

The Road

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I.

THE MAIN DOOR SQUEALS open the third time I'm knocking. A thickset woman, whisker-like scarification on her cheeks, steps out. 'What do you want?' she asks.

'Is this Tega's house?'

'Yes, sir. Any problem?'

I raise the necklace to her face. She grabs it, squeezes it against her chest. With trembling fingers, she counts the ivory beads, like the necklace were a rosary and she was saying the Hail Mary. She stops when she reaches the pendant. It's shaped like a coin, but flatter, and with spirals on its arc like ripples on a solidified lake. I can't tell if it's me imagining it, or the woman's eyes are really watering.

'My name is Ehimen,' I say. 'Tega and I were on the road together. I know you must have found out one way or the other. I'm—'

My head is a blank page. I can't think of what to fill it with. A hen is clucking nearby, scattering sand, and the damp smell of dug-

up soil is thick in the air. The woman doesn't cry, like I'd expected. Perhaps she's cried so much that there are no more tears in her eyes. Or she's like my mother, who, despite the indiscriminate punches of reality, still clings to the illusion of divine favour – a phenomenon that excludes her and hers from danger simply because she believes in God and Jesus. A prophet had probably held a mirror to this woman's face and she'd seen Tega alive. She'd nodded to the prophet's incantations, her knees sore from kneeling, her throat sore from screaming, her faith burning brighter with every prayer session. But now, standing face-to-face with the truth, she sighs, tucks the necklace into her jeans pocket, and motions for me to come in.

'Are you—' I begin.

'I'm Tega's wife. Ejiro.'

It hits me. *Tega's wife*. I turn away, and my eyes settle on a child beside the fridge who is arranging pencils and crayons in overlapping triangles. She instantly reminds me of Tega, with the fan blade ears and the narrow, pointy face. I squat beside her, touch her ribbon, but she doesn't stop to look at me. It seems my intended interruption buoys her even. When she runs out of material, she scatters the triangles and starts all over again. There's something mechanical about her movements; they remind me of the broomstick animations my nieces used to watch every Saturday night.

'Eguono,' Ejiro says, returning with a Coke. 'My daughter.'

'And Tega's?'

'Are you thinking I hawked myself around to get her?'

I shuffle to the sofa, feeling drenched to the bones. There's a glittering brown stain on the wall opposite. It looks like dried-up honey. I fixate on it while cracking my knuckles.

'Don't mind me.' Her voice is low and small. 'I just—'

'Eguono is so talented.'

'But she's strange, right?'

'No. Not at all. Why?'

'She has autism. I don't know, she just doesn't fit anywhere.'

'She's lovely.'

‘You know what autism means?’

‘I did neurology in school. Speech and behavioural therapy.’

‘You read Neurology?’

‘Linguistics.’

Ejiro smiles, revealing pebble-smooth teeth. Her hair is bound up in a doughnut-shaped bun, two strands straying off, touching her left eyebrow whenever she blinks. The paisley shirt hugs her body like a skin. The first three buttons are undone, and the lacy tops of her bra peek out. Did Tega ever peer in there? Did he ever unbutton her, grip her backside, press himself against her and let out an animalistic growl?

In a corner of my mind, he is kissing her, mumbling words even he couldn’t understand, and I feel betrayed. He never told me he had a family. But here I am five years later, confronted by a wife and a daughter, both flung at me like lethal accusations. The drive to talk about his death ebbs away, leaving bloated fury in me, and I imagine an alternate world in which I dug a hole in the desert and buried Tega’s necklace and other memories.

II.

I met Tega at the camp in Sokoto, as we waited for a bus. The bus would arrive when those in Niger confirmed the road was clear. We slept on the cold floor, rose every morning to the muezzin’s calls to prayers, munched caked bread and shrivelled groundnuts, listened all day to Abdul’s sermons.

‘Remember you are all brothers and sisters,’ Abdul repeated. ‘Always look out for each other. Even when you reach Europe, don’t ever forget that. No one should ever take off his or her charm. Remember what Baba said, that even though he’s bathed you all, taking off the charm could be dangerous.’

