

one story

Breastmilk

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The warm, slimy creature that is my son is placed in my arms. He is crying a grating, lusty soprano. I stretch my mouth into the likeness of a smile. I don't look down at the baby. I hold him loosely: too tight and he might squirt out of my grip and ricochet off the white walls of my hospital room.

"We're going to cut the cord now, mummy," one of the nurses says, and I nod. She says *mummy* in that patronizing tone I use when I tell my cousin's children that they are so big and tall and grown now.

"Can I cut it?" Timi asks.

I don't hear what they say to him, how these efficient women tell him no. But I see him step back, his head lowered like he's been chastised. I could have told him that this is not one of those New Age hospitals that allow men to actively participate in the birth, that the father is merely a bystander here, a witness. But I didn't. There are many things I don't say to my husband.

The baby is taken from me so he can be cleaned, so I can be cleaned too. Through the haze of twelve-hour labor pains, I watch my husband reach out to receive our baby from the nurse, now swaddled in the ewedu-colored cloth we bought. I am tired. My gritty eyes want to close against the world, and my aching body wants to gather its leaking, melting shape into itself so I can recover from all the pushing and groaning and bloody catastrophes of childbirth. But I want to watch Timi's first moments of fatherhood. His body is stiff, in the practiced hold they taught us in prenatal classes: baby's neck in the crook of your elbow, the other hand supporting the rest of the weight. He swings his head toward me—the only part of his body he releases from this wooden stance that proclaims fierce responsibility and a dash of pride—and smiles. Through mine, I see the sheen of his tears.

I turn away and settle back into the pillow.

In the morning, my mother shows up. She is telling me that she came as soon as she could, that my father would be proud of this feat of mine, bringing new life into the world. And am I glad? Am I relieved? Am I fine? Am I proud?

I am excused from responding to her barrage because I am a woman who just had a baby, an exhausted woman who endured earth-shifting contractions, who thrashed through a forest of clawing pain, whose pelvic region throbs as if pounded by a pestle. My mother doesn't sit; she hovers above me, tucking a braid away, stroking my cheek.

I roll my eyes. "What of the conference?"

“Bah,” she says, waving fingers as if she didn’t spend the last six months putting the event together. “I have a grandchild!”

The headliner of the conference is a friend of hers, a woman who is combining her research on chemosignals in some Netherlands university with knowledge from her grandmother’s traditional beliefs and claiming that with practice, we can all smell emotions. When my concern doesn’t fade, my mother adds that her assistant is very capable.

A nurse comes to save me from my mother’s good-willed pawing.

“Da-Silva?”

Her uniform is so white, her waist so small. She looks like a cardboard cutout, this nurse. She also looks faintly like someone I have seen on Timi’s Facebook when I hit “Load More” so that his life appears before me in grainy frozen smiles with strangers. Why do some Nigerian hospitals insist on these silly white caps for their nurses? Her cap looks like a diamondless tiara tucked into her afro bun.

“Yes,” my mother answers for me. “This is her.”

There are many times I wish my mother would be present to speak for me, with her impassioned activist’s voice. Like the night Timi confessed his affair, thirty-eight weeks ago. But am I not an adult?

“Your baby is scheduled to receive formula again in thirty minutes,” the nurse says, “but I came to see if there are any changes. Any thick liquid? Clear? Yellow?”

As she reaches for the neck of my hospital gown, I catch

her wrist. Her face rearranges itself in surprise, and I think she isn't that pretty; her eyes are too close together. "There's no change," I say.

She twists free and brushes the rescued limb against the front of her dress, as if to restore her composure. "Okay, but I still need to take a look, Mrs. Da-Silva—"

"Ms.," my mother corrects. "*Mizzz.*"

What does "Mrs." really mean? is a question I grew up hearing my mother pose to people who could only stutter in response.

The nurse's frown deepens; she is unsettled by this interaction with me and my mother. "I'm sorry, *Miz* Da-Silva. Your son isn't pooping as much as we'd like. He's okay, but to be safe, I'm going to have to feel around for colostrum, milk."

