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Adjustment of Status

Folahan slouched on the shady bench of the roadside paraga bar five minutes away from the apartment he shared with a bus driver who was never home. He checked his pocket for his phone after hearing a ping and discovered that it was from his wife. He sighed and put it back without even glancing at her message. He was exhausted from walking in the scorching sun and needed to get his mind off his problems.

Mama Nkechi, the owner, poured him a plastic cup without asking. He took the cup with a smile and drank as he watched vehicles and passersby. His head filled with warmth. His eyes watered. Alerted by another ding, he dug into his pocket for his phone and saw that message from his wife again, and again he returned it to his pocket unread.

A wispy fellow waved as he walked past the canopied bench and called out to him: “Londoner!”

Folahan had never been to London. He could not quite recall when he acquired that nickname—it must have been during one of his drunken roadside rants about America. He must have informed his drinking companions in his *gonna-wanna* accent that in his two years of living in America, he had never experienced a power outage. He must have told them about Tyler Perry Studios, Coca-Cola, and the place where Martin Luther King Jr. once lived. He must have told them about massage parlors where “anything goes”—nondescript buildings in neighborhood strip malls—and even sounded a little emotional about it. He must have tried to explain who Martin Luther King Jr. was, even though one or two of them must have wanted to tell him they already knew. He must have peppered his speeches with *fuck* and *shit*.

One of them probably called him a Londoner as an insult: “Because you are a Londoner, you think you are better than us, abi?” Maybe the person who first called him Londoner didn’t care where he’d traveled as long as it was overseas. The nickname apparently stuck, but Folahan didn’t care what they called him as long as he didn’t have to offer his real name. Yes, he frequented the joint and had conversations with them over shots of cheap, locally brewed rum, till the church bells nearby rang for the umpteenth time, but that didn’t mean he should tell his business to strangers. Folahan was well aware that they regarded him as a “been-to,” someone who had traveled abroad and was now living large at home. Only he had been back in Nigeria for three months without informing his wife

or children. Only he had lost his dignity and returned home almost penniless.

Folahan waved back at the fellow and wiped the sweat from his brow. He was sober now. Not for long.

Earlier that day, he had heard about the explosion in Lagos but was too preoccupied to care. He had seen an okada man shuffle over to a young girl sitting in a kiosk with a transistor radio pressed close to her ear. The fellow had pinched her cheeks playfully, and while the girl with a serious-looking face tried to fend him off, the announcement had spilled in from the radio. The girl screamed with shock before repeating the news aloud: “A bomb blast in Lagos.”

“Bomb blast? Where? How did it happen? Was it a gas explosion?” the fellow demanded with urgency in his voice.

“Shhh. I am trying to hear the rest . . .” the girl said. Other people brought out their portable radios. A nearby store owner switched on his TV. There was a flurry of words from the newscasters.

Folahan moved from shock to disbelief to empathy to helpless acceptance in seconds. This was how people constantly dealt with the waves of misfortune in this country. They gasped with shock, sorry for the victims for a few moments, and then forged ahead, hoping the next calamity wouldn’t come near them or their loved ones. His family lived far away from Ikeja, the site of the blast. He wondered if his wife had even heard about it.

Another hour had passed when the church bell tolled again. Folahan sipped his drink and heard the distant sound of a band playing, the drums rolling and a trumpet blaring mournful music. The sound grew louder, and a slow-moving convoy of vehicles led by a station wagon emerged from around the bend. Traders stepped out of their stalls. Children gawked.

“Eeyah, so sad,” said Mama Nkechi as she served a customer who had just arrived. Folahan caught her looking at the convoy only once. She carried on with business. He reckoned she must have witnessed many funeral processions.