On the eve of our departure, Razzman inspected us and discovered Tega wasn’t wearing his amulet.

‘What’s wrong wiyuu, mehn?’ Razzman said. ‘You wan’ die?’

'I don't like that thing,' Tega said. 'It's smelling like blood.'

'Bombacla! So whadda fuck do you like?'

Tega lifted the pendant of his necklace.

'And whodda fuck gave this shit to you, mehn?'

'My father.'

'I see. Yo poppy a fucking seer too?'

'No. But this is a cowrie here. Isn't it the same cowrie that the Baba uses?'

'Know what? Fuck you. I ain't gat time for fellas destined to die.'

Tega shrugged and continued to toss his rubber seed. I sat in the shadow, fiddling with my cigarette. The Baba was a stout man, naked save for a red loincloth, and chalk patterns on his body, dancing round clay pots in a dense palm oil plantation in Benin City. He mumbled, spat and threw a handful of cowries in the air. Thirteen of the cowries ran along the line he'd drawn, and five strayed. 'Out of the eighteen of you,' he announced, 'only thirteen shall go and reach there safely. The road is not good for the remaining five.'

We queued up, and Baba tossed a cowrie at our feet each to ascertain the unfortunate five. My own cowrie fell along the line. He was able to fish out the five even before he got to ten. One of them, a woman with the girth of an overstuffed pillow, stormed off, raving, 'I know this is my stepmother's handiwork, but I will break her wings tonight!' The others were advised to go appease their guardian angels and try again next year. I didn't see Tega then because he was in the fifth batch, two batches after mine.

All the batches united here in Sokoto. So there was where I first saw him, Tega, taciturn and well-built, twiddling his necklace, ducking as though from overhead bullets. I followed him when he went outside, sat with him on the railing. He lit a cigarette and continued to toss his rubber seed.

'Rothmans,' I said. 'Nice. That's my brand, too.'

He held out the packet. I pulled out a stick.

'You have a lighter?'

That was the first thing Tega said to me. And the last.

III.

I'm alone in the parlour, flipping through the album Ejiro handed me to pass time while she makes breakfast. The first photo is of Tega's mother. She has that mole on her nose that Tega told me about. I close my eyes, to imagine the fires engulfing her, rippling her clothes, muffling her wails and stuffing smoke into her mouth, and I am nauseous and turn the page. The second photo is of his father. He is grey-haired, dressed in a red lace and the traditional Urhobo hat. Although the hat casts a shade over parts of his face, I spot the bad eye. It puffs out like a tennis ball buried in pleated skin, with a tiny yellow opening shining like glass.

Ejiro has made banga rice, served with snail stew. She feeds Eguono. Crumbs fall from her mouth and roll down the table. 'She can't do it herself,' Ejiro says. 'She's nine now and she still can't do things.'

She points to a glass of water just in front of Eguono, nudging her to take it, but Eguono isn't even looking at her let alone reaching for the water. She remains sheathed in silence, swaying left and right, staring ahead like an old woman re-assessing her maiden years.

'This therapy thing is taking much time and money,' Ejiro says, and lifts the water to Eguono's lips. The girl empties the cup in two loud gulps.

'Wow.'

'Did Tega tell you about her?'

'He never mentioned he had a wife even.'

She sighs, and after wiping Eguono's mouth, she jabs her spoon into her plate of rice. The wall clock ticks in the silence: five minutes, then six, then seven. Ejiro doesn't lift the spoon to her mouth.

IV.

From Sokoto, our throng of buses reached Agadez, a town in Niger, on the cusp of the Sahara, from where we'd reach Italy in a month, as Mahmoud the smuggler assured us. Mahmoud's face was always

framed in a dusty turban. He had a habit of poking the spaces between his teeth, even if there was nothing lodged in there. He spoke fluent French and pathetic English. He warned us to remain in the compound because he wouldn't move a finger if any of us got arrested. The 200,000 CFA we paid barely covered the camp owners and the police and the soldiers and the smugglers. From that money, he'd take his meagre share, and what would now be left? He called meagre *migra*, and mischievous ladies made him repeat the word until he realised they were mocking him.