That's all I did last night while Timi slept in a chair beside me. I prodded and tugged and massaged, but my breasts have stayed swollen to unfamiliar D-cups, nipples stubbornly dry. They told me milk, or something like it, would come a few months into pregnancy, or around birth.

"I said there's nothing." I jerk the top of the gray sack of a gown they have put me in. I turn away from the nurse's unpretty face to my mother's, which is now contemplating me with a frown.

Timi holds my hand, and my mother caresses my shoulder while she cradles our baby in one elbow. Another day has passed, and the doctor is asking questions before discharging

us. I hang limp in Timi's clasp. His palms are always so dry. How do I trust a man whose sweat glands won't betray him? His palms were dry then too, when he stroked my arm and informed me he was going to Abuja for business, just business. But should this man trust his wife who claims she forgives his affair, who pardons his cheating so easily, a wife who says everything is forgotten and buried? A wife who kisses those dry palms the morning after his confession and says, "We're good, babe." Should he trust this woman if she doesn't believe the truth of her own forgiveness?

I wriggle free from Timi's hold and reach for the baby we have not yet named; we have two more days till the naming ceremony. My mother lowers him into my arms.

"And don't worry about lactating," the doctor is saying. "I don't want you to worry at all. Lactation happens late for some women, others not at all. Some women even say breastfeeding is old-fashioned! But everything is fine as long as baby is loving the delicious formula."

I want to ask the doctor how he knows the formula is delicious, if it is more delicious than breastmilk, if the baby can tell the difference.

When we saw the baby's penis for the first time, pointed out to us in the jumble that is an ultrasound, the nurse gave a practiced chuckle. "See how he's proud of that penis!" she said. Timi's eyes liquified. I turned away from him and away from my son's penis, to look at the fetal growth chart on the wall. A son? My heart broke a little. A son who could grow up to become a man, a man who might hurt other people no

matter how well I raise him because a man is a man, even when he is the best man—as Timi has shown me. I gathered myself and turned back to smile at the monitor.

Maybe it started there, my body’s rejection of my child, visiting the sins of father on son?

I lower my head to blow air into my baby’s face, my mouth a soft *o*. My smile is not forced when he wrinkles his face and blinks at me.

“If you want to see our lactation consultant,” the doctor adds, “you’re welcome to do so. He’s not in-house, though well recommended. Give it some time, I’d say. Baby is fine, poop is fine, all is fine!” The doctor has three horizontal tribal marks on each cheek that squirm when he speaks. My baby’s cheeks look extra smooth in comparison. I press my lips to that smoothness. Timi beams at this picture and asks if I’m ready to go home.

All of our family members come out for the naming ceremony. Their voices ring loud as they celebrate me, celebrate Timi. A first child, a son! Someone has dropped a thick white envelope into my lap—for my hard work, they say. I let the insulting thing slide off.

Timi strolls around in his agbada made from the matching guinea brocade his mother bought for us, a baby-blue shade of sky we haven’t seen since harmattan started. He stops to laugh at someone’s joke, the cloth billowing around him, so natural, so *man*, so *Timi*. He has been cradling our baby all day, as if eager to show off how modern he is, a rare

Nigerian man who “allowed” his wife to keep her mother’s name, a man who will be involved in the care of his child. I want to yank the baby from him, but I do not have the right. The one bond that ties baby to mother, at least for the first year, is missing. My breasts oppress me with their emptiness.

We name him Fikayo; we call him Fi. Olufikayo. All the names I suggested were Finn, Fenton, Fran, because my love of *F* names had lingered from devouring all that angsty British literature when I was a teenager. But Timi reminded me that we are Yoruba, not English, and the name should reflect that.

Is there a Yoruba name for “this child was conceived in the throes of hurt and anger”? An Egun name for “this boy is a result of your forgiveness sex after your husband confessed his wrong”?