The convoy came to a halt in front of the chapel, about two hundred meters from Folahan. A man dressed in a priestly robe stepped out of the station wagon with a woman and two children. Clad in black, the family huddled together, clutching handkerchiefs. Maybe the deceased was the head of the household. More people streamed out of the other vehicles with somber faces. Mama Nkechi filled his cup again, and he emptied its contents in one gulp. The station wagon’s back door opened, and the pallbearers, young men in black suits, dark glasses, and dirty white gloves, sprang out like rats from their nest. They dragged the coffin out, hoisting it to their shoulders. The mourners moved single file: the priest, the band, and the pallbearers leading the way. The band blared out a new tune, and though there was no singing, Folahan knew the words:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,*

*Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

Yes, he knew the song all too well. He took another swig from the cup, looking at the drawn faces and the crying family as they filed down to the cemetery next to the chapel. Clumps of elephant grass and small trees dotted the burial grounds, and gravestones poked out of bushes, white and gray, caked in mud. The band stopped at the cemetery gate, and the mourners walked on, meandering through the graves until they reached the place marked for the interment. He'd seen processions like that many times in Georgia; the family of the deceased would sometimes request that the funeral director be present for the ceremony, and he'd accompany Bill. Folahan wondered who was in the coffin. He wondered who had prepared the corpse for burial, and how. Was it anything like he'd done all those months abroad? Within moments, the roadside watchers dispersed and went about their business. The bustle returned. Life went on. Folahan asked Mama Nkechi to pour him another drink.



Folahan's job as a washer of the dead had no official designation, and its legitimacy was questionable. He had come to America on a visitor's visa and refused to return even after his time had run out. His objective was to overstay his visa, and his plan was straightforward: file for a green card using the procedure known as adjustment of status, based on immediate relative relationship with a US citizen. He had heard about American citizens who would get married to an undocumented migrant for a stipulated period for a fee, and since there was no record of his marriage in the US, this wouldn't be a problem. All he had to do was make enough money to get one of these spouses for hire and avoid getting picked up by the immigration authorities until the day he submitted his application for adjustment of status. A year or so after getting a green card he would leave his contractual marriage and send for his real family.

As part of the under-the-table arrangement with the funeral director, he had lodging, enough food, and other necessities. Folahan's free housing was a small room in the basement next to the refrigeration unit at the back of the funeral home. He had no social security number, which meant he couldn't do what other people did without attracting attention and subsequently being in danger of being deported. Therefore, no hospitals if he got sick, just home remedies; no driver's license; no apartments; no bank accounts, only cash. If he were arrested or even talked with law enforcement, that was it—he was gone. Whenever he went out, he was sure to make himself inconspicuous. Bill was particular about Folahan laying low because whatever he did impacted him too.

Bill had once traveled to the Congo on a one-week trip when he was young and turned expert in all things Africa, at least in the eyes of the members of Community Saints Church in Lawrenceville, Georgia. He was an influential elder in the Church.

“Thank you for what you are doing for the Lord. I am sure this young man will be in good hands,” said Margarete, one of the nosy white church ladies, after a service. Bill told the church folks that Folahan lived with him and was in the United States to attain the American dream. He did not say what that meant. When Folahan first got to the United States, he stayed with Gbadebo, his friend who was a graduate student at Emory, in Atlanta. Folahan quickly concluded that his plans for supporting himself in America and making enough money to get a green card and bring his family to the country were unrealistic. Soon it became clear that Folahan’s reliance on Gbadebo was an inconvenience, so when Bill, whom he met at church, offered him a job and housing, he saw it as a sign of God’s blessings.

Did Folahan conceive a situation where he would be washing corpses in America? He had left his job as a manager of a cement factory in Nigeria. He left a wife and three children, Junior, Oluwadara, and Semilore. But he, and many others just like him, had been drawn by the allure of the West, convinced that life there was better and that nothing could be worse than the conditions they lived in, so they left, abandoning what was left of their dreams. Once they discovered otherwise, it was too late. So, they clung to hope, worked hard, and wished for good fortune. Folahan had sold off his cars to afford the flight and rent for the first two months. Maybe he did not imagine himself in such a dire situation, but that was what attaining the American dream meant—rising from the dust of wretchedness to an enviable status in a strange land. However, some days he wondered if it was worth it—if he’d made the right choice.

