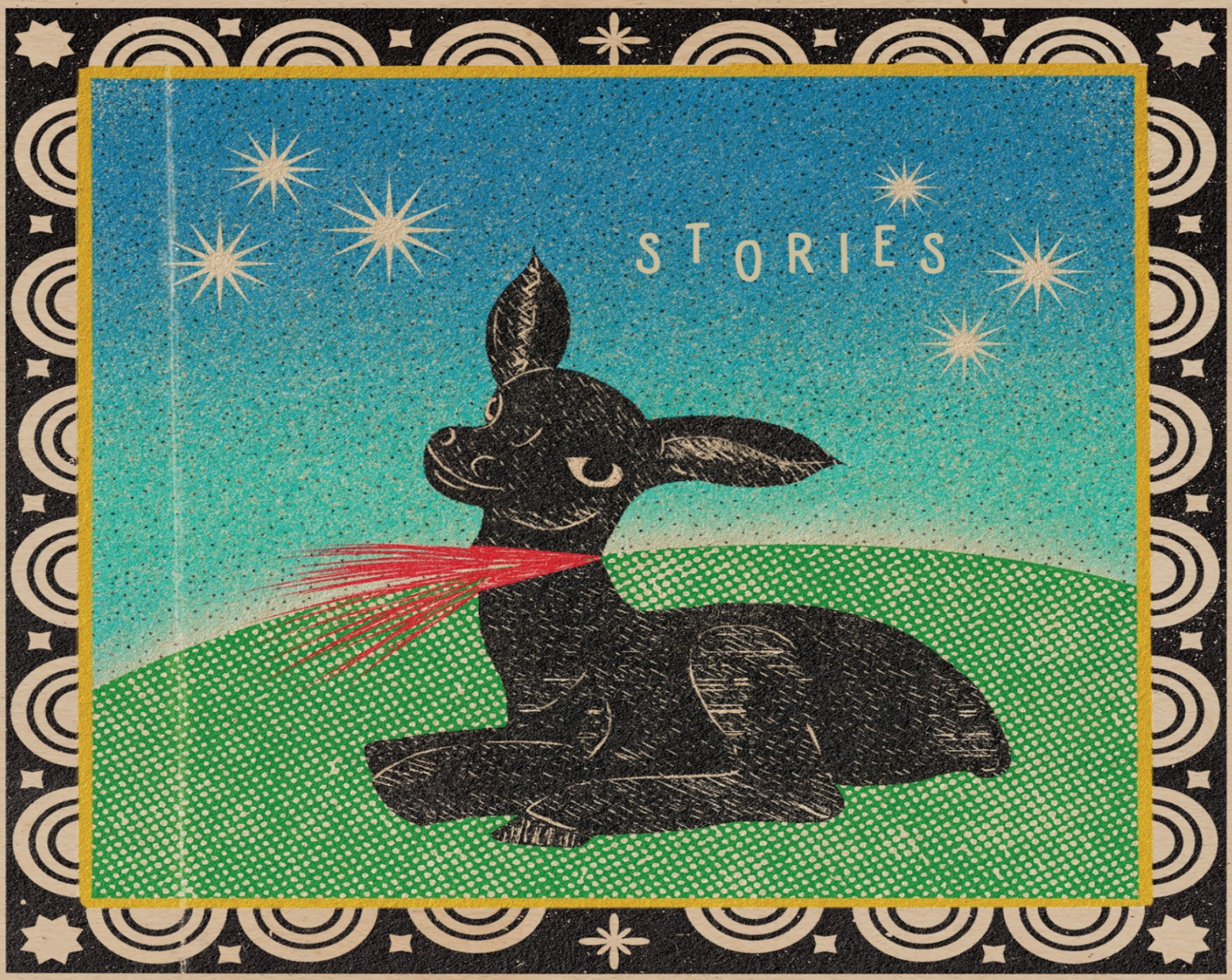
GHOSTROOTS



'PEMI AGUDA

GHOSTROOTS

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stories

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’Pemi Aguda

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
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For Modupe and Ngozi, and the women who raised me

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GHOSTROOTS

MANIFEST

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THIS IS THE FIRST PIMPLE OF YOUR LIFE. QUESTION THE foreign object with all your fingers.