I acquiesced easily to his sensible argument about the names, remembering how he had quietly rebutted my reservations about becoming his girlfriend six years ago, an elevation from our casual fling. “Come on, we have the same views on the important things, Aduke!” he said. “That’s what’s important ni t’ori Olorun. That’s a foundation not many folks have.”

Timi’s mother’s pastor calls out the names, Olufikayo Olujimi Olatunde. The people cheer and toast with glasses of wine and zobo under the canopy we rented for the day. When the robed pastor dabs anointing oil on Fikayo’s head, the baby begins to cry. I jump up to snatch him.

“He’s hungry,” I murmur to no one in particular and retreat into the house. I hear music pick up behind me, Sunny Adé blasting from rented speakers, my cousin’s children screaming at each other, Timi’s mother shouting for the caterer to start serving small chops. The woman’s Christian benevolence is what prevents friction between her and my mother, between me and her, between her and Timi. “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” she mutters to herself frequently, like a calming mantra, shrugging in acceptance even when she doesn’t understand why her son is acting “like a woman,” doing household chores and sharing the financial decision-making with me. The microphone screeches and I close the nursery door behind me, but the door is not thick enough to drown them out.

One of my aunties has tied my iro for me, insisting that the tighter the wrapper, the faster my pregnancy pouch will shrink. I release my belly now and flop down into the armchair. I shift Fi in my arms and draw the diaper bag closer with a foot. It is an awkward process; I haven’t yet perfected the juggling acts of motherhood.

He quiets when the nib fills his mouth, and I am envious of a plastic bottle.

My aunt finds me dozing off while Fi feeds.

“Ahn ahn, feeding bottle kẹ?” Her gele is green and gold, and the light from the window reflects against the scaly material. I squint and look down at Fi. He has fallen asleep.

“Aunty,” I say.

“But kilode? Why are you not breastfeeding, mgbọ?” She

crosses her arms under her own breasts. “Deyemi’s wife had the nerve to tell me she was not breastfeeding so her breasts won’t sag. Sag! You too, Aduke? Does your mother know about this decision?”

“Aunty, aunty!” I check to make sure Fi is still sleeping and lower my voice. “There’s no milk, aunty.” I have begun to cry.

My aunt’s face relaxes. She moves to pick Fi up, places him in his cot. She leans forward then, as if to hug me.

“I know what to do. Jumoke had this same problem, but you should see her now! The baby girl is three, and we’re begging her to stop. I will send you one agbo that my sister makes in Ijebu. You will rub it like...” She reaches for my breasts, through the baby-blue brocade, through my bra, and begins to knead. I feel myself leaving my body through a frustrated sigh, floating to the ceiling of the lilac nursery with the white silhouettes, above my own gele, above my aunty’s gele, which dips forward in rhythm with her hands, above my body, above my shame.

Our friends visit with gifts that are not newborn-baby appropriate. Only Sandra, who writes an annoyingly wholesome mummy blog with a large readership, shows up without a hard-edged toy, but she also brings along a pious look to throw at the feeding bottle and formulas. If I were to check, I would probably find an irate blog post railing against them. Timi tells her I need to rest when he catches the glance. The others bring laughter and warmth and kisses

for Fi, but I am grateful when I walk the last person out the front door and return to the silence of our living room. Timi is sitting on the edge of an armchair, and I know he wants to speak with me. I grab a bib from the floor and head to the nursery, to my baby, to hide.

“Aduke.”

I turn to look at my husband, his wide nose, the Cupid’s bow that would fight Rihanna’s for perfection. The first time I kissed him, I let my tongue trace that dip, re-carving it with my lust.

“Are you okay?” he asks now.

“Yeah, why?”

“You’ve been kind of distant.”

What I should say is: I don’t care about your stupid ex; I care that I don’t know how to be angry about her. What I say instead is: “We just had a baby, Timi. Have you read any of Sandra’s articles about motherhood?” The laugh that punctuates my sentence is a weak sputter.