Mahmoud always talked longer when he switched to French. The Nigerien women, sharp-boned and quiet, listened, breathless. Tega took my hand and we sneaked out, sure that others in the compound had all gone to bed.

The streets were wide, the buildings all covering squares of grey mud protected by graffitied walls. Tiny lights stood in the distance like fireflies trapped in mist. And the dry air rustled, its smells sharp and crusty. Tega and I leaned against a wall in the compound. Here, you could see the minaret of the mosque pierce the night sky, the sticks around it like bristles. We smoked and talked about the burdens that Tega had borne alone for years.

'I saw my father burning in my dreams,' he said one night. 'And then I knew.'

'Knew what?' I asked him.

'That I had to do something before anything happened. Like, trying to change how I feel about boys. I really wanted to give him grandchildren, being his only son, but—'

'But?'

He was silent.

The next night, he seemed to be in a chatty mood. He told me how, in a bid to change his orientation so he could have grandchildren for his father, he blinded the man's eye. The witchdoctor he consulted asked for a thousand naira and an orange-headed lizard's tongue. One was running up the wall one afternoon. His father was lying on the veranda, fanning himself. When the lizard came close, Tega released

the pebble from his catapult, but instead of smashing its head, it slung into his father's eye and water and blood ran along the weaves of the raffia mat.

Tega bit his lips and started to cry.

'It's okay.' I rubbed his shoulder. 'It's okay.'

He looked sideways. There was no one in sight, just the two of us under the moon, inside the semicircle of impoverished trees and huts. He leaned against me, his breath slowing down, his twitchy hands relaxing. He was humming Celine Dion's 'I'm Alive'. I joined, even though my voice was raspy and almost ruined everything. We swayed. We moved our shoulders up and down. We dared to raise our voices. We chuckled.

'I've never said I love you to anyone,' he said.

'Of course. I guess we weren't taught to—'

He touched his lips to mine. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. We remained like that for a long time, before he broke into tears again and I had to hold his chin in my palm. He was bigger and stronger than me, but in that moment, he felt so fragile, like an electric bulb rolling down a staircase of gravel. Asides my mother – whose faith, when thrashed by reality, could immediately pull her into depression – I'd never felt a ridiculous need to protect anyone else from the world. But here I was, holding Tega's chin, his beard tickling my skin; here I was hating his mother for burning, hating his father for lying on the mat that particular day, hating God for not finding him someone he could tell he loved, hating myself for not finding him earlier, when he was still ankle-deep in the quicksand of misery, when it would have been easier to pull him out.

'I'm here now,' I said. *Nothing will happen to you anymore.* My eyes began to cloud, but the tears wouldn't come. Tega took my hand and squeezed lightly, then he laced his fingers into mine. *I'm here, too,* he was saying. It was a language we'd created and developed without knowing it, a language too sacred to rely on mortal words.

'I love you,' I said. It felt like chalk on my tongue; like Tega, no one had ever said the words to me, neither had I told anyone.

‘I love you, too!’

Then we were singing louder. P-Square’s ‘I Love U’. I was drumming with my fingers; he was tapping a foot on a pile of planks. A door creaked open among the silhouetted huts. A beam of light shone in our direction. Someone threw spluttery Arabic and eased the door back onto its frame. *We didn’t stop. We couldn’t stop. I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, you’re the man of my dreams, the personal person for me.*

Next night, I told him about myself, about my degree in Linguistics, about scrubbing floors for four years and finally deciding to try Europe. I talked about my mother, petite and prim, with cone-shaped jawbones, my mother who sprayed the house with anointing oil and whipped at invisible witches every 12 am, my mother who swept the veranda until the tiles squealed under her feet.

Tega spoke of his mother with clenched fists, with a shaky voice. She died in the 1998 pipeline explosion in Jesse. He was ten then, and his dada, decorated with cowries, hugged the nape of his neck. That morning, he’d not stop fuming until his father let him accompany his mother to fetch the petrol. Clusters of men and women elbowed each other off with their bowls and jerry-cans, and his mother made him sit further away because the smell was strong. The pipeline exploded when he went to urinate. Tega claimed he saw his mother in the fire trying to escape, but her hair was already alight and her clothes were shredding and her eyes were melting into ember-red sockets.

