



“MIRROR”  
JASMINE WEBER  
Brooklyn, New York, USA

# bruised things

A SHORT STORY

BY YVONNE “YV.” ONAKEME ETAGHENE  
Oakland, California, USA

I like scarred things. Bruised fruit. Furniture with broken bits. Peeling paint. Flawed things.

They remind me of myself.

This is the nicest thing I've ever said about myself.

I accept their flaws in a way I never have my own.

In department stores, the marked-down items with stains on them, the ripped fabrics with holes, missing beads or buttons speak to me. The pieces of clothing with seams coming undone and frayed edges—I flock to them. I want to whisper to them: I am sorry you feel like the rejects. Like no one will sit with you in the cafeteria.

I'll sit with you.

I inspect you, wonder if I can

take you home, if you are my size, my color, my style. I am the personification of frayed edges, slowly coming undone. At first, a few loose threads seem harmless, but before you know it you turn around and the whole garment has fallen apart.

My whole garment has fallen apart.

I am loosely held together by magic and my mother's prayers. What else could keep me here? Completely undone yet still here. What else could do that but something bigger than me? My mother's prayers are the biggest thing I've ever known.

I like bruised things, scarred things. Because they're kin to me.

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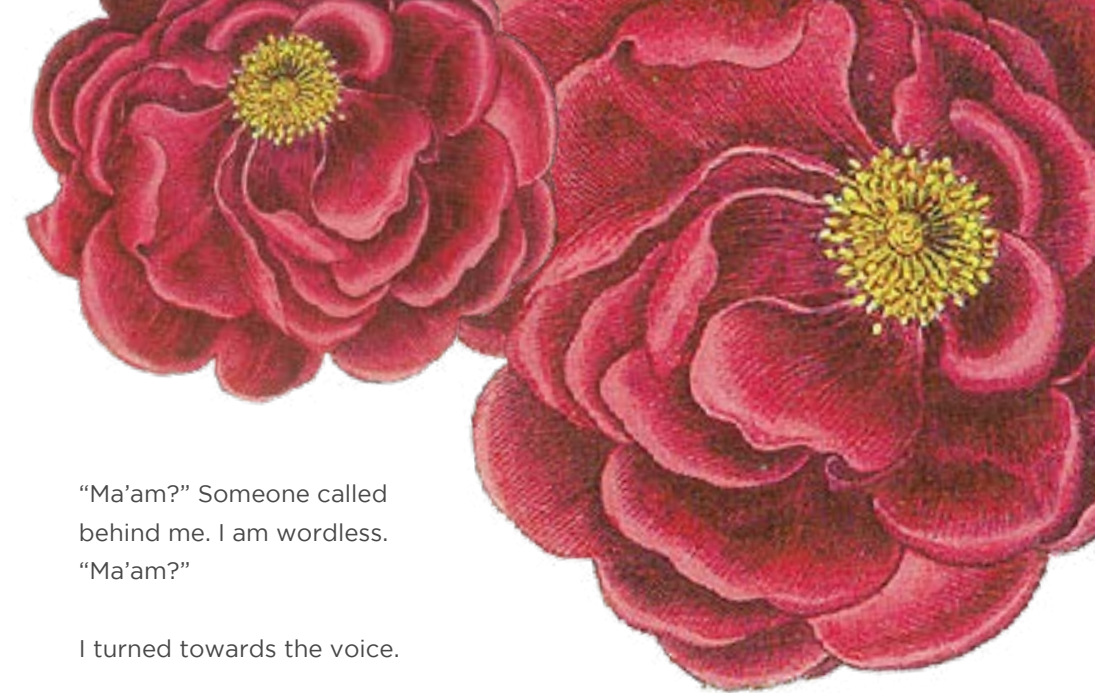
Saturday morning. I'd gotten up before dawn. Laid in the dark for an hour. Not moving.

In boy shorts and no top beneath heavy blankets.

Later, I sat at my vanity. Barefoot, bare faced. My makeup laid out in front of me. Foundation. Eyeliner. Precise, like silverware. Dawn slowly rising behind me.

