

The Women in My Life Are Unfinished Portraits

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1.

I FUCK LIKE IT IS the end of the world.

The men in my life say I have a mouth that makes them long for home, a mouth that commands a man to stay without saying a word. And that is why they keep coming back, looking to find something they left behind the last time I allowed them inside my body. Each time they come searching, I imagine what is lost is not a thing.

The sugar daddy who so loved his wife before meeting me at a party at Eko Hotel, the playboy who had sworn off commitment before my body told him there was only one way home and it looked like me, the pastor who preached against fornication before he realised there was more truth between my legs than in the holy books – they all keep looking for the lost remnants of their past selves, the selves they once knew before coming undone so beautifully in my hands. And it becomes a cycle – they come back into my body to recover lost parts

only to end up leaving more behind.

And I am thankful for their love, believe me. I am a chronic lover, too. I love recklessly, without restraint. I love like my mother loved my father – smothering him with so much affection that he threw himself off a bridge. She loved him into his grave; that is how my sister Taiwo puts it. She loved him till his body could not take any more, till he decided the water under Third Mainland Bridge was his only escape. Mother's love will do that to you. It is one of a strange intensity – at once cold and flaming, loud and gentle, distant and in-your-face.

I remember her every time I look at the photograph hanging on the wall of my bedroom. In it, I am three and seated on her lap, pulling at her hair while she tries to break free. The picture is old, granted, faded away by time, but there is something particularly unclear about the image, something vague – an imprecise emotion. I still cannot tell if the look on her face is a frown or a smile. Her body language is one of relaxation and agitation. When I try to paint the picture the colours get out of hand, spread themselves across my canvas and become unrecognisable. I tend to read too much into things. But this picture is not one of them. It is a conduit for a truth I have always known. Everything about Mother is ambiguity. And there is nothing more ambiguous than our relationship.

It was a simmering thing, our relationship, building up heat upon heat until it detonated. Now the two people in that photograph are long gone, the mother no longer a mother to her daughter and the child no longer the child she loved and raised. These days when I try to paint a portrait of her, I leave the face blank, a pristine canvas-white in place of her eyes and nose and mouth. This is not out of spite, but I simply cannot bring myself to give an accurate presentation of the woman who no longer calls me daughter.

I do not quite remember when the problems began. But there were early instances, like when I was caught kissing Banji Fawaz, the senior prefect boy. 'Kissing' was not all we did, but that was how the school principal kindly put it when she told my parents. Or when I fled campus in my third year to live with Jianyin, a Chinese expat, for three

months, before my mother found out from one of her friends who frequented the Moroccan restaurant he loved to take me to. Or when I flirted with Dad's friend at his 60th birthday party. I was Mother's little disgrace, her very own problem child.

When I got my first tattoo, at 21, she called Aunt Rosemary to talk sense into me. It was a lower-back tattoo of Inanna-Ishtar. She said I was inviting the devil into her house, that Beelzebub had got ahold of my soul. But how could I explain to her that nobody owned my soul except me, that I was the only one in control of my own life, finally? That when next a man came for me, I would always have extra eyes at my back – a goddess's eyes at that?

When Mother asked Aunt Rosemary to speak to me, I knew it was not going to be the reprimanding session she hoped for.

'Wòó, leave the girl alone. She is just enjoying herself,' Aunt Rosemary said in the living room, one hand stroking her new Cartier pearl necklace, the other flipping through a magazine with photos of a barely clothed Gisele Bündchen. 'There is no crime in that.'

'What are you talking about?' Mother asked, her voice steeling, shifting her big body to the edge of her seat, like she was ready for a fight.

'You hound these girls too much. Let them be sometimes.'

'You are terrible at correcting children. No wonder God didn't give you kids of your own.'

Aunt Rosemary's eyes were fixed on the magazine.

2.

There is a second photograph, a much newer, less faded kind. I am in lingerie, in my bathroom. I have a blunt in my mouth. My face is covered in a cloud of smoke. I remember Rihanna and SZA's 'Consideration' playing that night when the picture was taken. Photo credit: The Boy I Love.

The Boy I Love says I am a fire that burns like a lonely hunter's companion in the forest on a cold night, aware of its own unmatched

worth. In his poems, I am a hovering presence. In his photographs, I am a leaving thing; that is to say the camera always captures half of my body. He says it is his artistic process. He says it is his way of capturing my *I'm-there-but-I'm-not-really-there* spirit. 'You are a multitude,' he said once as he kissed me. 'Such a bizarre thing.'