Now, his voice was breaking. There were sparkles of tears in his eyes. I took his hand, squeezed, tickled his palm. He was still heaving, ready to burst. When I cupped his ear and whispered, ‘Remember, I love you, before you start crying,’ his face crinkled up and he started to laugh. ‘Me, too,’ he said. We collapsed on each other, giggling.

V.

After breakfast, Eguono sprawls on the floor and starts to draw. The album is open in front of her. Tega’s pictures are on both pages. On the

left, he is holding a ball to his belly and laughing hard. The veins on his neck stand out in protest. It hurts that I will never know why he was this happy, or who made him laugh, or every moment like this when he briefly forgot who he was and laughed. The photographer had cut out someone else from the picture, leaving the blur of what seems like an arm in motion.

Ejiro turns on the TV. A rain of static, speckled with distorted images, rattles on the screen. The TV comes to its senses after some smacking and knob-twisting. On the screen are women dressed in white, dancing around a figurine by a river. The wind ruffles the cattails at the other side of the river. Add an ominous background song, slow-motion effects and vignettes, it would look a great Nollywood horror scene. Ejiro squints at the TV as though taken aback, not understanding why she'd turned it on in the first place.

'Did you people honour him, like a wake or something?'

'His uncle insists he'll come back,' she says. 'Five years have passed and you're still waiting for your nephew as if you merely sent him to buy Maggi next door.'

'Wow.'

'That's it, jare.'

'I'm so sorry, Ejiro.'

'Eguono can hear us.' Her voice is low. 'She doesn't know her father is dead. We can talk in Tega's room, if you don't mind. She can't come there because she'd think it's still locked.'

The walls of Tega's room are covered in dog-eared Ronaldo posters. His FIFA ball, the one he's holding in one of his pictures, lies deflated under the table. Ejiro dips a rag in water and cleans the posters while telling me about Ogaga, Tega's best friend, the one who planted the Europe-by-road idea in Tega's mind.

VI.

Tega's eyes watered whenever he talked about Ogaga. He mentioned his name in whispers, as though scared of hearing himself mention

it, and he glanced around to make sure nobody else was listening. Ogaga had fingers as straight as pencils, he said. Ogaga still believed in God, still closed his eyes and danced on his knees in a church that condemned people like him. Sometimes, it alarmed Tega, made him imagine Ogaga waking up one day and declaring, ‘I belong to Christ now. Please leave.’

And yet he suggested they relocate to Europe to marry. He said ‘relocate,’ as if Europe were his hometown, some place he could drive to and toss sweets at diastemal children whose mothers would spank for not saying thank you, uncle. Ogaga planned their lives as though he was certain about the future, a transparent curtain he could peer through once in a while. After getting married in Europe, they’d make lots of money, return and disclose their sexuality to their families. Money stopped nonsense, he said, so none of them would raise a brow anymore. By God’s grace.

Because Ogaga injected too much of God into his plans, Tega daydreamed money flooding the streets of European cities for their sake. His welder business wasn’t working out. He couldn’t save enough money for his HND. His father didn’t reap the fruits of his labour because of what he did to his eye, and every morning he woke from the fire dreams, he felt forces hauling him closer to his end.

Ogaga believed he was just paranoid; no harm came to true children of God, or wasn’t he a child of God? Ogaga hummed Bobby McFerrin’s ‘Don’t Worry, Be Happy’ over Tega’s grumbles. He told and retold stories of the wandering Israelites, of martyrs, of the crucifixion, of the prosecution of early Christians. He accused Tega of little faith. He reminded him how somebody who’d previously embarked on the journey assured him that there were agents in Sicily who supplied instant EU passports without asking questions. Europeans gave African migrants homes and jobs once they heard their plights, because they knew they caused it in the first place. If their fathers hadn’t come to colonise Africa and take away its resources and manpower, nobody would give a fuck about Europe.