Timi points at me, then at himself. “We’re okay?” He wants my eyes to meet his; I hear it in his question. They meet. Mine skitter away.

“We’re great,” I say. I look down to find my baby’s bib crumpled in my fist. I straighten out the butterflies on soft white cotton, blue and orange and pink. “I’m just tired, you know?”

“But you—”

I look up, afraid he will say that I am not even breastfeeding, that he will ask me what is making me tired.

“You don’t even let me help with Fikayo. You’re always sleeping in the damn nursery. This wasn’t our plan o, Aduke.”

Of course, Timi is not insensitive. He rises right along with me when Fi cries us awake. I keep shushing him away, back to sleep, away from the nursery. “I just feel a bit guilty about the breastmilk thing. Maybe I’m overcompensating.” I push the fiction out of my lungs easily.

Back in Sunday school, where my mother used to send me before she decided religion hated women, the teacher would pipe, “To err is human, to forgive is divine,” even if we kids didn’t know what it meant to err. Now that Timi has shown me what it means, the homily taunts me. If to forgive is divine, why am I resisting my own divinity? I want to feel the righteousness that comes with forgiving infidelity, but all I feel is shame at my lack of backbone, my lack of indignation, and fear that if it happens again, I will just as easily forgive Timi.

My husband is good, has been good. This was a fluke, and he confessed immediately because he knew I would want to know immediately, and he was sorry, and he is sorry every day, and I could see his heart breaking because he knew he had broken mine, and he is so very sorry, sorry in a way that I believe?

Am I even my mother’s daughter, to be thinking about forgiveness?

Now Timi is asking if I think this is postpartum depression.

“I’m not depressed. Just tired.”

“Come back to bed,” he begs. “I miss you.”

I flinch.

“God, I’m not talking about sex. I’m not a monster!”

I raise both hands in surrender. “Yeah, we can move his cot to our room tomorrow. How about that?”

When Timi lets out a dissatisfied breath, covering his face, its beautiful features, with his hands, I flee into the nursery, closing the door that is only wood, not metal, not thick enough to protect me. But why do I need protection? Why shouldn’t *he* be seeking protection from *me*? I want to be the type of woman who turned into a pillar of flames when Timi told me about sex with the ex in Abuja. I want to have singled the confession off his tongue until the smell of his own burning choked him, robbing him of oxygen till he was flat on his face, at my feet, melting in my fury. I want to be a woman like my mother. There are YouTube videos of my mother cutting down the governor at a rally organized by her nonprofit for women’s development. The governor had said she should leave politics to men. “Don’t you dare, Mr. Olusegun Adetula!” my mother screamed, spittle gathering in the corner of her Ruby Woo-painted lips. “Don’t you dare belittle the women who carry this society. We carry it!” But no, I went straight into his arms. Mine was a faltering anger: here, then gone. My mother would be disgusted to see the weakness in her spawn.

We’re in the nursery. I am seated on the floor between my mother’s knees on a folded blanket, feeding Fikayo while my mother lines my scalp with oil. The smell of the coconut oil

meets the smell of formula in my nostrils. Fi is naked against my bare breasts, skin-to-skin bonding my mother scoffed at the first time she saw us in this position. “Bonding?” She laughed. “Where did you read about this one now?” But this proximity to his sucking mouth, even if the milk doesn’t come, has me flushed with feeling. Fi tugs on the bottle against my breasts while my mother tugs softly at my hair, plaiting straight cornrows. This is what it is like to be a mother and a daughter.

Timi is cooking okra soup in the kitchen, and when a waft strays into the room, I hear my mother’s belly rumble. We laugh. A husband who shares the kitchen with me is something I am proud of, a way of life my mother approves of, preaches. She works through a tangled section, and I stiffen my neck in discomfort.

“Sorry, does it hurt?”

I shake my head.

“How’s the copywriting?”

“Fine. I submitted June’s calendar yesterday.”