The Boy I Love is Hausa and Muslim and bisexual – my mother's worst nightmare. I am crazy and agnostic and so unashamed of my unclothed body – his Imam's worst nightmare. Yet here we are: loving each other like we are not supposed to. Loving each other like we are supposed to.

Even though my mother did not like him at first, back when she still cared that I existed, he was a hit with Aunt Rosemary and Taiwo – the only people who mattered, really.

Taiwo almost never likes any of my lovers. She either thinks they are too old or too ugly or too weak or a winning combination of the three. But she took to him quite easily. The day she met him, at an art exhibition she had invited all of us to, she pulled me aside and said, 'Sis, I know you are polyamorous and shit, but this is the one. He had better be your main lover.'

Taiwo is the younger sister I sometimes wish to be like. At age 20, she bagged a first-class Law degree from the University of Ibadan. She founded an NGO providing water for children in underserved communities. She won a grant from the African Union and used the money to fund her school's STEM research. But all that shit is paper talk. I am not done with her portrait.

My sister is the most caring babe I have ever known. Even when Mother was being Mother, Taiwo always looked out for her. The day we heard the news that Father's body had been found underneath the Third Mainland Bridge, she refused to cry until the third day, consoling everyone else in the meantime.

But I fear for her in ways I cannot describe to her. She is so strong that she fears any sort of weakness. That is why she found herself in the hands of a man like B-. The bastard was a senior lecturer in her former school, one of those men who preyed on young, impressionable girls.

But my sister was neither impressionable nor young where it counted. She chose to love him because, she said, he was one of the few men who could match her strength. I have never liked the idea of women seeking strength in men.

I feared there was something wrong with him from the day she came to see me with a black eye, saying she had been in an accident but not wanting to talk about it. I knew if this man was beating her, she would not say. She would rather let the silence settle on her skin and strip her of colour than admit the truth. I let it go. I let it go because I thought she could handle herself.

Until the day the motherfucker broke her arms and legs, and she spent three months in the hospital, and the police refused to press charges, and I set his car on fire, and Mother asked her not to make noise about it so as to not make herself unattractive to future husbands, and she spent a whole year trying to own her body again. Why? She had been the satanic Jezebel who refused to cook for him, for her 'husband'. In my portrait of her, she is an angel with a sawed-off wing.

3.

The story never starts the way it is supposed to. I keep trying to start with the moments of untamed joy – days when my family was whole and I was pure, untouched by hands I had not invited into my body. But I can hardly remember the days before that. I cannot bring myself to recollect the details of the time before Father-Father and Mother became nemeses who lived under the same roof, each waiting for the other to drop dead.

But I remember this: it was perhaps my first memory, the day of the Incident. I was six. Father-Father took us all to church – me, Bobo and the twins. Mother refused to go with us after a fight with him. She was not going to allow Angel Gabriel strike her for tainting the sanctity of the house of the Lord with anger in her heart.

He dropped us all off at Children's Church. Bobo and I went to

the ‘Ages Five to Six’ classroom, while the twins were in ‘Age Three’ class. I remember being uninterested in the teaching – I mean, I loved Sunday lessons, it was time to learn something new about the Good Book all while stuffing our mouths with cookies and juice, but the story of a white god who ordered a man to kill his own child to test him was a bit dark for me. I thought, instead, of the Genevieve Nnaji movie we watched on Africa Magic the previous night. The Nollywood star’s infectious smile. How Aunt Rosemary once called her ‘the only beautiful thing to come out of this shit-show of a country’.

I looked out the window and saw someone walking out of the church gates. It was a little girl in a pink dress, walking alone, unsupervised. It took me a while to realise it was one of my sisters. It had to be Kehinde. She was the latchkey one who frequently snuck out of places just to walk around. I smiled and shook my head. Her little escapades amused me. But I had to go return her to her classroom, that little rascal.

I turned to the teacher in my class and told her I needed to be excused. When I walked out of my classroom, there was no little girl at the gate. Odd. I went to Kehinde’s classroom. Only Taiwo, her twin sister, was there. I ran back to the gate and walked out of it (till today, nobody mans the gate at the Rhema Kiddies’ Church Centre, Magodo, during services). I looked around frantically, and in the far distance, there was Kehinde walking aimlessly. I called out to her but she didn’t hear. I should have known better than to call out to her of all people. I ran after her. When she saw me, she started to run, laughing away. It was a game to her. And to me, I suppose. We were always playing police-and-thief at home, anyway. This was just another one of those games. But I realised the surrounding was eerily quiet.

