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American Dream

I was eleven when Prophet Ajanaku announced in front of the whole church that I was destined to live in America.

"This one is an Americanah," he'd said. "His enemies have seen this and they are not happy. That's why they want to take him before his time. Church let us pray."

He sprinkled holy water on my head and rang his bell in circles seven times.. In the middle of the prayer, I looked up at my mother and noticed that happiness had suddenly descended on her. I had been sick with malaria for seven days, and for those seven days she'd worn sadness as clothes. Her sadness turned into panic. Panic turned to anguish when she found me foaming at the mouth and shaking without control. But as the prophet blessed me, the corners of her mouth were turned up and her face glowed with optimism.

For many years after that day, my mother would clutch tightly to those few words about my future and they would lift and soothe her soul as she struggled to build a new life without my father. I remember that day in church clearly because it was also the one year anniversary of my father's death, and exactly ten months since we had moved from our house in Surulere to our new home in Makoko, a sprawling slum on the Lagos lagoon. There were no official numbers for the population of the slum, but people said that between 85,000 and 250,000 people lived in the tightly packed shanty houses that hovered precariously over stagnant waters on uneven wooden stilts.

A lot changed in the year after my father's death, but the move to Makoko was the biggest change for me. A week after we'd moved into our new home, I noticed a cluster of ringworm develop on the left side of my neck. Then without warning, I woke up one morning to find that it had spread all over my body, including my scalp. My mother shaved my head and kept it shaved for the months that the ringworm lingered. On my first day at my new school, I felt embarrassed walking into my crowded classroom. I imagined that the other children would stare and point at the new boy with no hair and ringworm colonies running up and down his arms and legs. But that didn't happen. And I quickly realized that having ringworm or some sort of skin disease was not an oddity at the school.

Life in Makoko revolved around the lagoon. There was no clay soil, no concrete, and no dirt roads to stand on, to tumble in cartwheels on, or to play soccer. All of that was no longer part of my life. And clay soil and open dirt roads now felt so distant, as if they had only been a figment of my imagination. The other children in Makoko didn't seem to mind that they didn't have these things. Most of them were born here and had learned to swim before they could walk. Their lives followed a predictable pattern. They went to school if their parents decided on it.

They learned to swim and paddle wooden canoes with a straight bamboo stick. The boys learned how to build the narrow, wooden crafts and how to fish. The girls learned how to smoke the fish and how to sell it along with other goods. This was their way of life and anything different would be so foreign that it would require some time to adjust..

On some evenings, some of the boys stopped by my house in their canoes and we paddled out into the open lagoon, away from the other houses, the barking dogs, the women selling goods from the ribbed bottoms of their canoes, and the chaos of our organic, unplanned neighborhood. We fished and watched cars and buses crawl through traffic on the Third Mainland Bridge in the distance. The boys taught me how to cast a net and how to swim.

When I felt confident in my swimming skills, I called my mother and my two younger sisters out to the little porch in front of our house and I leaped off the peeling wooden rail into the brownish-black water below. They jumped in excitement as they watched me alternate between the breaststroke, the backstroke and the front crawl. My sisters asked me to teach them to swim and we started lessons right away. My mother kept a watchful eye from above, in case she needed to scream for help. She didn't know how to swim, and I could tell that she was proud of me, just like she was whenever I brought fish home from my outings with the boys. After a while, she got tired of watching and she went inside.

Our house was a square room with two windows on the same side as our door. We had tiptoed around the room for the first two weeks after we moved in, afraid that the thin wood sheets that suspended us over the waste and sewage-filled lagoon would give in under our weight. My mother had placed a queen-sized mattress that took up half the space of the room on the wall directly across from the door and windows. In a corner near one of the windows, she kept a small kerosene stove that always ran out midway through her cooking. Sometimes she'd ask me to go and beg Iya Tubosun, who lived next door, for more.

