbors had finally gotten exasperated by the disturbances and called the police." Patricia laughed

again. The tank was nearly empty. She stopped draining and they carried the pail into the kitchen, where Patricia ran a hose from the sink to the fish tank.

The neighbor woman turned the tap and rejoined Patricia by the tank.

“Anyway, Sista Bisi called me yesterday, demanding to know why my husband was refusing her son money. It was not an inquiry, of course. More of an accusation.”

The neighbor woman began to understand Patricia’s meaning, which made her confused, unsure why Patricia was having this conversation with her. She wondered what Antar had told his wife. “Is that why you encourage your husband to give them things? Because you knew they’d blame you if he stopped? You’ve been married several years. You’re hardly a recent change in his life now.”

“But I’m still the largest factor, the *easiest* one: in their minds, a bomb that has been waiting to detonate.” She paused to pour a tablespoon of blue liquid into the filling tank. “Besides, I don’t encourage Antar. I *support* him. He has always felt indebted to them, and would continue to do what they ask as long as he believes he has to.”

“Then why not help him see that he doesn’t have to?”

Patricia raised her eyebrows, and now there was almost an edge to her voice. “He feels certain that he does. And it’s a delicate path we tread as women. Wives before me have tried and failed to come between a man and his family. If I tried to dissuade him, I could become the enemy and gain nothing for my pains. Even when we talked on the phone yesterday, he sounded torn apart, as if he still thinks he owes the boy a second trip to America.”

The neighbor woman felt as though she were meeting a different woman from the one she’d known these past few months. The tank was almost full. She should return to the kitchen and shut off the flow, but she felt almost unable to move.

“I realize how hard it is, of course. Not the giving—the feeling of perpetual indebtedness. I think—I have always thought—that if I act as though the giving means nothing, he would be reminded less of the feeling.”

“You don’t think you should tell him how you feel?”

“How I feel,” echoed Patricia. “How do I feel?” She looked at the neighbor woman as though her words were absurd. Then she laughed, heartily. And for a moment the neighbor woman felt as though she could forget the Patricia she’d just seen, and remember only this one with the tinkling laugh. But even the quality of the tinkling felt different now.

* * *

It rained again that night. The weather had wavered all day between glimmering heat and short, gloomy spells of light rainfall. Then when the sun shrank for good at 7:00 PM, the skies turned a thick gray, shrouded in dark clouds, and the neighbor woman's compound erupted with strong winds that shook the plumerias from their core, whipping off their blossoms. Surprised that the power had not been cut off in the face of the impending storm, the neighbor woman turned off her TV—it might be struck by lightning otherwise—and decided to retire early. A few hours later, she awoke to the sound of frantic banging on her front door.

Patricia was standing on the porch again, breathing heavily, her clothes wet beneath the raincoat she had not bothered to button up, her hair dripping with water. The neighbor woman stepped forward, shocked. "Patricia, *kilode*? Are you well?"

Around them, the wind roiled in turbulent gusts, pelting them with rain, which was falling in haphazard slants. Patricia took a moment to gather her words as well as her breath, and the neighbor woman saw, in a brief flash of lightning, that tears mingled with the rainwater on the younger woman's face. "I am undone, Mama Ibeji," Patricia sobbed. "My child has died in my hands."

The neighbor woman shuddered, fending off a volley of painful memories. "God forbid," she said. "What happened? Tell me what happened."

"Fever . . . It started when I picked him up from school, but it didn't seem serious . . . I don't drive at night . . . he is usually fine after a meal and some rest. I thought I'll take him to the clinic at Jericho in the morning if need be. I couldn't drive in the storm. I can't drive in this weather . . . I didn't know who else to call."

The neighbor woman rushed back indoors and grabbed an umbrella from a corner of the pantry. When she returned to the porch, Patricia was pacing rapidly, her body rocking back and forth.

Both women lunged into the storm. The neighbor woman fought, in the powerful gusts, to hold on to her umbrella, and Patricia wept, her voice mostly drowned by the rain, "I have no more than two of them. There are only two. How can I bury one? What will I tell people?"

When they arrived at the house across the street, the neighbor woman found her neighbor's three-year-old sprawled across the living room sofa. She could see, even in the wan light of the candles placed on the cabinet—NEPA finally having cut the power—that Femi, though almost unconscious, was definitely not dead. His head was still burning with fever when she knelt and touched him. "Put a pot of water on the stove," she told Patricia. Turning to the older boy who hovered,

consternated, above his brother's form, she said, "Fetch me a basin of cold water, Biodun. Go outside after that and pluck some fresh green leaves from the mango tree. Pawpaw leaves, too, if you can get any. Be careful in the rain." Biodun returned a minute later. The neighbor woman instructed Patricia, who had also returned from the kitchen, to douse the child in the cold water. "It will help reduce the fever." She hurried back to her own compound and returned with lemongrass and dongoyaro leaves. "Wash these thoroughly and boil them along with the mango and pawpaw leaves. Let it steep for a while."