The adults’ church was a few blocks away but there was nobody in sight. I started to worry at this point. I tried to get her to turn back but she was running fast for a three-year-old. She kept laughing, running into a quiet street, turning corners upon corners. I looked back even as I ran, to see if any adult had noticed our disappearance and had come running after us too. I continued calling to her but I knew that was futile.

She made multiple sharp turns until we reached a bushy patch of grass. It was a long stretch of grassland ending at the foot of a lake. Kehinde suddenly stopped and looked at me running towards her breathlessly. Then she turned her back to me and continued her running, towards the water. I tried waving to her to stop running but she had already turned away. Were she not born deaf, perhaps she would not have kept running, perhaps she would not have jumped into the lake.

‘Kehinde!’ I screamed. As if that could make her come out of the water. Strangely, there was no ripple, no sign that someone had fallen in. I kept calling to her. Then I heard it – that unnatural sound I still cannot get out of my head today. It was the laughter of a thousand children, loud and mocking. It increased in tempo and volume. A splitting migraine hit me across the head like a hammer. I fell to the ground to cover my bleeding ears. I screamed out in terror. When the sound finally stopped, I stood up to look at the water. It was gone. Before me was dry land. No water. No sound. No Kehinde.

When I returned to the church, I went to the twins’ class to tell the teachers my sister had disappeared. They had not noticed. How was that possible? I told them where I had last seen her. A handful of teachers followed me to the spot. They saw dry land, too. How did my sister jump into a lake when there was no lake to jump into? They looked at me, puzzled. Did I know what I was talking about?

Mother paid numerous pastors to pray for Kehinde’s return. Father-Father placed adverts in every major TV station, promising millions of naira to whoever found her. My family spent two years looking for her, before we gave up. She often came to me in dreams, calling me to follow her. I would wake up breaking into sweat. When I try to paint a portrait of Kehinde, an ocean appears on the canvas instead. Sometimes, she chose to appear to me in water. This was where she came to me the day the boy I first loved taught me that my body did not always belong to me, a miseducation that would take years to unlearn.

It was a school excursion after our first-year exams at the university. We had travelled to a city in the north – I keep forgetting its name. I

was young and excited. And there was a boy.

His name was Kaka Williams. Kaka was the sexiest boy I had ever known, he had two large cups for pecs, with Greek-god arms and abs that could cut diamonds. His smile could light up a city. He was the kind of handsome that could make you touch yourself at 2 am. I wanted him badly. But there was a girl, too.

Her name was Bola Popoola. Bola was the nastiest person I had ever known; she had the foulest tongue. She was Kaka's girlfriend. I hoped he would leave her for me, but he did not seem interested in a 'black' girl. Boys like him were not interested in dark-skinned girls like me. I wished I had inherited yellow skin from my mother – had I inherited anything from her?

In the end, Kaka came along on the field trip north. Bola did not. She had stomach cramps—which might have had something to do with some prayers I made. After the long trip, we got to a hotel and had to rest. That night, a couple of my girlfriends and I decided to go swimming in the pool. This was not my first time swimming but I swear there was a pull in the water I had never felt before – an undefinable weight. My legs could not flap like they were supposed to. The cheerful noise of my friends blurred into nothing, their bodies fading from brilliant colours into black. Everywhere went dark. Then I heard it. The unnatural noise, a thousand children laughing. Suddenly, something pulled me further into the water. I found myself sinking, unable to control my own body. My lungs filled with water, the liquid air an unbreathable weight in my throat. I gasped but only filled my mouth with more water. Then I saw her float past me in her cute pink dress. Just before she went out of reach, we came face to face. She was laughing hysterically, her teeth gapped. She disappeared into the water.

I woke up in what looked just like my room. All the rooms in the hotel looked the same anyway. My head was light, and my body had a terrible shiver.

'You are back,' the masculine voice said, excited.

I turned to see who it was. Kaka. He had only a Speedo on, his bare

chest in full view, a conspicuous bulge around his crotch.

‘You were gone for long. I was so worried.’ He sat beside me on the bed.

‘What happened?’