“It’s stupid they didn’t give you time off.”

“It’s fine. If I stop, they’ll find some mass comm student to do it for cheaper. It’s just words; I can handle it.”

“And Timi’s work?”

“Good. He’s building a website for Coke with Deji.”

“And”—she continues to plait my hair—“are the two of you okay?”

I take a deep breath and try to relax my shoulders so my mother doesn’t sense the tension this question evokes.

“Why?”

I feel her shrug. I wonder if she has somehow smelled the strain through my scalp. Maybe her professor friend has taught her nose a trick or two. And if so, what emotion is she identifying? Shame? Resentment? Anger? How do I tell my mother, the woman who told me never to stay with a man who disrespects me in any way, that I am doing just that? That not only did Timi disrespect me with this affair, but I couldn't even flare up in response?

Whenever we heard a story of a husband who left, who hit, who had another family in a village somewhere, my mother would joke that my father—“that one who died to escape my wahala”—knew dying was better than misbehaving. That he knew she wouldn't have stayed a minute longer, that her blood was thicker than that. He had met her on the streets of Unilag waving a placard that read *Women Are Students, Too! Students Not Maids! Students Not Sex Objects!* He joined the protest that day, later finding out she was the last daughter from a polygamous family she never completely forgave for their lack of attention. “That's your mama's origin story,” he used to say to me when I sat on his lap and pulled at his full beard, “our superhero.” Joking about my father's death made me squirm, even though I understood the dark humor for the coping mechanism it was. But she would look at me with those blazing eyes that want all the good in the world for me and say, “Women suffer enough. Don't add man problem on top. Keep your shoes beside the door.”

I can't tell her now that maybe her superior blood thinned with me.

"We're fine," I say. But I have waited too long. She knows I am hedging.

She will not push it, though. Instead, she will scoot her chair away from the table later at dinner, announcing her departure, leaving a full bowl of delicious food untouched, leaving Timi thinking that he has offended her with too much salt. But I will know it is my mother bringing her protests from the streets of Lagos into my home.

My mother is gone and Timi wants to talk again; he wants to hammer this out once and for all. He wants to be sure we are good, are we good, are we good, are-we-good-arewegood? Timi wants to know, Timi wants.

I walk into our bedroom where we have moved the cot, away from Timi's questioning voice. I want to look down into my baby's face with his always-puckered brows, to have his lustrous brown eyes look back into mine, his chubby puff-puff cheeks reassure me with their fullness, his plastered curls remind me of newness and freshness and growth.

Instead I find my baby turning blue in the face. His fingers are fisted tight; his arms are flailing little sticks. Has the strain hanging in the air of our bedroom asphyxiated our son?

When the doctor tells me that Fikayo has a gastroesophageal reflux, an allergic reaction to the formula, that breastmilk would be ideal at this point, I feel a sharp pain in my breasts.

Can guilt be felt physically, like a blade on a finger, like a cramp in the calf, like biting your own tongue?

The lactation consultant's office is in the Boys' Quarters. We squeeze past two Jeeps in the narrow driveway to get to the one-room office at the back of the main house. The signage is lopsided, dusty, but my doctor said Dr. Laoye is good at what he does.

Timi and I sit on the couch while he paces.

"Have you taken any cod liver oil?" he asks after I tell our story, that a fourth formula is being tested on Fi, that my baby is now bones in a bag of soft skin, that my aunty's agbo didn't work.

I shake my head.

Dr. Laoye reminds me of those boys I loved when I was thirteen. The older boys in our estate who looked big and tall and bounced with a swagger to buy Guinness from the shop where I would be buying matches or Maggi or cotton wool. They looked like the epitome of adulthood to me with their loud, uncontained laughter and colorful rubber wristbands, as if they knew exactly what they wanted and how to get it: beer, life.

And that had been Timi too, so dogged in his pursuit of me, his want of me. What fractured this want, insinuated a pause long enough for Abuja to happen?