The child's body had begun to cool when Patricia returned with the potion. The neighbor woman wrapped him in several layers of cloth, bending his head over the steaming pot until he began to sweat profusely. Then, when his breathing grew calm, she towed his body with cold water and let him fall into a tranquil sleep.

Outside, the wind had lost its vigor—the neighbor woman could no longer hear its whistling—but amoebic splotches of water, opaque in the flickering candlelight, alighted unceasing on the windows. For a while, the three of them stood without moving, as though afraid to disturb the sleeping child. Patricia was finally starting to breathe evenly. The neighbor woman's mind roved, now, to the agonizing miscarriages she'd had before the twins. The first and the second and the third. And how she'd felt each time, laying tentative fingers on the blood that left her body in thick clumps, as though a child were dying in her hands. Twenty-four hours ago she would not have, but now she considered pulling Patricia into a comforting embrace. She decided against it. "It is just *iba*," she said. "A fever. The dongoyaro leaves are medicinal. It will seep into his pores. He should be all right by morning."

"Thank you, Mama Ibeji. Thank you."

The neighbor woman stepped again into the rain and headed for her own house. The events of the night, the strange conversation with Patricia earlier that day: everything felt almost surreal now, and she expected that it would all seem even more peculiar by morning, when the sun rose again, as it must, and belied the hysteria of the night before.

What the neighbor woman did not expect—and perhaps she should have—was that Antar would return to Ibadan the very next day and show up at her door to thank her.

He sat on the porch and told her that Patricia had called him early that morning, recounting everything that happened the night before. "We can't possibly say how grateful we are," he said.

“Grateful, *ke?*” The neighbor woman laughed. “It was my responsibility to help, really.”

“Thank you,” he said. And for a moment, it seemed as though he might say something more, but he stopped himself.

“I hope Femi is feeling better,” she said.

“Yes, yes, he is. In fact, his mother has to make him remain in bed.” Again he seemed to hesitate, looking off beyond the plumerias to his own house, where the blossoms from the flame of the forest, flung off the tree by the previous night’s wind, had formed a crimson carpet on the lawn. “Sometimes,” he said finally, “I wonder if it is a bit inconsiderate, leaving Patricia alone all week with the children, but it seems impractical to come home every day.”

“It does seem like a bit to handle,” the neighbor woman said carefully. “But the kind of thing that happened yesterday doesn’t happen very often. And Biodun isn’t a child anymore. He was very helpful last night.”

“Ah! He is finally learning to be an older brother, then. It took him a while to get used to having a younger sibling.” Antar paused. “He seemed almost afraid of the baby at first.”

The neighbor woman laughed. “I suppose he didn’t take very kindly to suddenly having a rival.”

“Not at all. Although perhaps it wasn’t completely unjustified: he was almost ten when Femi was born. He’d grown used to being the center of attention.”

“Still, I’m sure he wouldn’t want anything happening to his brother, any more than his parents do.” She paused, looking off into the yard herself. It seemed that Femi had liberated himself from his mother’s bed rest, for now he emerged from the front door, the little dog in tow. “The thing with children: no matter how many of them you have, the loss of even a single one is unbearable. Of course, that doesn’t keep those of us who have just two from being so fiercely protective.”

Antar did not smile. He fiddled, for a while, with a chip in the varnish of his chair. “I have a daughter,” he said. The words were simultaneously abrupt and quiet, so that the neighbor woman was unsure, at first, if she had misheard him. But then he continued: “There was a woman a few years ago. I made a mistake I should not have made. I haven’t seen the child in years. Even that feels like a loss, like she might as well be dead.”

The neighbor woman stared at him, astonished. “Has Patricia met this child?”

His laughter was bitter. “No. I don’t know if I can tell her.”

“You think she will not forgive you.”

“No, I think she will not be angry enough. That while we’re ‘casting our bread upon the waters,’ she might think, also, that the child is ‘a good and perfect gift.’ And I’ll resent her for it.”

He was trying to sound flippant, but there was, beneath his words, something virulent that shocked even the neighbor woman. She recalled now Patricia’s seemingly carefree bread-and-water speech. And the other incident which he referenced: Patricia returning from church to find her and Antar on the patio, her yellow faille boubou billowing behind her, telling them how the pastor had preached in church that “every good and perfect gift comes from the Lord”; why it paid to serve Him.

“It’s hard to have conversations about things, you see, when she takes it all so . . . well.”

There was a time when the neighbor woman would have agreed with him. A time barely more than one day in the past. But now she thought that Antar would do well to more delicately investigate his wife’s cheer, her facade of blitheness. She wondered if there was a way to tell him this.

The neighbor woman looked up. The sky was overcast, as if it might begin to rain again soon. The plumerias danced a gentle dance in the light breeze. And she had another thought: she realized the enormity of what she’d just learned—perhaps more importantly, the enormity of Antar’s confidence in her—and she felt as though she’d just been given something, that she now wielded something, a version of which she’d lost on her return to Nigeria. Maybe even before that. The neighbor woman was determined to hold on to it this time. She reached across and touched Antar’s hands and, looking him in the eyes, told him, “You are right not to talk to Patricia. It is best for your marriage. She would never understand.”