If you were to draw a straight line down from the right corner of your lip, then another straight line forward from the corner of your jaw, the pimple would be sitting at that intersection. Your index fingernail—false, acrylic, painted a burnt orange—flicks at the tiny bump. You press the pad of your thumb down on it, hard. The pimple does not go away. You have just turned twenty-six, why now?

Tonight, your mother calls you Agnes for the first time.

Agnes is not your name.

You are sitting at the dining table, picking beans, picking at this pimple. You like to sort beans on the wide surface of the mahogany table that's older than you, sliding weevils and broken beans to a corner, making a route through the good beans so that you never have to lift them up. You think of the bad beans and weevils as lepers, driven out of the colony to live amongst themselves in disease and brokenness forever. When a weevil starts to creep back to the good beans, you stab at it. You love to feel them die. The crunch, then the give, under the force of your finger. Flick the dead off, stab again. Your mother must have been standing there awhile because when you look up, there she is, frozen, gripping her Bible and hymn book bag to the gold

buttons of her nineties suit. The illumination from the hallway bulb envelops her so that her edges are blurred. Half of her face eaten by light.

"Agnes?"

"Hmmn?" you ask. "Who's that?" But your mother only shakes her head, retreating.

"Who is Agnes?" you ask your father later that night. He is eating while watching a news report on the South Sudan civil war. *Since the start of the conflict, almost two million people have been internally displaced . . .*

You sit at the foot of his armchair, pulling hairs from your arm in the glow of the television screen. Agnes is your mother's mother, your father tells you. "She died when your mum was young, ṣ'oo mọ ni?" He questions your ignorance as he makes vile noises with his tongue and teeth in an attempt to dislodge beef. But what do Nigerian parents tell their children about their own parents? Especially the Pentecostal Christians? Nothing. If you took a poll of your friends, three out of five would be similarly ignorant of these histories of parents who moved from somewhere to Lagos, left behind religions and curses and distant cousins and grimy pasts.

You ask your father if he wants more beans and beef, your hand back on that pimple. He shakes his head no. Your father hates that you take the weevils out of the beans; he thinks they add a certain flavor to the dish.

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THE SECOND TIME your mother calls you Agnes, your little family of three is sitting in relative darkness. Electricity is out again and fuel scarcity means that you only see each other in candlelight until the power is restored. Your father snores in the gray-turned-brown armchair you call "Daddy's chair," while you and your mother sit across from each other at the dining table. You pull the empty Milo tin that the candle is mounted on closer to yourself. Wax sloshes off slowly and trickles down a side. You close your left eye, then

the right, then the left again, enjoying the way the flame shifts. You draw the candle even closer, sniffing at the flame.

Your mother's face lifts from her phone screen and watches you. Through your left eye, you see her eyes widen. Through your right eye, you see her mouth open. Through both eyes, you see terror spread over her face, the way it does when a flying cockroach is in the vicinity.

"Agnes?" Your mother's voice is all croak and phlegm. "Agnes, is that you?"

You lift the candle to your chin to illuminate, pulling it slightly back when heat licks at that stubborn, still-there, solitary pimple. "It's me." Pause. "Are you okay?"

Your mother says nothing, swallows.

"Mummy, do I look like your mum? Do you look like her?"

She pushes her chair back, not answering, leaving the table in an arthropodous scurry, locking herself in the guest bathroom until the lights come back on.

"But what's wrong with her?" you ask your father the next morning, whispering over his black coffee and your milky tea.