Iya Tubosun was my mother's closest friend in the neighborhood, and she always seemed willing to give my mother whatever she asked for—cooking seasoning, toothpaste, kerosene, calamine lotion for Tosin's measles, detergent. When we first moved in, she lent us one of her canoes until my mother saved up enough money to buy her own. On some mornings, she stopped by our house with *Agege* bread and hard boiled eggs that she bought from hawkers who paddled around the neighborhood in their canoes, shouting, "Come and buy *Agege* bread 'o," in Yoruba. Iya Tubosun would hand the food to my mother, and then place her fat hands on my mother's thin waist to twist her hips from side to side, admiring them as if they were new shoes.

"If I thin like you, *ehn*, I for done go international. All these *oyinbo* men on the Island, na them I go dey sell my market to," she'd say. My mother would laugh shyly, avert her gaze from Iya Tubosun, and pretend to not be flattered.

No one dared to offend Iya Tubosun, a woman who walked with an air of confidence and certainty engendered a sense of assurance and a

sliver of fear. Her short, stout build, deep red eyes, and horizontal tribal marks that ran across her puffy cheeks only added to the effect.

She was the type of woman who knew how to make things happen, the kind of woman who couldn't be shortchanged on anything. The first time she knocked on our door, which was on the day we moved in, Tosin, who was three at the time, refused to look at Iya Tubosun's face or to collect the biscuit that Iya Tubosun held out to her. Later that day, Iya Tubosun brought her four children to greet my mother. She ordered her son Jide, who was a year younger than me, to pick me up for school in their canoe every morning. Jide frowned and grumbled something incomprehensible to himself. I'd been surprised that she didn't put Tubosun who was my age in charge of the task. But he didn't seem to mind that the task had been delegated to his younger brother. Before Iya Tubosun left our house that day, she told my mother to let her know if anyone gave us trouble as we settled into the neighborhood. I was happy my mother had gained the friendship of a woman whose place in Makoko was unquestioned and firmly rooted.

But their friendship didn't last long. One Saturday morning, I woke up to find my mother and Iya Tubosun trading harsh words, each woman trying to out scream the other. My mother called Iya Tubosun an *ashewo*, a third-class prostitute. The crowd of neighbors and strangers who had gathered to watch the mildly entertaining scuffle looked to Iya Tubosun for a reaction.

Mama Bisi stood between my mother and Iya Tobosun, restraining them from exchanging more than words. When either woman hurled an insult and tightened her wrapper, as if in preparation to get physical, Mama Bisi ran to wrap her body around the woman, shouting, "H'is h'okay. H'is hokay 'o. Let there be peace. Me hi've said my h'own." But then her face would betray her words. She'd glance at the other woman, searching for a response. She yelled to my mother in a moment of unnecessary self-aggrandizement, "H'if to say hi' not here, Iya Tubosun for finish you."

But Iya Tubosun had already won the fight and the crowd. My mother stood in a corner, exhausted and at a loss for words, her hands folded over her flat chest. Tears gathered in her eyes and remained there. She shook her head in the pitiful way she did whenever she thought of my father's death. How swift and unexpected—alive and vibrant in the morning, slight headache in the afternoon, dead before sunset.

My mother had used her best line when she called Iya Tubosun an *ashewo*. But it had failed to have the desired effect she had hoped it would. It didn't sting like hot iron on the skin.

It left her mouth and fell flat at Iya Tubosun's feet.

The crowd had not gasped the way they did when Iya Tubosun called my mother a "wretched widow" or when she called me a "prancing ringworm infested beggar." But then again, it was also an open secret that Iya Tubosun was a sex worker. I saw men of all ages and body types either running away shyly from her room or knocking quietly at

her door, trying not to attract the unwanted gazes of the jobless neighbors who sat outside and gossiped.

I wanted to go outside and put my arms around my mother's bony shoulders. I wanted to remind her and announce to the familiar and unknown faces that my mother has a son who is destined to live in America, a son who is an Americanah.

If Prophet Ajanaku had said it, then it had to be true. Prophet Ajanaku would not lie. He hears directly from God, he is God's anointed. God reveals himself to him in a way that he does not to other people. That is the reason why the Holy Prophet, as we were ordered to call Prophet Ajanaku in church, is able to see things in the future that other people cannot see.