‘You drowned. I heard the girls screaming and I ran to the pool. I knew my lifeguard training would come to good use. What would you women do without strong men?’

I nodded. I could barely say much. My throat felt sore. My head hurt. Every part of my body was working against me.

‘I saved your life.’

‘Yes.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Thank you. Thank you so much.’

‘One would expect a little more gratitude.’

‘I’m sorry. I am grateful. It’s just, my throat. My head.’

‘Oh, sorry.’ He came closer and pulled me close. ‘It will all be fine.’

I did not know why he did that. My body felt wrong all over, the last thing I needed was to be touched. Later, Mother would say I should have known. I should have known when I saw his bulge. I should have known when his voice got soft and he said, ‘You know, I have always liked you. Don’t pretend you don’t like me, too. I see the way you like my IG pictures in the middle of the night. You want me to fuck your little brains out, don’t you?’

I got up and smiled politely. I just wanted to go to my room. Shivering from the cold and the shock, I made for the door, but it was locked. I turned around and he held up the key card, licked it and slipped it into his underwear.

‘Come here, sugar.’

‘No.’

But that *no* was not enough. It meant *try harder*. It meant *take it by force*. It meant *come into my body as an unwanted guest; you are a man after all. Show your masculinity*. At least that was his interpretation. At least that was Mother’s interpretation. Why did I not scream for help? Why did I not cover my body with the blanket the moment I became

conscious? Why was I so dumb? Why was I so slutty? Why was I so woman?

I was thinking of this weeks later, when I taught my wrists to bleed and jumped into the pool in our backyard. I created a miracle – a literal pool of blood. I do not remember much but I recall the pain like a release, like my swansong. My brother, Bobo, found me and rushed me to the hospital.

This story is about the women in my life. And there is one of them I have not told you about, the woman who started it all – my grandmother.

4.

Maami was a foul woman. Nobody ever says this sort of thing about their grandmother but she was a foul woman by every metric. A difficult woman. A woman who for God’s sake wouldn’t just *behave*. She embraced her complexities. Never dimmed her brilliance for something as pedestrian as *convention*. And isn’t that incredible? She grew up the sixth of a family of 16, the only daughter. Her father was an affluent baale in the city. We do not know anything about her mother. Like most women in history, her silence was rewarded with a namelessness, with an absence in the scripts of memory.

But Maami was anything but a silent woman. At 13, her father tried to marry her off to one of his friends. But she fled the house, ran down south of the country and never looked back. There, she was homeless and hungry, roaming the streets. But that changed after she joined the followers of Osun. She drew her power from the water. We do not know exactly what that power was, but growing up, even I knew she was no ordinary woman.

One time when I was eight or nine and visited her in the village, she took me to the river to bathe. It was night, and I could hear creatures I could not see.

‘There is nothing to fear,’ she said. ‘You are in the water. Your

foremothers live in the water. They will always protect you if you accept them.’

The day she died, only months after the situation with Kaka, Father-Father picked me up from school earlier than usual. I had no idea what was happening, he wouldn’t say. It was not until he drove me to the hospital and led me into Maami’s ward that I was told the old woman was sick. Mother would not come. She had cut ties with Maami years back, since she became Christian and decided she could no longer be associated with her witch of a mother.

‘Okan mi,’ she said to me as she squeezed my hand. Everyone else had left the room.

‘Maami, ki lo sele?’ I asked, even though at 16 I was old enough to figure out what was happening.

‘It is time for me to go meet the mothers,’ she said.

‘How?’

‘Everyone’s time comes, my heart,’ she said. ‘Mine is now. We cannot change it. Osun has decided it is my time.’

‘Maami...’ I could not hold my tears.

‘Okan, me, I am not dead yet. I have not brought you here to mourn me,’ she said. ‘There will be enough time for that soon enough. I just need you to know this.’

She squeezed my hand and looked straight into my eyes. And, immediately, I knew it. It was as though she could see into my soul in that moment. I saw the grave sadness in her eyes, a sadness borne from the inability to avert a pain she could foresee. Being who she was, I knew she could see more than anything she could say.

‘Forgive me, child. I did not understand it until now either. But now I know the truth: your whole life, you will be followed by it, that same thing that follows everyone. To find it, you have to look to the water and claim it as yours. It is not your enemy. The water is always hungry. Give yourself to it or it will take you by force.’

‘Find wh-what?’