Margarete had turned to Folahan and spoke about never being to Africa. She asked what Africa was like. Did they have paved roads? Modern buildings? Folahan wanted to say, yes, we do, just like you have here. But Bill spoke before he opened his mouth. “He is from Nigeria, Margarete, one of Africa’s richest countries,” he said with a smile. Folahan couldn’t decide which was worse, Margarete’s question or Bill’s comment.

Margarete gave a surprised look and mumbled something about her daughter spending time in South Africa as a study-abroad student. She said something about the safari, wished Folahan well, and shambled on to speak to the next church member.

Folahan worked mainly night shifts at the morgue, down in the basement. That was the only way he could work without drawing attention, and the arrangement

worked for Bill. A family could bring their dead one day, and the corpse would be prepared for burial the following morning. It took about forty minutes to prepare a corpse plus the time required for embalment. Folahan only assisted in the embalment process if needed.

Folahan would open the body bag slowly from the head down, armed with a disinfectant spray. Then he would transfer the deceased to a stainless-steel slab with slats for the water to run through. The head reveals the fact of death—vacant eyes, gaping mouth, the vomit-inducing smell that rises out of orifices. Sometimes fluid gushed out of the ears and nose. Folahan's first time opening a body bag sent him heaving into the toilet of the prep room, but he got used to it. Thinking helped him work and gave him fortitude. He thought about his family. Junior, a pre-adolescent, was growing tall when he left. He wondered how tall he was now. He remembered his children's smiles, longing tears, and questions about when he would bring them to America when he was about to leave.

He sometimes imagined following the traditional trade of *mghassilchi*, something he had read somewhere months ago. *Mghassilchi* washed and shrouded the bodies of the dead for religious burial. It was an honorable profession, he learned, and God bountifully rewarded those who did it. He imagined purifying the body for burial after the soul rose to the sky, leaving the shell on earth, back to the dust from whence it came.

Folahan sometimes imagined Bill as a *mghassilchi* too. Bill insisted on showing respect to the bodies no matter their condition. They lost their lives; they shouldn't lose their dignity, he would say. Bill provided cloth to cover their private parts and taught Folahan how to wash them gently with warm water splashing out of a long hose hanging from a single faucet. Folahan learned to sponge them with soap from head to toe and towel them off without chipping their delicate skin. He learned to close their eyes and mouth, positioning them with their hands crossed over the abdomen, as in a casket. He learned to wash the hair. To oil and comb it. If the corpse needed to be embalmed, the body was wheeled to another room, where Bill got to work under the glare of UV lights. Folahan hardly participated in that process, which involved making a small incision in the neck to allow the blood to drain, injecting embalming solution into the carotid artery through a small tube connected to a machine. He waited on Bill, handing him tools and helping him hold them. Bill injected a solution to plump facial features if the body was emaciated. If trauma or disease had altered the appearance of the deceased, he enhanced it using wax, adhesive, and plaster. He took proper care, like a sculptor remodeling a stone or an artist touching up a painting. In the end the deceased could be viewed in the casket, dressed, cosmetics applied. The body would be beautiful again.

Another loud ding. He checked his phone. Another message from his wife. He

had sent her a Blackberry he bought with installment payments he made in America for ease of communication. Transatlantic calls were too expensive, they had agreed, so they stuck to “pinging,” which worked out for him still, even after he had returned to a neighboring state in Nigeria three months ago without her knowing. When she requested him to send her images of America, he said he was too busy. When she asked for pictures of him working, he mumbled something about not being allowed to photograph the bodies. Folahan heaved a sigh and scrolled through his messages until one caught his attention.