It is the reason why people fall to the ground when he places his hands on their foreheads. It is the reason why women who visit our church complaining about barrenness come back nine months later carrying new born babies. It is the reason why some church members get new jobs just days after he tells them that they will. It is the reason why people who have all kinds of sicknesses come to our church and later give testimonies of miraculous healings after the Holy Prophet has touched them.

Some people are even healed without his touch. One time a crippled woman stood from her wheelchair and started running around the altar after the Holy Prophet's sweat fell upon her by accident. I was in church that day and I saw everything with my own eyes. Prophet Ajanaku was shouting into the microphone as he prayed. He was sweating profusely, as usual, but he did not have the small red towel that he always uses to wipe the sweat from his face and neck. At some point, he ran his index finger across his forehead to wipe away the beads that had formed there. Then he flicked his hands to get rid of the sweat. It flew in the woman's direction, and she was healed.

I did not go outside and let the crowd know what the Holy Prophet had said about me. My mother would have knocked my head with her knuckles if I did. She did not want anyone besides the people who were in church on that day to know what lay in my future. She feared that people would be jealous and that they might try to stop it from happening. I don't know how people are able to do such things. But I know that no one can be trusted, not even your uncles and aunties.

The conditions of people's love are fragile and superficial.

One day they can have your back and then the next they can come after you with a wickedness that will shake you at your core and uproot the anchors of your life.

I learned this after my father died. His brothers and sisters—my uncles and aunties—showed me a part of themselves that I didn't know lay within them all the years my father was alive. Daddy was the first born, and he was also the first to live in Lagos. After he graduated from secondary school, he left his small town to study Mathematics on a full scholarship at the University of Lagos. This was when Nigeria was still "good" as he liked to say.

A sepia picture of daddy smiling proudly in his graduation gown hung on the wall above our television back in Surulere. After he graduated, he got a job in the oil industry, and from his paycheck he put Uncle Tayo, Uncle Segun, Aunty Titi, and Aunty Fisayo through school.

I was nine when Aunty Fisayo finished up her degree in Mass Communication at Lagos State University. Like my other uncles and aunties, she, too, lived with us while she went to school and after she graduated. She and Aunty Titi shared a room in our four-bedroom bungalow while Uncle Tayo and Uncle Segun lived in the boys' quarters. I enjoyed having all my uncles and aunties around. But Uncle Tayo was my favorite.

Even though he was older than Uncle Segun, Aunty Titi, and Aunty Fisayo, he acted younger. He walked with a bounce like some of the teenaged boys on our street, bending his shoulders, listening to music through his Walkman, and moving his arms with a swagger that made girls listen when he talked to them. He had come to Lagos with dreams of studying Law at the same university that daddy graduated from many years earlier.

His admission letter stated that he had been admitted into the Law program, only for him and dozens of his other freshman classmates to arrive on campus to discover that their offers had been receded without any explanations. The university offered them spots in the English and the Theatre Arts departments instead. Uncle Tayo chose to major in English. Five years after graduation, he remained unemployed, or underemployed, I should say, since he was cutting people's hair for a living. If he had any resentment about where his cards had fallen, he didn't show it. Or maybe I wasn't observant enough.

On weekends, he blasted Michael Jackson songs from his radio while he hand-washed his clothes outside in the courtyard. I would sit with him, listening to his stories of how the university had changed so much over the last few years, watching his muscles stiffen as he wrung water from the wet clothes. I enjoyed comparing the stories he told of his school to the stories dad told.

Unlike daddy's stories, there were no campus gardens, no exhilarating road trips around the country and other parts of West Africa with other students, and no cheery lecturers in Uncle Tayo's stories. Everything was dark and gloomy—lengthy strikes that stretched four-year degrees to eight years, hungry unpaid lecturers who charged students fees for their final exam results, cultist students who slashed other students' throats with machetes and terrorized the campus. His stories were a reflection of what the country had become since the good days were displaced by successive coups and brutal military regimes.

On some Saturday afternoons, Uncle Tayo took me out. I always looked forward to our outings. We usually went to the bookstores in CMS and bought cheap secondhand books. And then on our way home, he always bought me either a meat pie from Mr. Biggs or an ice cream from the ice cream men who rode around on bicycles. Once, when I was

eight, he took me to the Bar beach in Victoria Island. It was a pleasant surprise.