‘Look to the water. Return to it. It is waiting for you.’

She refused to say anymore.

She died an hour later.

She was once married. Shortly after she had my mother, she left her abusive husband. To preserve his dignity, he told the world *he* had left her. He said she was too controlling, too arrogant a woman. He had beaten her so many times to teach her her place, but that foul woman just would not fucking stay down. Of course, that brought her a bad name among people. But she didn't care. After her, the women in my family came to be defined by the leaving of the men in their lives.

Or the emotional turmoil left behind by the men they had loved.

My therapists say this is the reason I never finish my paintings or give my stories traditional plotting. Thinking in vignettes and incompleteness is a coping mechanism for those who feel they have lost the plot of their lives. Dr Adesua says it is common with manic depressives.

I told *The Boy I Love* this the day he decided he had had enough of me.

5.

Aunt Rosemary is nothing like my mother. They are so different you would be tempted to argue they did not crawl out of the same vagina. She is an ever-present light. Mother flickers. After the situation with Kaka, when Mother read out a list of things I did to encourage it, Aunt Rosemary told me nothing that happened was my fault, that I owed nobody an explanation for not avoiding my own tragedy. When Mother was settling down to become a Christian wife and mother-of-four, Aunt Rosemary kicked the hedonism up a notch. Till today, she is unmarried and unbothered and unwrinkled and rich as fuck. Think Rihanna in her 50s, and even that Fenty chick could only aspire to Aunt Rosemary's energy.

Aunt Rosemary is a Babe. She was especially so back in the '80s. I have heard all the stories and seen all the photos. She, alongside my mother, moved to the United States when they were teenagers. They spent about a decade there, living their best lives in Los Angeles. There

were wet T-shirt contests, ballrooms, summer days of jean shorts and frozen yoghurt at a Pink Floyd concert, smoke rings at a disco bash, ill-advised bangs on the first day of college, hugging a Janis look-alike at a protest. There is a video recording of her walking the runway very briefly. I still think about it, that intoxicating strut. Art. Aunt Rosemary is art. She's a 100-per-cent-certified bad bee.

Yet, remarkable as she is, she is another woman in our lineage defined by a silence, by something hidden inside words unspoken.

Aunt Rosemary is lesbian. She has never told the family this. But I know. I know these things. She has never been married. Mother chalked it up a long time ago to the devilish spirit of eternal spinsterhood. She has been living with Aunt Rashida for about 10 years now. I do not know why that never raised any eyebrows. But, seeing them together, I wonder what she has given up to live this life in secret. I know she tried suicide twice, but it was supposed to be the depression in our family, the depression that seems to touch only the women.

'I think I am losing control again,' I overheard her say tearfully to Aunt Rashida once. She was having one of her episodes. I started to notice the signs after that, the way she tempered her emotional reaction to things, how she made sure to radiate nothing but extreme positivity, or how she deleted her social media after hearing of a celebrity who had a breakdown on IG Live. Over the years, she struggled more and more to live with her fear of losing control. Of herself and the image she had crafted so perfectly. She feared she would someday come undone, her shimmering essence dulled by the sickness. And she sought support in the one woman she loved.

Today, she is travelling to France with Aunt Rashida, and that is why I am at the airport to see her off.

6.

She says they are only going on a summer vacation, but it is September and they have sold all their property. They are not returning. I sit while

they go to the checkpoint. I text The Boy I Love: *Aunt Rosemary is finally leaving. I am so stoked for her. Call me.* But I know he won't call. He has been ignoring my texts for weeks now, since the Monday he told me he was tired of all my extremes, the way I cannot decide how to love him, telling him I want him to be soft and vulnerable with me while asking him to retain his mystery. I knew it would come to this; the complicated fuckery of love and pleasure we got ourselves into can only end badly. But I don't want it to. I have been with many men, but he is the only one I have ever loved.

'I will marry you,' he had said on our first date at a country club in Ikoyi, sipping wine, staring at me, those gorgeous eyes filled with intensity and smolder.

And even though I had not thought of marriage as a possibility at that point in my life, even though I had begun to entertain the idea of being single for life, something about his confidence made me smile. I said, 'Let's wait and see.'

And when, on our second anniversary, he rented out a theme park and went on one knee as a joke, fireworks going off in the sky, a part of me wished for a fleeting moment that he would ask me to become his forever.