Baba Junior,

Did you hear about the bomb blast? Junior went to Ikeja with his friends this morning, and he has not been back. I am driving there now to look for him. Call us as soon as you receive this. Find a way.

Omowunmi

He felt shock, then cautioned himself. She was probably overreacting. He looked at his cup and wished it wasn't empty. Mama Nkechi took a hint, pouring him more. Dizziness set in. He gulped the liquor. Now he tasted nothing, but he felt a burning in his throat. She asked if he was okay. Folahan fumbled through his wallet, gave her cash without counting, and lurched off the bench.

“Is everything okay?” said Mama Nkechi again as he reeled and swayed, drifting onward. He was her customer, nothing more, so he did not owe her any answer. She knew nothing about what he had been through, the shame he had to endure. She knew nothing about the pain of his dashed dreams. Better to walk away without saying a word. He kept walking, and when the ground began shifting beneath his feet, he stopped to gather himself. He leaned against a utility pole and drew deep breaths. He tried to will himself to be still. Stay still. Still . . . still . . . still . . .

Work was sometimes hard, and his small, formaldehyde-smelling room suffocating. The silence, pierced only by the distant rumbling of trains, was tolerable for the first few weeks. But weeks turned into months, and the dense silence seemed to animate the concrete walls. There was the loneliness of being an outsider in a strange country—the cold smiles from strangers, the prying eyes of busybodies, the insensitivity, and the insularity of well-meaning folks like Margarete. To keep sane and tend to his needs, he touched himself, conjuring images of his wife's beautiful body. He stirred up memories of her warmth and moisture. He recalled how they would lie close, and her naked flesh would quiver under his hands, her breath hot against his sparse chest hair. But again, the walls and the silence closed in, fogging his brain. Soon, even the memory of his wife began to fade. Not her

essence but her smell, how her skin felt, the contours of her body.

One afternoon, after sleeping off the exhaustion of the previous night's work, Folahan typed "porn" into the Google search on his phone. Two links, Pornhub.com and XXNX.com, caught his eye, and he went for the latter. Captioned videos of naked bodies engaging in intercourse appeared. He moved his cursor down the horizontal links as he felt his body stir. *Riding homemade. Female amateur swinger.* He hovered his cursor around the *Female ejaculation* tab for some seconds and changed his mind, clicking the webpage shut. He wiped light perspiration from his brow and adjusted the bulge in his trousers, shame coursing through him.

Three days later, he went back to the site, this time stroking himself until a sweet spasm went through him. After a while, even porn-enhanced orgasm could cure neither his loneliness nor his desires. That was, however, what he had. He made do. One night, he stumbled on the "massage" porn of XXNX.com. He had heard of massage parlors that provided "happy endings" but never thought it was real. Porn actors mostly roleplayed the massage videos, but some seemed more candid, taken from cameras that were hidden, the shots dark and unsteady. His search led him down the rabbit hole of review boards, forums, and blogs about happy endings, code words like "rub-n-tug" and "full-service." He found a community of men online who frequented erotic massage parlors and referred to themselves as *mongers*. It was not long before Folahan realized massage parlors weren't just scenes from porn videos. He learned, to his astonishment, that there were such parlors as close as two miles away from him. He could visit one, if he wanted to. Part of him felt guilt. He was also angry. Angry at himself for being vulnerable. Angry about how hard everything was, and how he couldn't do anything about the desire gnawing inside him.

Bill brought in more work. Hours of washing corpses made Folahan's muscles ache and plagued his mind with desperate thoughts. His craving for living human contact made him look forward to services at Community Saints Church, even if it meant he had to put up with Margarete. Her daughter, Heather, was visiting from Colorado Springs, and he spoke with her after church service one Sunday. She wore a flower-patterned gown and smelled of lavender. Her blond hair was straight and lustrous. Folahan reckoned she had to be in her thirties, some years younger than him at least.