It alarmed Tega, too, that Ogaga used words like *fuck*. But he was

learning to sieve out evil thoughts, steering all of his mind towards Europe. In Europe, he'd work with his Lab Technology diploma while Ogaga continued his jersey business. In Europe, they'd live in Central London. They'd board the Tube to see The Shard. They'd skate in the snow. They'd become all the things Nigeria dared them to try. Everything would work out because they were God's children with substantial faith.

Then Ogaga's cowrie strayed from the line. Ineligible, the seer said. Ogaga told Tega later that it was God's will that he went before him. Perhaps, it was to prepare grounds for the explosion they'd become in Europe, just like John came to clear the way for Jesus.

VII.

Ejiro taps the bed. 'You're not a bodyguard, Ehimen. Sit down.'

I sit away from her. She's cleaning a framed photo of Tega.

'You were with Tega for like a month or so?'

'Yes. Close to.'

'That boy. Did he tell you things at all, because he was so quiet and calm.'

'Depends on what you mean.'

'In secondary school, Tega was so shy he wouldn't talk to girls. I liked him so much – now, don't laugh – I liked him so much that I learnt to play football. Still, he wouldn't look my way. Everyone thought he was going to be a priest. He told you that?'

'No, not really. Doesn't sound like a secret, though. He's not much of a talker, too.'

'That's true. Well, his father forced him to marry me. That was the beginning of his misery.'

'That's not entirely true. Tega had always been sad. Right from childhood.'

'He was my husband. You don't know him better than I do.'

'He told me things. He said that, in all his life, he'd never spoken.'

She lays down the photograph. ‘Do you know why he didn’t tell you about me?’

‘Because – I don’t think so.’

‘You don’t think what?’

‘I mean, I don’t think I know why.’

Ejiro picks another photograph. Tega is wearing his Chelsea jersey here. It is so tight you can make out the triangular structure of his torso. I remember this jersey exactly the way I remember his dead face: eyelids peeled back, eyelashes bristled, cigarette burns across lips. I carry the photograph from her and lay it on the bed, bridging the gap between us.

‘He was wearing this jersey when we found him dead,’ I say.

VIII.

Tega was clinging onto an overhead rod like the rest of us cramped into the truck. There were five trucks altogether, with at least eighteen passengers stuffed in each. Before we left Agadez that morning, we were counted, all 95 of us, and assigned numbers according to the positions of our names in Mahmoud’s records. Gaunt boys with purplish lips scribbled the numbers each on our sacks of garri, jerrycans of water, sachets of roast groundnuts, masks, hand gloves and our mentholated balm bottles. Then our truck belched, coughing out thick smoke, and jerked into motion. We whizzed past low shanties lined along the road. Dust trailed behind. The air sliced off turbaned men bent over their walking sticks, moving down the road in clusters. A few children showed their teeth, their navels protruding, shiny like creamed balloons. And then everything froze behind us, and an ocean of ecru land stretched beyond our sights and imagination.

Our driver, Abdoulaye, ensured we all pronounced his name the same lyrical, sluggish way. He chattered mostly in French, titillating his Frenchmen, especially the ladies who laughed hard and slapped each other on the shoulders. Once in a while, he dabbled into fragmentary

English: ‘This desert, *pays sec*. You tie my eye, *tu attache mes yeux*, I pass it. No hard. No hard at all. I know correct dune. We reach Libya. *Six jours*.’

I spent my time squinting at the hailstorm of dust for as long as my mask protected me. I stared and stared until the dust morphed into humans, with flappy limbs and compact bodies, chasing our trucks in undulating tides. I only stopped staring when we started to encounter corpses on the way. The bodies were all bark-dry, rendered auburn by dust, flattened to the ground like tabletops crumbled over their legs. The bodies made me drowsy, made me grope for space to rest my head. The bodies caused stagnant tears to stand in Tega’s eyes. The bodies made a Rastafarian-looking woman, with her fat dreadlocks and chiseled face, retch and spray other passengers with mouldy, half-digested groundnuts.