That was the first time I saw the Atlantic Ocean and a horse. I asked Uncle Tayo if I could ride on one of the emaciated animals that took beach visitors on five-minute rides beside the crashing waves. But he didn't have enough money to pay for a ride. Instead, he asked a gaunt-faced handler if I could touch his horse. The man shouted at us in Hausa and threatened to hit us with the whip he used on the horses. We ran away disappointed.

The day daddy died, Uncle Tayo put his arms around my shoulders and told me to stop crying. We walked to the *kaboki* store down the street and he bought me a bottle of Fanta and a packet of biscuits. We sat in silence in the dimly lit living room with Mummy, my sisters, Uncle Segun, Auntie Titi, and Auntie Fisayo. Uncle Tayo sat in daddy's chair. I sat beside him, resting my head against his chest. Mummy dabbed tears away from her eyes with her wrapper from time to time. Neighbors trickled in and out of our house. They all had puzzled expressions and different explanations for daddy's mysterious death.

Mrs. Delano, who lived across the street and had a son who was a doctor in London, said that she saw a star fall from the sky the previous night when she went outside to take down clothes she had washed earlier in the day. Mr. Omotosho, who was the headmaster of a small private school on the street before my street, said he had seen a black cat sitting in front of our gate just that morning. Paapa, a white-haired man who had lived the longest on our street, said he saw a dark cloud over our house in a dream he'd had some days before. He said he'd shared the dream with his wife and they'd prayed about it.

That night I dreamt about black cats and dark ominous clouds.

The next morning, Uncle Tayo woke me with a heavy slap. His hand left an imprint on my face. He dragged me from my bed and pushed me to the floor. When I opened my eyes, I saw Uncle Segun, Auntie Titi, and Auntie Fisayo standing behind Uncle Tayo. I heard my mother crying loudly behind my door.

"You and your witch mother are leaving this house today, illegitimate goat," Uncle Tayo said as he kicked me. "We will kill you before you kill us." Auntie Titi and Auntie Fisayo nodded. Uncle Segun shouted insults at my mother in Yoruba. He slapped her and she fell to the floor. For the first time, I wished that Uncle Segun's eyes would go blind. He already had poor and rapidly deteriorating vision because of his albinism. I get lost in my thoughts every time I recall that day, particularly Uncle Segun's pale hand slicing across the air before landing on Mummy's cheeks. The memory is like paddling out into the vast lagoon without the backdrop of Makoko to guide you back home where you set out from.

It was only when my mother slammed the door that I realized that she and Iya Tubosun had run out of hurtful words to throw at each other and that the crowd which had gathered had dispersed. Mummy threw

herself on the mattress and slept for the rest of the day. She did not let me or my sisters go outside to play, so we were stuck inside with her. The next morning, I tiptoed outside while she was still asleep. An unpleasant smell of feces and trash hung in the air. It had rained heavily throughout the night and outside was dull and heavy, as if a lot more rain was still to come.

I felt myself unfold as soon as I stepped out. It was as if all the air outside inflated my whole body, not just my lungs. Tubosun was sitting on the ten-inch wide plank that was their front porch; his legs spilled over the edge and dangled in the dirty water below, which had risen because of the rains. He was biting his nails and scratching dried flakes of skin from the infection on his scalp. He often sat outside like this whenever his mother had a client inside. His brother and his sisters would come to my house or go to some other friend's house. But Tubosun never joined them. He preferred to sit alone and bite his nails.

I asked him if Jide was home. I wanted us to paddle out into the lagoon. Tubosun pretended not to hear me. I raised my voice and asked him again. He looked at me through the corners of his eyes, rolled his eyeballs and hissed loudly. He got up from the edge of the plank that he sat on and walked to the end that was farthest away from me. I watched as his hips swayed from side to side in an intentionally exaggerated fashion.

This was his way of reacting to the fight between our mothers. I wanted to call him a bastard. The word hung from the tip of my tongue. It was what his mother called him.