He shrugs. "Her mother died around your age . . . Maybe the resemblance has heightened?" He ruffles his mustache, forehead crinkled. "Be patient with your mum, the memories are hard on her."

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DAYS LATER, you sit on the four layers of tissue paper you've spread on the toilet seat of one of Lekki's posh restaurants as protection from the innermost liquids of strangers, and stroke at the hardness of the pimple.

You skim the inside headlines of the newspaper you picked from the top of the magazine rack. *Woman Cuts Lover's Penis Off in Rage of Jealousy. Man Beats Daughter to Death for Skipping School. Community in Outskirts of Lagos Hack Thief to Pieces.* You close the paper.

Someone knocks, jiggles the handle, but when you don't respond, footsteps fade away. It is then you wipe with too much tissue, stand. After you flush, your gaze stays fixed inside the toilet bowl even when the shuddering of the machinery has stopped, after the Lekki water is as clear as it will be. You watch until the water in the bowl stills.

The replacement tissue rolls are sitting on an open shelf under the sink. Pick them up, one after the other, throw them into the toilet bowl. All five of them. When the last one has landed on top of the others, white on white on white, squeeze up the newspaper and throw it in too. Flush again. Watch the water rise to seat level. When it starts to seep out of the bowl, through the newspaper's print, and out to the black-and-white hexagonal tiles of the restaurant bathroom, flush one more time. Then walk out of the flooding bathroom.

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THE NEXT MORNING, you wake up to find the pimple gone. Lying on your back on your friend's sofa, you spread fingers across your face, searching to see if it has moved to a new location. Your unmoisturized fingers are dry and harsh against your soft skin, so you trail every inch lightly, careful not to scratch yourself.

"If you haven't ever had a pimple, can we say you've not gone through puberty?" your friends used to tease you, cupping your cheeks in their hands, plastering kisses on the smooth, taut skin of your face because you have always been the loved baby of the group, the youngest. Sweet baby-faced you.

Only when you are satisfied the bump is no longer there do you creep into the bathroom to stare at your reflection in the tiny mirror above the sink. If you lean back, away from the mirror, you can see all of your face, but no, don't lean back. Move your face up, down, left, right, and see the parts in detail. The thin brows, trimmed too slim by the zealous makeup artist at a

friend's wedding. A wide nose, yellow sebaceous dots accenting the point where nose blends into the rest of the face. Lips that are full, too full, so that you highlight with a brown lip liner before filling in with lipstick, an attempt to thin them.

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THE THIRD TIME your mother called you Agnes, she hit you in the face with a Bible. Your friend Lesley is hosting you until your mother stops seeing her mother in your face, stops labeling you the reincarnation of someone who terrified her. You and Lesley both work on Awolowo Road, so you drive together every morning in the red Honda handed down from your mother. Lesley doesn't have a car.

You move away from the mirror to get ready for work. But after you have pulled on the branded neon green T-shirt for your job at Globacom, where you spend all your hours asking how you can help customers, the pimple is back. You touch it, softly. It is tiny, almost imperceptible to the eye, but there is a hard bump underneath. You sit on the arm of the sofa that is temporarily your bed, worrying the pimple. Pinch it, press against it.

"Genes," is what you told your friends when they teased. "I got Mama's good skin."

Lesley hasn't stirred from her room this morning. She is a deep sleeper. You stare at your friend's bedroom door, brushing at the pimple. Then you pick up your tote bag. Don't knock on Lesley's door, don't wake her up even though you're her ride to work. Jog down the stairs to your car, slam the door. Drive alone to Awolowo Road with your bag sitting in the passenger seat like a queen.

When Lesley starts to call over and over again, an hour later, sending angry *WTF?!!* texts, turn your phone facedown on the desk. Walk to the bathroom down the hall, lean into the mirror, and see that the pimple is gone again. Your skin is back to baby-smooth and blemish-free.

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YOU ASK YOUR COWORKERS if they believe in reincarnation. Five of them believe. Two of them claim to have corroborative stories.