"Do you have a family? Are they here with you?" she asked him outside on the church lawn. He considered lying about having a family, but what if she found out the truth from Bill?

"Yes, my wife and kids are in Nigeria."

"It must be hard to be so far away from them."

"Yes, very hard."

"I am very sorry about that."

"Thank you."

They took the back door and strode down the street from the chapel for ice

cream. Folahan got two scoops, vanilla and strawberry, and Heather got one scoop of chocolate. She loaded up some with her wooden spoon for him to try.

“No, thank you,” he said with an impish smile, and after an awkward silence Heather muttered something of an apology for offering. He told her not to worry then asked her about South Africa. They talked for a time before falling silent again. Folahan was searching his thoughts for something to say, anything to fill the silence as they walked back to the church building. She extended her hand as they approached the church doors, and he hesitated for a second. He saw the smile on her face and took her hand. Her palm felt warm.

In his room later that day he felt the need to scratch the stifling itch in his sex. He sniffed the lavender on his hands where she had touched him and opened his fly.

Folahan stepped up and pressed the buzzer. His hands bathed in a cold sweat, he promptly rubbed them against his trousers, looking nervously over his shoulder across the large parking lot. The box-shaped building that housed the massage parlor stood at the end of a strip mall that looked like it hadn't received a touch of paint in years. Lace curtains covered the windows of the storefront. Neon-red inscriptions of “Body Massage” and “Open Massage” flashed in the midday sun from signs above the door.

A white woman Folahan assumed was the manager opened the door and gave him a once-over before smiling. She could have been in her fifties or sixties. He stepped into the waiting area, a vestibule with a gray couch and decorative plants, trying to calm his nerves. She asked him if it was his first time, and he said yes. She said “welcome” again and opened a logbook from a stool beside the gray couch. She asked for a name and an address. He hesitated, then gave her a made-up name and the address of the church. Maybe she didn't care. She explained the tariffs, Folahan produced the cash, and they went through a beaded curtain.

The manager slipped past him in the dim hallway beckoning for him to follow, then pointed at a door. There were other doors. He could hear voices from them.

“Private rooms are at the end of the hallway.”

A massage table stood in the middle of the red-lit room they entered. Bottles of oil, talcum powder, tissues, and clean towels occupied a bench at one end. Small crystals were arranged in a line on a table in the room's corner. Zen-like music played softly over the speaker system. The masseuse walked in moments later. What Folahan first noticed was her beautiful smile. Her age showed in the laugh lines around her dark eyes, but her body looked lithe in her strappy, knee-length zebra-print dress. She had small breasts.

She instructed him to disrobe, don a towel, and lie on the table. Folahan waited for her to leave before removing his shirt and sitting on the edge of the massage table, looking around. Fear lodged in his chest; it was laced with anticipation. The

masseuse's instruction did not register properly, or perhaps he was careful not to do anything wrong, so he kept his trousers on. He did not know what to expect.

She walked in moments later, a look of surprise on her face. She grabbed a towel from the neat pile on the bench and handed it to him.

"Take off trousers." Her voice was hard and authoritative. Once again, she vanished. Folahan shucked all but his boxers and wrapped the towel around his waist. He roamed around the room, picking up the crystals and setting them back down, when he heard her approaching footsteps.

He lay down on the massage table and planted his face through the hole at the end. She began by standing above his head and kneading his temples. She smelled of talcum powder. Ripples of pleasure went through him. She moved to the other end of the table, covered his boxer shorts with a towel, and sat on his buttocks. She squirted oil on her palms and pressed deeply into his shoulder blades. He felt her hands slick and warm on the knots on his shoulders, and she slowly wound her way downwards. She plowed her thumbs into the grooves of his tailbones, nudging at the edges of the towel around his waist, drawing moisture from his skin. For a moment, he felt her hands drawing his boxers down, cold air moving in against his bare buttocks, but she stopped without removing them completely and proceeded to work on his calves and thighs.