When she and Mummy were friends, she would come to our house complaining about things he had done that displeased her. "I no know who give me that bastard. No be same person who give me Jide," she'd say, laughing. The first time I heard her call him a bastard, I'd been startled at the casual ease of it, as if it was normal. That day on the porch I didn't call Tubosun a bastard out of fear that Jide might hear me.

Although Jide was younger, he struck a strange fear in me. There was something about his authoritative demeanor, the stiffness and seriousness of his face, the broadness of his chest that belied his age. He was taller and stronger than both Tubosun and me. He usually decided where we paddled to, what games we played, and how long we spent on an activity. I sometimes imagined him as one of the soldiers in daddy's stories about the Buhari regime, which in its time had authorized soldiers to flog adult men and women for petty things like not forming a line when entering public transportation. Even at eleven, Jide already had a manliness that I and the other boys lacked. He probably thought of himself as the only male and, perhaps, the de facto first-born in his house. Sometimes I felt that his masculinity was so conspicuous because it stood in stark contrast to his older brother's femininity.

Tubosun was not like the other boys in the neighborhood. He never joined us for our fishing trips. He preferred to play hand and leg games with the girls. Once, when I and the boys came back from fishing, we sat in the boat and watched as Tubosun and some girls played *Ten Ten* in

front of his house. In the middle of the foot-stomping rhythms, one girl's braided extension dropped from her head and Tubosun picked it up and attached it to his own. He ran his hands over the length of hair repeatedly and tucked it behind his ear. The other boys and I laughed.

Jide glanced at us and our laughter vanished instantly.

As Tubosun continued to bite his nails and stare into the distance at nothing in particular, I asked him about Jide one last time.

This time he did not look in my direction. I realized that he was determined to ignore me, so I sighed and went home.

I heard him stutter "p-p-p-pra-pra-pra-prancing beggar" and burst into laughter behind me as I closed the door.

Later that afternoon, Mummy finally got up from the mattress where she had been sleeping since she came inside after her fight with Iya Tubosun the previous day. Her eyes were dim, as if she'd been crying throughout the time she'd slept. A dried, flaky trail of spit adorned the left corner of her mouth. Her short hair was tangled and pointed straight out of her head, as if in rebellion against something she had done or not yet done.

My sisters and I watched her as she picked out a flowery shirt from among her few clothes, which sat in a pile at the edge of the mattress. But just as she was about to slip into it, she remembered that Iya Tubosun had given her the shirt, so she threw it back into the pile and settled on a sleeveless yellow instead. Mummy knew that we were watching her, so she took extra precautions to avoid making eye contact with our hungry faces. No one had eaten anything since the previous morning. Mummy bent over the kerosene stove and shook it to see if it had any kerosene. It was empty.

But even if it had kerosene, I wasn't sure what she would have cooked. Almost all the money my mother earned went to keeping the rusted corrugated iron sheet roof over our heads. Mummy straightened herself, put her hands on her waist, and shook her head. "Ade, you have to work," she said to me, without making eye contact. "You can see how tight things are. I will ask the Holy Prophet to pray for you so that you can get a job."

The next week, I started working as a gateman at a school in Victoria Island, the business center of Lagos. I got the job through a member of our church, who was also a gateman at the school. It was my first opportunity to leave Makoko. As much as the stench of Makoko and the lagoon had become a part of my identity, they did not have the same hold on me that they had on most residents. Every night I dreamt of the day when I would leave Makoko and never return. In my dreams, I always load a big suitcase into a canoe and then paddle out of the lagoon and all the way to Murtala Mohammed International Airport, where I get on a flight to America and start a new life.

In reality, I would need to board one or two rickety *danfo* buses—the ubiquitous small yellow vehicles, black stripes along their sides, that are a unique feature of the Lagos landscape— to get to the airport.

Later, when I was paid my first salary, I folded the few notes into my pocket and took three *danfo* buses from the school to my late father's house in Surulere.

It was my first time there since my mother, my sisters and I were chased out. The bright red gate, which was one of the few things that I remembered about the house, was now painted black. An image of the day when I crashed into the gate and bruised my knee with the new bicycle that was my seventh birthday present from my father floated into my memory. I wrapped my hands around the bars at the top of the black gate and broke into tears, which surprised me.