In the afternoon, the sun roasted your skin and left caked sweat in your armpits. Your voice gruffed because your throat was parched, but you daren’t drink water. The truck wouldn’t stop for you to do that, and you couldn’t risk doing it while it sped on because someone could jostle against you and knock the bottle off. Even if the truck stopped for you to drink water, the water couldn’t quench your thirst; it was as hot as your metal buttons against your skin. And even if it weren’t that hot, you couldn’t be drinking water each time you ran out of saliva. If you did, you’d finish it long before you reached the nearest Libyan town. Who’d share with you if you finished yours before time?

As though an answer to this question, a Malian boy named Ousmane was found dead one morning. He ran out of water and inhaled only dust for two days, and he died the third day. Abdoulaye and his assistant, Souleyman, laid the body in the sand. They said an Islamic prayer over it. Another man placed Ousmane’s passport on his chest. In case someone who knew him passed, the person could take the message to his people. But as Abdoulaye said, it was hard for someone whose eyes were on the road to spot a passport. By then, it would have sunk into dust.

IX.

‘I know you weren’t just a friend to Tega,’ Ejiro says. ‘Just like Ogaga.’

My teeth are clattering, and I could have said a stack of things, but I’m only murmuring, ‘That’s not true.’

‘I found out after the marriage. Tega wasn’t attracted to women. That was why his father forced him to marry me.’ She moves to the table, dips the rag into water, and begins to scrub, with vigor. ‘I wanted to leave. My presence reminded him of who he was. But I didn’t leave. I don’t know. I didn’t just leave. So he decided to leave instead.’

‘Oh.’

‘I did things, too, Ehimen. Tega knew. I know he must have known. He never laid with me once, yet I had Eguono. He would have wanted to ask but his hands were tied. What could he have done?’ She squeezes the rag and begins to scour the upturned legs of the table. ‘There’s something about some secrets, you know? They’re what you know, what you’re sure about, yet they’re secrets.’

She replaces the table. She strides to the window and parts the curtains. Sunlight streams into the room in conical spangles, bringing with it sounds and smells: pigs grunting nearby, mucid odours of dug-up sand, a sing-song voice announcing her bananas are the best in the world.

Ejiro steps away from the window but doesn’t face me. ‘How exactly did Tega die?’

X.

I don’t know how *exactly* Tega died. We just found him stretched out in the morning, his skin hard like smoked meat, his eyelids rolled back. A sandstorm, wild like a swarm of locusts, had rocked the desert the previous day. The trucks had to stop. Everything was wrapped in brown mist. Sand bit the insides of your eyelids, slashed your tongue and lips, rattled in your ears. The masks stung your nose. We groped

for our blankets and wound them around our faces and coughed air through our mouths. Children sneezed and sneezed and stretched their necks in their mothers' arms. By the time the sand settled, two adults were dead. One of them swallowed so much sand he kept coughing even as he lay stiff in death. The Rastafarian-looking woman started to whimper. She traced a line down her trousers and started a song in French.

As if by instinct, others joined her. They lined in procession and sang a dirge. It was airy, this dirge, stuffed with sighing vocables and monosyllables. And it was sadly beautiful that the song united them all. Nigerian and Ghanaian and Gambian women picked up the mantra easily, even though they didn't understand it. A Senegalese woman with strokes like stretchmarks all over her arms yanked off her blouse. Buttons flew in the air. She slipped her skirt over her head. Abdoulaye watched her dance away; he folded his hands and leaned on the truck and sighed. No one went after her. Soon, the clouds of dust on the horizon swallowed her, spinning her fast into oblivion.

As usual, it was a cold night. The air was still, yet it clogged up your nostrils, and formed layers on your palm. We curled up, knees touching chins, even though we were swaddled in blankets. A few others smoked around a fire. One of the men started a slow song. His eyes sparkled in the light. Others joined as soon as they'd picked up the hook. Soon, their voices, guttural and deep, sailed into space.

Tega and I were staring at the stars. 'I wonder how Ogaga is doing,' he said.

'If only you had a phone.'

'Do you expect anything from me? Like a relationship or something?'

'No. You have Ogaga, and—'

'My father never forgave me.'

'It was a mistake. You didn't wake up and plan to blind him.'

'Not that. I'm talking about who I am.'

'Oh.'

'I told him who I was because ... I had to. I deformed him, right? So

I felt obliged to tell him. Was it wrong?’