One: A man dies from injuries sustained in the Biafra war. His widowed wife gives birth to their son months later. The little boy has dark eyes and an ear split in two, the two parts curling over each other like abandoned twins. The woman traces her son's ear, seeing her husband's blood dripping over her fingers as she cleaned his war wounds.

Two: A man named Collins really wants an education, but he is too old and thick from years on the farm. Collins's farming is successful, though, so when he is bitten by a snake and dies slowly in the arms of his little brother, Eze, he bequeaths his wealth to him, saying he will be back in another life to get an education. Years pass, and when Eze finally has a son after many daughters, people remark that the son loves to lick the palm oil before eating the yam, just like Collins used to. When the son falls ill at the age of ten, Eze consults the dibia, who throws cowries to consult the gods. The gods tell the dibia to tell Eze not to forget that Collins said he would be back for an education. After the boy is enrolled at a school, the strange illness disappears.

"Wow," you say. "Wow." But at lunch, one of the storytellers confesses to you, leaning over your plate of rice and stew, pulling at your sleeve, that he read it all on Nairaland and therefore cannot verify its authenticity.

"Nobody has a story about a reincarnated woman?" you want to know.

"Well, I know I'm Beyoncé," your boss's secretary says, sidling up to you in a haze of flowery perfume.

You frown. "I don't think that's how it works," you tell the woman, who is stroking her blond wig as if it were a living thing, a pet that needs comfort.

"Kilode? I'm telling you I'm Beyoncé. I am Beyoncé." She leans closer to you, her hair falling heavy to brush against your cheek; she caresses your

chin, turns it so that she is looking through full false lashes into your brown eyes. She smiles a benevolent smile. “I am Beyoncé.”

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THAT DAY YOU LEFT HOME for Lesley’s, your mother returned from choir practice singing a hymn about Jesus and lambs and blood. You were in the kitchen cooking dinner, because you liked to cook, and you liked to cook for your parents, and you liked living with your parents, although you could afford to move, and you liked the cold of the tiles seeping into your feet and the cold of the frozen turkey hurting your fingers.

Your mother’s singing stopped when she heard you humming over the sink. She stood at the door to the kitchen, looking at you, her daughter, wearing that black-and-gold kaftan you share. Her Bible trembled in her arms when she spoke.

“Where did you hear that song?”

You turned to squint at her. “What song?”

“What you were humming just now. Where?”

But you couldn’t remember what abstract tune it was—from TV? radio?—and you said as much but your mother was already bearing down on you, her terror stark.

“Agnes, why have you come back?”

You stared into your mother’s angry eyes, brown and cat-shaped, like yours, with the scanty but long lashes, like yours.

“I’m not Agnes, Mummy. I’m your daughter?” Your voice was small, frightened for the first time since the Agnes episodes began. Her face contorted; her tone, a screech. You leaned away.

“Agnes, why are you back? Have you not done enough evil?”

Then your mother lifted her Bible and swung it through the air until it hit your face. The leather of the Bible stung your chin. “Agnes, I bind you! Agnes, flee, in Jesus’s name! Flee!” Your father’s voice was somewhere in the

background, asking your mother if she'd gone mad. She hit you again and again, turning an eye blood-red, until your father placed his body between you and the Bible. But you did not feel pain, did you? You didn't even flinch. What you felt was a release within you, a stirring, like a cough freeing you from a congestion in your chest.

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YOU ARE A GOOD GUEST to your friend Amaka, who is hosting you after Lesley told you not to come back to her house. Amaka watched you clean the kitchen, play with her puppy, buy groceries, but her skepticism at your niceness forces a politeness on your interactions that was never there before. Lesley told Amaka about you leaving her that day without any reason or apology, and the gist among your friend group is that you have been acting weird lately, and maybe you are going through something? But Amaka is that friend who doesn't quite know how to say no. "Will you lock up, please?" she asks. "Do you want to use the bathroom first?" Courtesy, as if you've been demoted to acquaintance.