And when he got jealous once over me travelling to Milan to see another lover instead of him, even though he apologised for feeling possessive, I loved it, the way he had begun to want to be the centre of my world.

Now I cannot bear the thought of losing the only person in the world who knows me. I guess that is an ever-present risk when two manic depressives decide to fall in love: their combined immensities eventually become too much to contain. Or perhaps I am making shit up to explain what I do not understand. All I know is that I want him all to myself. He no longer wants me.

Aunt Rosemary comes to me and it is time to say goodbye. We hug so tightly, my ribcage might break. She starts walking away. She stops and turns around, as though to say something, as though to make sure no silence is left behind. But she turns again and keeps walking. I run

to her and hug her from behind.

‘Oh, my, dear,’ she says, a small laughter breaking her syllables.

‘I know,’ I whisper into her ear. ‘I know you’re not coming back. I hope you have a happy life together.’

She grabs my hands and faces me, surprised. She smiles a grateful smile as though she has been waiting for this, for family to tell her that she is loved. A single tear runs down her cheek. She walks away, not looking back. This is perhaps the last time we will ever see each other.

I check my phone. No texts. When Aunt Rosemary and her lover are out of sight, I walk out of the airport. I tell the driver to take me straight home. I know how to get my lover back. It will be too easy. All I need do is tell him what I wanted to tell him that Monday, just before he asked for a breakup: I am pregnant with his child. But I don’t want to use that to bring him back. I want him to choose me for me, not because of what I can give him. I have not decided if I want to keep it, anyway.

I think of my mother and my sisters and my aunt and my grandmother. The world tells me that all the women in my life are unfinished paintings, made incomplete by the disappearance of the men in their lives, their own disappearance. But we all know that is bullshit, right? We are the masters of our own stories, but why is it so difficult for me to see them in all their fullness? Or perhaps that is the problem: none of us can seem to achieve our fullness, limited by our haunted lineage. This is me trying to make sense of myself and these women.

Look to the water.

Every tragedy in my life has come with the water, every disappearance, every death has been of the water. For years now, I have felt a great dread in my soul, borne of a nameless placelessness. It feels more like a drowning, like I am fighting the current and losing. The most dangerous battles are always the ones with myself, the ones in which I am the only possible victim, in which I am both victor and vanquished. No human – no matter how limitless, no matter how magnificent – is strong enough to survive that. But what is survival

anyway? It is certainly not this, this fear that there is a curse which will soon catch up to me, this fear that all the confidence I have spent years building for myself can crumble with just a reminder that my power was once taken from me.

Look to the water.

My sister Kehinde has stopped appearing to me in water. For weeks now, I have been thinking of the day I cut myself, wondering if things would be easier if I had succeeded. I am failing at this. I am failing at getting past what happened. I am failing at rising out of it. I am failing at letting it go. I am failing at maintaining this silence. I am failing at not being angry when I see my abuser's Instagram pictures with his new wife. I am failing at not wishing I had cut his dick off and fed it to Alagbada Ina, the hungry god of flames. I am failing at telling this story properly.

Look to the water.

My grandmother knew so much but only ever said little. I am tired of the mystery surrounding my existence. I am tired of being made unfree by a bondage I cannot even define. I am tired of not having answers to questions I don't even know how to ask. That is why I am currently in front of my pool, stripping my body of every piece of clothing.

In my aloneness, I hear the sounds again. The same eerie childlike sounds that erupted the day Kehinde disappeared. I think of everyone I love and their disappearance from my life, their tendency to leave before I can complete a portrait of them in my mind. I pray for what is lost to return. May the spirit of Maami guide me. Maami told me to 'find her'. And I wonder who 'her' is. My mother? Kehinde? Taiwo? Myself?

I walk to the water and I am unnerved by its blue stillness, the way it just lies there, waiting for my falling body to awaken it. A dwarf moon settles onto the water. Maami is watching. The air is so cold, my breath turns frosty. The water cries out my name in a thousand voices. I feel a presence not my own – not my own alone. I walk slowly towards the water, the spirits of all the women in my lineage converging.

I understand now: the spirit of the water has been waiting this whole time for us to return, to worship it, to surrender to it, to name it ours and allow it to claim us. We have strayed from the path of the water with our new faiths and faithlessness. We forgot that the water will be the friend, not the enemy, if only we acknowledged its power. I let the spirit of the women take me over. May we break this curse of our disappearance. One last time, I look to the water.

And leap.