I had only returned to get closure, to bury a stubborn memory that had refused to die with time. I had not thought about what I would say or how I would react if I ran into Uncle Tayo or my father's other siblings, whom I'd not seen since the day they sent us packing.

As I wept in front of the gate, I did not notice that a grey, 1997 Toyota Corolla had pulled over beside the gate and a man dressed in a business casual outfit had stepped out of the car and was walking towards me.

"Can I help you?" he asked, fidgeting with a big bunch of keys in his left hand.

Words eluded me. I tried to speak. Only salty tears came. The man was patient, but I could see anxiety seeping into his chest. He was ready to fight or to run if he had to. After three attempts, I managed to tell him only about the memory of my bruised knee. He looked more confused than he was before. That was when my words finally came back to me and I told him everything. The man, who looked like he was between fifty-five and sixty-five, kept his hands in his pockets while I spoke. His brows were furrowed. He did not interrupt or ask any questions until I'd finished.

I asked him if he had bought the house from Uncle Tayo. But he had never heard the name before. He said that he bought the house from an Igbo man, who had bought the house from a Yoruba man, whom he believed was the original owner of the house.

"When I bought this house," he said, biting on his lower lip, "it was in a bad state. I had to do a lot of work on it."

I pointed at Mrs. Delano's house across the street and asked whether she still lived there. His eyes widened and he smiled at me for the first time. It seemed the question was his first authentication of my story.

Mrs. Delano, who'd said she'd seen a star fall when my father died, had moved to London two years earlier. She wanted to be closer to her son.

I was restless on my way back to Makoko that night. My heart pounded heavily against the walls of my chest. It could barely contain the exhilaration of what had transpired that day. My head felt light and free. My lips ached to tell someone about the man, the bright red gate, which was now black, and Mrs. Delano.

I couldn't tell my mother what I'd done. Any mention of my father made her face fall with the weight of sadness. I decided to stop by Iya Tubosun's house on my way home to tell Jide everything. I could already picture his eyes lighting up at my story about my father's house. I looked forward to providing embellished answers to any questions that he would ask.

No one was sitting outside on the porch when I knocked on Iya Tubosun's door that evening. That should have been a clue to me that something was wrong. Tubosun and his siblings usually ate their dinner outside on the porch. Although I heard voices inside, no one answered the door. I knocked again.

There was no response for a while, but just as I was about to head home, Iya Tubosun shouted, "*Ta ni ye?* Who is that?" She opened the door as soon as she confirmed that it was me.

Once I stepped inside, a ravenous shock descended on me and consumed all the excitement that had been bubbling within. Iya Tubosun's house was dark, except for a dull glow that emanated from the kerosene lamp that hung overhead on a hook attached to the ceiling.

In the dark, Tubosun lay motionless on the floor. His face was swollen beyond recognition. Cuts and bruises covered his entire body. He had been caught kissing another boy at school that afternoon.

An angry mob had formed and beat the two boys. I didn't witness the beating since I no longer went to school. The outcome may have been worse had Jide not gone to the scene just in time. He'd been heroic when he stepped in and fought off the boys who were beating his brother. But he had not escaped unharmed. An old shirt was wrapped around the gash on Jide's head.

He and Tubosun were expelled on the spot. The principal said he didn't want an abomination at his school. While I stood just inside the door, Iya Tubosun sat restlessly on a short stool in a corner, shouting, "Bastard, bastard, bastard," repeatedly in Yoruba. She shifted her chin from one palm to the other every few moments. I couldn't tell whether the redness in her eyes was from crying, since her eyes were always red. But her voice was cracked and she spoke without the certainty that I had come to know very well.

I knew it would not be wise to bring up my story, so I only sympathized with Iya Tubosun and her family and promised to check on them the next day.

When I went home, I tried to read the first pages of the used novel I bought earlier that day. The sentences on the pages of the book merged into a blurry image of the red gate, and I could hardly focus. I blew out my candle and forced myself to sleep.

In my dream that night, I loaded the familiar suitcase into Mummy's canoe and paddled to the airport. I got on a flight that stopped in London, where I saw a grey-haired Mrs. Delano. I told her that I was on my way to America.