One week into your stay at Amaka's, you wake up to two pimples. One on the same spot on your chin, the other on the left of your eyebrow, like a teenager's bad piercing. The new pimple throbs red, suffusing your head with an ache so intense you think you understand what the coconuts must feel like when you throw them to the ground to break them open in your parents' backyard. You know your head will explode, crack open under this pressure, staining red and white and pink and brown this space you have tried to keep clean for Amaka.

Amaka is not back from work yet, and you sit on the shaggy rug of her living room, cradling your head in your hands, in your lap. The puppy is nudging your foot, licking your ear. You lift your head, so heavy, and stare into the gray eyes of the small dog that is the size of a handbag, so tiny, so

huggable, so cuddle-able, and the dog stares back into your eyes. It has a patch of black around its right eye.

The dog shuffles back. It smells something.

Pick the dog up. The dog is named Ojukwu. Pick it up. Hug the animal tight. Hug the animal tighter until its breath is your breath, and you feel its small bones against your big bones and the breath and the fur are warm against your flushed skin. Hug it even tighter when it starts to scratch at your skin because hugs shouldn't be this tight. Crush the animal until you hear a *pop*, but no, it is not your head that has exploded; your headache, in fact, is now gone—it twitched to a stop along with Ojukwu's heartbeat.

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YOU CALL YOUR MOTHER'S AUNTIE—one of the four relatives from both parents you're allowed access to—and ask about Agnes. She says: "Oh, I'm surprised your mother told you about her! It can be so hard to talk about. And both of you look like her too, you and your mum—those cheeks, your noses . . . it must be hard to accept. See, Agnes was such a wicked person! Evil! She died really young too, from something too kind like malaria, but everyone was so happy when she was gone."

"But who was she? Where is her family? Mummy never talks about her."

"My dear, nobody knows where my brother married her from. She could be the devil's daughter for all we know! He showed up from a hunting trip with her by his side, not answering any of our questions, unleashing her terror on our family until she killed him finally."

"I didn't know anything about this." The details of your family history are only now beginning to fill in with color, but the colors are harsh, severe, and you're tempted to look away.

"Of what use is it to you, my dear, to know?" your aunt asks. "Let the past stay there, abeg. There are stories we leave buried so our children can move without weight."

“But why?”

“Why what?”

“Agnes. Why was she wicked? What happened to her, to make her be that way?”

Your aunt laughs the way she does when she thinks you’ve been brainwashed by “the West,” like the time you said having house girls was modern slavery. “O, ọmọ mi,” she says now, “not everyone needs a reason.”

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DURING THE DAY, as you answer the phones, listening to customers who want you to solve all their problems, you feel a rippling, like a tiny rat let loose underneath your skin.

The customer on the phone is telling you that his data disappeared immediately after he loaded it. You ask for his details while brushing against the scratch marks Ojukwu made on the inside of your elbow. It tickles, you shudder, swallow back nausea.

“What is the worst thing you’ve done?” you ask 08056647737, Olajide Benson, of 76A, Eunice Bashorun Street, Victoria Island.

“Like how?” He sounds confused. “With my Glo SIM card?”

“No, in life. What’s the worst thing? Are you a wicked person? Have you hit a woman?”

“Is this a survey you are doing?”

“Yes,” you lie.

“Well, I don’t remember really. I must have done bad things in my childhood, you know? In my youth too. I went to Unilag, I was even in a cult, but that’s all in the past. But wo, see, if we really look at it, you’ll see that we’re all wicked in this country. I’m watching the news now, have you seen that our governor is demolishing innocent poor people’s houses just so he can build expensive estates?”

“And do you believe in reincarnation?”

“What?” He sounds panicked now. “Is this Globacom customer care?” He hangs up.

You charge his line a fee for no reason.