"This isn't about you," is what my mother might say in this situation, as she has done before, those days I came home crying about a boy who didn't love me back, a

friend who stopped talking to me, a job I didn't get. How she would straighten my shoulders and wipe my face and insist, "It isn't about you. Roll it off. Those who appreciate you will come." How she would embrace me, "my gentle, sensitive baby" whispered into my hair in a voice I thought sounded mournful or scared, and I would go back into the world trying to be less gentle, bolder, demanding more from life once I saw things through the filter of my mother's opinions.

Dr. Laoye asks me to sit on the consultation chair and take off my blouse and bra. I like that he has not looked to Timi for permission or acknowledgment, unlike many nurses at the hospital who ask about my husband before attending to me.

I look nowhere as the cool from the air conditioner tightens my now-bare nipples. Not at Timi, not at the doctor. I pin my arms down, fighting the urge to cover myself.

Dr. Laoye peers at my breasts, then cups them in his gloved hands, latex against breasts.

This is the first time a man has touched my breasts since the night of confession. That night with Timi that brought us Fi, that angry night when I allowed my nails to dig into his back, scratch at his skin, draw blood, when he held my breasts and bit them, and I arched into the violence of his mouth, asking him to press down harder, longer, forever.

Could my confused pleasure of that night have ruined me for my child?

The doctor squeezes gel into his palm and gets to work on my breasts. The gloves glide over my skin with the slippery

tingly gel, with a soft sound, his fingers moving first in an elliptical motion from the sternum, round and round, till he tugs at the nipples.

As the tugs become harder, I hunch over. Dr. Laoye lightly grazes my shoulder, tender, an unspoken *relax*. My eyes shoot up to find Timi's. His face is blank, too straight, and I know he is struggling to show me nothing.

I think: look at another man touching me, Timi.

And then I feel it, a warm trickle out of my left nipple. The milk feels like a living creature crawling out of me. I look down at my chest, then up to share this moment with Timi, but he has turned away.

The hospital wants to test my breastmilk before they introduce it to Fi. *My* breastmilk. Fi's. Even while the doctor explains milk content to me, why they are testing, how the mother passes on more than fat and protein, how toxicity the mother has been exposed to can be a risk to the baby, all I can hear is *your* breastmilk. Timi's gaze keeps drifting down to my unbound breasts under the boubou.

Later, my mother shows up at the hospital with the woman from her conference, the smell professor. The woman has decided to take up a visiting professorship from Unilag, and they have just come back from lunch. I reach for my mother's hands. "We're waiting to hear," I say.

"Timi?" I can see my mother's nose wrinkle when she says his name. I will not confirm her suspicions.

"With Fi," I reply.

Another nurse comes to stand by the bed. “It’s time to pump again, madam.”

The nurse pulls apart the flaps of the hospital gown and starts to apply lubrication to my nipples. I do not move to help. I do not move away. I just lie there, a body. When the pump has been attached and turned on, my mother’s professor friend stands to leave the room. The swish of her colorful kimono disappears around the door. My mother goes out after her.

I am now alone with the nurse, who is intently watching the liquid stream down the tubes into the bottle. *What are you looking for?* I want to ask. This feeling of milk out of my breasts is so strange, like a string is being unspooled out and out and out. *What can you see?* I want to ask.

When I stir from sleep, my mother and her professor friend have returned to the room. My mother rushes to fuss over me.

“Mummy,” I say, shifting my face away from her pesky touches. “Do you want to check on Timi and Fi?”

“Yes, yes.” She hurries out of the room, happy to be useful, leaving me with the professor.

“Good evening,” I whisper, remembering my manners. She turns toward me. Her face looks sunken, the wrinkles fanned around like the lines on a palm to be read. She nods at my greeting and walks closer to the bed, almost regal in carriage. She stops before she reaches me.

I am curious: what is it about me that is repellent to her? Why won’t she come closer? Can her trained nose smell

my shame? My failing motherhood, wifehood? My failed daughterhood, too?