Was she going to tell him to roll onto his back and take away his towel? That would surely make him feel even more awkward. Would her nails brush slowly, teasingly against his chest? Would she seek consent before pulling down his boxers the rest of the way, or did he have to ask her first, as some of the internet forums instructed? He had never felt this vulnerable before.

Without thinking, he reached out for her breasts when he was told to lie face up. The masseuse objected with her eyes and then asked for a tip. Folahan was about to agree to her request when he heard a door slam somewhere down the hall and the shouts of "Police! Police!" from the other women. He pushed her off and rushed wildly to recover his clothes.

Dressed and in the vestibule crowded with masseuses and their customers, he told the police, between short, quick breaths, that it was his first time and that he had come for a professional massage. They told him there was no cause for alarm, questioned him a bit, asked for his name and address. This time he felt he had to give them his real details. They let him go soon afterwards.

Two days later, the funeral home was visited by ICE officers in tactical gear. The next two weeks were a blur—with more questioning, and with Bill denying his knowledge of Folahan's undocumented status then demanding to talk to his lawyer at the ICE office, Folahan being transported from detention center to detention center, more questioning, and paperwork. Finally, Folahan was transported to an airplane that flew him back to Nigeria.

Failure was what he feared the most. The story of his fall from grace would be whispered in village verandahs and the corners of households. No one traveled

abroad and returned empty-handed, not if they had nothing to fall back on. He could not return to the job at the cement mill, which would have been filled by now. Even worse, to him, was the fact that he lost everything as a result of his sex-solicitation. He could conceal that to others, but he would forever have to live with the consequences. At first, he thought he would tell his family he had been deported after a few days, but as time went on, he had more time to reflect on the catastrophe that was his life. He had ruined his life for what again?

Ding! Another message rolled in. Junior is in the hospital! A wave of fear tore through him, much like he felt when the police barged in on the massage parlor. With trembling hands, he typed a message: What? What happened? Which hospital?

One minute felt like an eternity. He told himself there was no reason to be alarmed. Maybe it wasn't anything too serious. Stay still. *Still . . . still . . . still . . .*

Another ding. *He was in Ikeja where the bomb blast happened.*

He responded too quickly. *What you mean?*

One minute passed, then two, and he could not wait any longer. He stumbled away from the utility pole on which he was leaning, his legs unsteady. He noticed people glancing at him from the corner of their eyes. He searched around for a GSM stand or a kiosk where he could make a call. When he found one farther down the road, someone was using the only cell phone available, and another person was in line. He went up to him, beseeching him. "My son is in the hospital. I don't know what happened to him. Please let me make a call next," he said with tears in his eyes. Passersby stared. One of them said, "Your son will be healed in the mighty name of Jesus," and a chorus of amens followed.

"Take my phone and call your wife," said the kiosk manager. Folahan thanked him and walked away from the kiosk to make his call.

"It's me."

"You are in Nigeria?"

"I just landed. I wanted to surprise you. How is Junior? What's the doctor saying . . ."

She was silent for too long. Then, "What do you mean you wanted to surprise? When were you going to call to let me know you were in Nigeria?"

"I was—"

"Folahan, what is going on? Were you deported? Are you with another woman?"

Folahan was taken aback by her onslaught of suspicious questions. He quickly attributed it to raw emotions.

"Is my son, okay? That's all I want to know right now."

"You have been drinking. I can tell. What is really going on? So, you've been in Nigeria all along?"

Folahan had no response to her question; there was no point in attempting to deny the situation.

“This is not the time and the place, please, is my son okay, I need to know?”

He could hear her quiet sobs on the other end of the line. Folahan choked back tears, tried to compose himself.

“Will Junior be okay?” he asked again.

She finally caught her breath, then was silent again for a long time.

“He has been admitted, but he will be fine,” she said.

“Thank God.”

“Please come home.”

“I am on my way, my dear. I am on my way.” ■