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YOU ANSWER YOUR MOTHER after the thirty-seventh missed call. Your father has sent you *Please, just talk to your mum* texts; *She was wrong, but she’s hurting* texts; *Come home, let’s talk* texts. Each new one bumps an old one away, all unanswered. Your mother is crying now, saying she is sorry and could you possibly forgive her?

“It’s because I heard you humming that song. It was her song. How did you know it?”

“I don’t know, Mummy.”

“. . . and I saw you doing all those things that she would do, and . . .”

And she tells you that all she could see superimposed on your facial features, so like hers, was her own mother cutting her arms with a razor and stuffing the wound with powdered chile pepper, and her mother locking her out of the house if she played in the street too long, and her mother smashing a full bottle of beer on her father’s head so that the musty smell of beer mixed with the sharp smell of blood and both liquids soaked up his Limca T-shirt before he slumped to the ground and died at her feet.

“I’ve done things too,” you say.

“But Jesus can save you!” Your mother says Jesus has saved her, and had you not noticed that she has always been a kind mother to you, and never hit you, or screamed at you? Not until the day she saw her mother reappear on your face and freaked out and reverted to the self her flesh wanted her to be, even though her spirit had overcome through Christ who strengthens her.

You hadn’t noticed extreme kindness, but perhaps only because there hadn’t been the opposite present to emphasize it. She has been a good mother, a goodness you have taken for granted. Your father has been a good

father, if oddly protective of your mother and her extreme religiosity. You are starting to understand that this must stem from knowing her history.

"He can save you!" your mother repeats. "Jesus saves!"

You are sitting in your car outside your friend Fatima's house; she is celebrating a promotion. You yank the rearview mirror down to check your lipstick. A pimple is glowing red.

"Mummy, I have to go."

"Wait, wait! Come with me for deliverance, Pastor Kalejaiye is coming on Sunday. We can get it out of you. Jesus can—"

Fingernails bite into palms. Bite out: "I said I have to go."

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YOU WALK INTO AN INTERVENTION in Fatima's living room. Six of your friends are there, including Lesley. No Amaka.

Nobody sits next to you on the fuchsia couch.

The last time you were all together, it was your twenty-sixth birthday, and they had surprised you then too, but with a dinner party at Cactus. You remember Fatima had started to make a toast, four glasses of wine in, and said to you, "Babe! Our late twenties are for questioning. Are you who you really want to be? Are you—" and she had hiccupped loudly, a sound that echoed in your head.

You bite the inside of your cheek now, your fists still clenched from the conversation with your mother.

"We know you didn't mean to . . . to hurt the animal. Was it a mistake? You should have just told her instead of running away."

You are quiet, you do not lie to them. Silence becomes your only answer as they go on.

"This is not you," Lesley says. She is standing next to the door as if waiting for a reason to walk out. "I ran into Michael at Chicken Republic the other

day and he said you threw water in his face at work? Like, that's so so not you." She looks to someone, anyone else, to support her. They all nod.

"Remember when you flew to Abuja last year just to help me pack?"

"Or when you loaned me fifty thousand naira and refused to take interest?"

"I mean, you convinced your folks to take me in that year in uni after Popsy died."

Their stories do not sound familiar to you at first. Surely that's not you? The only you to remember is the one that held on tight until Ojukwu stopped breathing. The you that flooded that bathroom without pausing to question your actions. You remember the you that did not flinch when your mother hit you with her Bible—you had stood there, taking it, feeling an awakening within you, a stirring of an animal that had always been there, hibernating, waiting, waiting. But as they keep piling stories on top of each other, the memories melting over your head like cool ice cream, yes, you remember when you slept in the hospital with Tola that weekend, when you sat next to Jude while he came out to his parents, when you loaned Lesley your laptop for her final-year project.