She is quiet for so long that I think she has not heard. But then she takes two steps closer. When she speaks, her accent is a flavored reflection of all the places she has lived, nasal and clipped and flat and lyrical all at once. “Good evening.” She shifts. “What is it?”

I am not surprised at her question. “What can you smell?” I ask, doing the Nigerian thing of responding to a question with another.

She laughs, but her face is sad. “Darling,” she says, and this endearment, which I would find annoying coming from anyone else, fits. “But darling, you smell a lot like your mother.”

My mother walks her friend out to get a taxi, and I slip out of bed. I move down the corridor, climb the flight of stairs that will bring me to my baby’s ward. I find Timi asleep on a chair next to Fi’s cot, a thin curtain their only privacy from the rest of the room. I stand there staring at my family.

“Timi,” I whisper, and he jerks awake.

“Hey,” he says, rubbing his eyes. He looks at my breasts, and I follow his gaze. There are splotches where milk has leaked onto my gown.

“Timi,” I say again.

He stands and leads me out of the ward to the dim corridor. A fluorescent light farther down blinks every few seconds.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” His hands rest on my shoulders. He runs them down my arms, slides them back up.

“I’ve forgiven you,” I say. For my job, I rely on the thesaurus, finding new ways to say old things, fancy ways to turn the client’s directives into copy the consumers can relate to. But for my own life, the words are flat. I can say only what I can say.

He becomes still. He swallows. “You said you had.”

“I have. I swear.” I raise my hands to trap his on my shoulders. While my belly swelled with our baby, I would smile at my beautiful husband, who was the first man I felt confident enough about to introduce to my mother, a man I was sure wouldn’t misbehave. Surely I must have suckled some fire from my own mother’s breasts, even if just a trace. I press down on Timi. Hard. “I just hate that it was so easy.”

I feel him go rigid. This is the first time I am allowing us to discuss the affair since he dropped that suitcase and knelt in front of me, crying, begging for forgiveness. “What are you saying, Aduke?”

There is a scar on Timi’s chin, a small diagonal line hidden mostly by his beard, and I like to rub my thumb against the slight elevation. He says he doesn’t know how it got there. But what would the scar say if it could speak? If the body could tell what it doesn’t forget, doesn’t process? I reach out to touch it now.

“I’m saying I am angry that it was so easy,” I tell him. “I needed to say that to you.”

The doctor says toxicity passes unto the child through breastmilk. If I don't tell Timi these things, will my fluids flood with unvocalized coarse emotions? Will I choke my son with the force of them?

My hands fall to my side; I release Timi. He drops to a squat. He is trembling; he holds his face. "Give me something to do. Give me a list, anything. What can I do?" His voice thickens. "What can I do?" He loses balance and latches onto my knee. I look down at my husband's head. There isn't anything he can do differently. This is about me, was always about me.

The fluorescent bulb flickers again, like a flashlight panning an abandoned room, lighting up things that have stayed in the dark too long.

The next morning, my milk is declared safe for Fi by the doctor with the tribal marks. He smiles wide, all those scarred commas stretching at me.

When Fi is placed into my arms, when his lips and gums circle and clamp onto my nipple, I cannot stop crying. Emotion rises up my chest, hot and forceful, up my neck, up my head, then crashes over me. I pull him closer to my heavy breasts. I hold him tight. My wet kisses slobber all over his forehead. Does that nose look like mine? Those eyes, like my mother's? "My sweet baby," I cry. "I love you," I weep. "I love you," I sob.

My mother sits by my head, letting me cry, stroking my braids. Timi shows up just outside the door, keeping

his distance, still reeling from yesterday's talk. My mother stops stroking. She stands up, smiles at me, says, "Look, my baby is a mother. Her own woman." Her voice is gentle—no mourning, no concern, no fear.

I nod at Timi to come closer, and he stumbles across the threshold to join my mother and me, my baby and me.

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