The singing voices had reached crescendo. I heard them travel far away, across lands and oceans, landing in Italy before their owners. Still, the desert hummed above them. The fire was dying off and a few people were snoring.

‘I don’t think it was wrong,’ Tega continued. ‘But he went to find a girlfriend for me. I told him I didn’t love her. He looked at me and I saw disdain in his eyes. My father had never looked at me that way.’

The desert hummed on.

‘I’ve never talked about this with anyone.’

‘Don’t you feel safe with me?’

‘I haven’t said otherwise.’

‘Then I’m listening.’

‘That’s all for today, Ehimen.’

‘Well.’

‘I love you.’

‘Reduce your voice, Tega.’

‘Fuck them! I love you!’

‘Jesus!’ Feigning fear, I covered his mouth with my hand. He flicked his tongue against my palm until I pulled away. We withdrew into our blankets and kept chuckling until he said, ‘You have a lighter?’

He was still smoking when I fell asleep. He was dead in the morning. His eyelids were rolled back like the peeling of an exotic fruit. There were burns on his lips, ostensibly from the cigarette. The rubber seed he brought from home, which he’d been tossing, lay beside him. I took off his necklace and his wallet before they laid him in the dune. The journey continued, and the jokes came, and the wind howled, and I crouched there trying to breathe, as if Tega wasn’t lying behind, swathed in dust and distance.

I didn’t cry for Tega until we reached Qatrun, until we were waiting for the road to clear up so we could proceed to Tripoli. Even in Qatrun, in the cold zinc room with fat cockroaches raining on you in the dark, I didn’t cry loud enough. Not even when some of us who reached the Mediterranean drowned after several dinghies capsized in the sea. It

was after the International Organisation for Migration rescued us a year later that I wailed openly. I held Tega's necklace to my chest and buried my head in the sand and elbowed off intruders.

XII.

I'm bending beside the pit Ejiro asked me to dig while she rummages through Tega's welding equipment. First, she pulls out his helmet, nuzzles it, lays it aside. Then she shakes the apron, and two metal balls fall on the slab of cement she's standing on. She picks them up, tucks them inside her jeans pocket. Next is a face mask she unearths from the pile. There are clamp pliers inside a small polythene bag, all shaped like the thighs of defeathered broilers. Ejiro takes them out and lays them on the floor. She shakes the bag, and an angle grinder clatters on the ground; its disc, rusty and thick with grime, breaks into two. She pulls out gloves and safety glasses and, finally, earmuffs. She throws the items into a leather bag. She ties up its mouth with a jute rope. She drops it into the pit I've dug.

'Did he tell you he stole the necklace?' she asks. 'Well, he did. He was still feeling his father never forgave him. He entered his room on his funeral night and stole it. He felt it would keep him close to the old man. Me, I thought it was unnecessary. The old man had forgiven him.'

'But he never accepted him that way.'

'Ugh.'

'That's the thing, Ejiro. You don't understand. No one understands. But I guess it's okay. It's okay not to understand, right?'

'I'm—'

'It's okay. Let's pray for him.'

In the dull, watery sun, we hold hands over the mound and mutter prayers for Tega. We sit on the raffia mat after burying the equipment. Eguono sways out to us. There's a tentative smile perched on her face. She's carrying a cardboard, which she hands over to Ejiro like a present. Eguono has made a perfect replica of Tega. The laughing Tega.

The wild Tega. The Tega I never knew. He's clutching the ball to his stomach just like in the picture. His elbows arch out in a triangle. The same number of creases on his jersey is here, the way they appear in the original picture.

Ejiro starts to sob. Phlegm bubbles around her nose. Eguono sways along, left to right, right to left, like some sleepwalker in a horror film. Eguono tries to hold her, but she flits off. As she sways forward, she chants, 'DaddyComeOver, DaddyComeOver, DaddyComeOver,' in a robotic monotone.

A freezing sensation grips my temples, tight like doubled rubber bands. I start to sob. Ejiro takes my hand and squeezes hard. Gradually, our voices become a single wail, tearing at the dusky afternoon.