This new horrible person is not you, you start to agree with them, but on the tail of that acknowledgment are doubts in the shapes of laughing hyenas who ask questions like: What about those moments deep within a mundane interaction when you were struck by the realization that your life was a performance? When you were confused about why you were smiling, if you wanted to be smiling, if you were supposed to be smiling, and who your audience was, who you were trying to convince?

If your instinct has always been to suppress the urge to burn the feathers of the gateman's nesting chicken, or to stamp down the itch to run into pedestrians crossing the road, and instead to be there for a friend, to massage your mother's feet, then your friends must be right to believe that's *the real true you*, the one that has prevailed until now.

But then Fatima comes to sit next to you, your body tilting toward hers

when the cushion dimples under her weight. She stretches an arm out to you. “We love you,” she says, and starts to touch your face, your baby cheeks that know their kisses so well, but she grazes the pimple on your chin and you are fisting up, pulling back, smashing her nose, shouting that she shouldn’t touch you.

It is their turn to be silent. Your hand is throbbing in protest. There is blood on your knuckles.

The silence ends as they gather around Fatima, who is screaming, “Fuck-fuck-fuck-izit-broken?”

You stumble through, past them, out of that house that is suffocating you. You want to stay, you want to cry, you want to grovel, you want to believe that the stories they told are real, and all your life has not been acting. That they know you.

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“I DON’T KNOW that I can overcome this, Mummy,” you cry to your mother on the phone, your knuckles still wet with Fatima’s blood. “It’s inside me.” You are so scared that you believe it.

Your mother reminds you that you had always been a sweet child, always smiling at your parents, always making friends, always making them proud, even with your odd habits of plucking out your hair or yanking the tail of the neighbor’s cat. But how does she know the hair-plucking and cat-bullying weren’t the true parts? The joy at killing weevils? Your mother is sure that this is a result of her mother’s blood in you, genetics, but what if the independent you, the distinct you, the *you*-you, has always pined for this cruelty, wanted it, waited on it? She suggests church again. She brings up fasting and prayer.

“Look, Agnes . . . she insisted I call her Agnes . . . she died from a mild fever at twenty-six; what if she’s back to finish the work she started in that life? My pastor reminded me that in the Bible, King Jehoiakim was wicked

and started his reign at twenty-five; but King Amaziah also started his reign at twenty-five and he was a good man, a good king! There's no coincidence here. Your spirit wants to choose and we must cast out the spirit of Agnes!" This theory of your mother's appeals to you: It's not your fault.

You tell your mother no, you won't go to her church's deliverance service, you don't believe in that, but yes, you will fast and pray with her if she thinks it will help. Abstaining from food for seven days to purge yourself of this other hunger seems cosmically right to you. You will fast; she will do the praying.

On day one of fasting, twelve customers hang up on you.

On day two of fasting, you call in sick, you spread tea tree oil over your pimples, including the third one. Then the fourth.

On day three of fasting, your mother calls to pray with you, to encourage you. She went through this, she reminds you. After her mother died, she hadn't known how to react. Whether to weep with joy, or with grief. She had gone on a rampage, a decade-long biting phase. She bit from the age of six till she was sixteen. She was the sixteen-year-old with a biting problem. She bit her family members, she bit strangers, she bit herself, enjoyed the taste of skin and sweat in her mouth, between her teeth. But then the Lord had saved her. The pastor's wife took her in at sixteen and introduced her to Jesus.

On day four of fasting, you squeeze pus out of your tenth pimple. Your belly pulls down to meet your spinal cord, your eyes roll back. You bite your tongue until blood pools. You go down to the parking lot of the dingy hotel you're staying at for the duration of the fast. Enter your car. Put the gear in drive and hold your breath until your car rolls into the parked Mercedes-Benz in front of you. Breathe out.

Maybe if you indulge this urge within you, instead of abstaining from it, the pimples will go away, you will exhaust Agnes away. Then you can return to yourself.

So when you slap the security guard at ShopRite, feeling his jaw shift beneath your palm, when you go into the parking lot of the small church,