Faced painted with light earth-brown foundation. I applied lipstick methodically. Rimmed my eyes with a charcoal black eyeliner. Mascara thick and long. I picked out my afro with a wide-tooth comb, tied my hair back into a tight bun, then wrapped it into a spiral at the crown of my head. The bun was almost severe in its tightness. Absentmindedly, I returned a stray tendril of hair back into its place in my bun.





I walked towards my closet and opened the door. I already knew what I was going to wear. I put on a silk bra. Black. Changed my underwear, also black. A high-waisted pencil skirt, black. Long-sleeved silk shirt, black. Button by button up to my neck. Nude pantyhose. Stiletto pumps, black.

My carpeted floor swallowed the click of my heels. I sat back down in front of my vanity, painted my nails indigo. Indigo is my mother's favorite color.

Was.

Indigo was my mother's favorite color. Past tense is the worst thing, the most painful thing to have to get used to.

I'll never get used to it. Still feels unholy to speak of her in the past tense. I speak about her in the present tense. Still. Still. Still.

Indigo is my mother's favorite color.

\* \* \*

The sun was out, lighting up my entire bedroom. Ironically enough, I could tell from where

I sat at my vanity that it was a beautiful day outside. The kind of day I loved to wake up to, that made me want to run to the beach. Or tend to the tiger lilies in my garden.

It was 9 am. The funeral would start at 10.

I sat there. Still as death. I swallowed and met my gaze in the mirror. I looked impeccable. For someone who'd just lost everything.

I sat there. I couldn't move for some reason.

I looked at my phone. It was 9:45 am.

And then it was 10.

If I left now, I would be late.

I sat there, fully dressed. The minutes dragged by. Then hours.

I left my house in the late afternoon. Someone, a neighbor, called my name. I assumed they wanted to offer condolences. These days, that's all anyone offered me.

I didn't ask for them. But I collect them now. Stuff them into my purse, they overflow over my everything. No more surface area in my house to place them down. I have so many condolences that I have quite a few to spare. I might put up an ad on Craigslist. Or have a yard sale: free condolences, everything must go.

I walked. Past the quiet row of houses of my suburban neighborhood.

In heels.

About a quarter mile into walking, when each step became

an agony I could no longer ignore, I took my heels off. I kept walking. The cemetery was ahead.

I arrived.

I saw rows and rows of aunties and uncles, cousins and babies, mamas and daddies, nanas and grandpas, friends, strangers, grocers, doctors, teachers.

Buried.

Lined up in columns and rows. Tombstones where smiles used to be.

The dew beneath my bare feet was refreshing relief after miles of concrete. I walked to where I knew she was. Earth, freshly dug up, a rectangle of an open wound. I tumbled to the ground, sitting at the edge of my mother's grave, my feet dangling above her coffin. There was loose dirt on top of this box holding my mother, I assumed a few shovels of dirt that had been placed there during the funeral. I climbed into her grave, wrapped my arms around the wooden coffin as if embracing my mother. My back to the sky, I embraced the casket with everything in me.

Her tombstone read: "Beloved Mother & Wife."

As if that could sum a person up, capture all she was. I'd chosen that epigraph days before. Simple, I thought at the time. Elegant. Classy.

But now it seemed woefully inadequate. Even insulting.

"Ma'am?" Someone called behind me. I am wordless. "Ma'am?"

I turned towards the voice.

"Are you okay?" he asked. The groundskeeper, I assumed. He wore overalls with dirt stains on them. Maybe he'd just dug my mother's grave.

"No," I said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Can I call someone to take you home?"

"No."

"Can I call you a taxi?"

"No."

"I can drive you home, if you'd prefer."

"That's kind of you, sir. But if I go home, I'll be dead by the morning."

"Ma'am—"

"Can you take me to a hospital?"

"Yes, ma'am, let me just tell my supervisor where I'm headed."

I lay there waiting for him. In his car, the houses and buildings flew by like scenes in a movie. Then we were in the hospital waiting room, waiting to be seen.

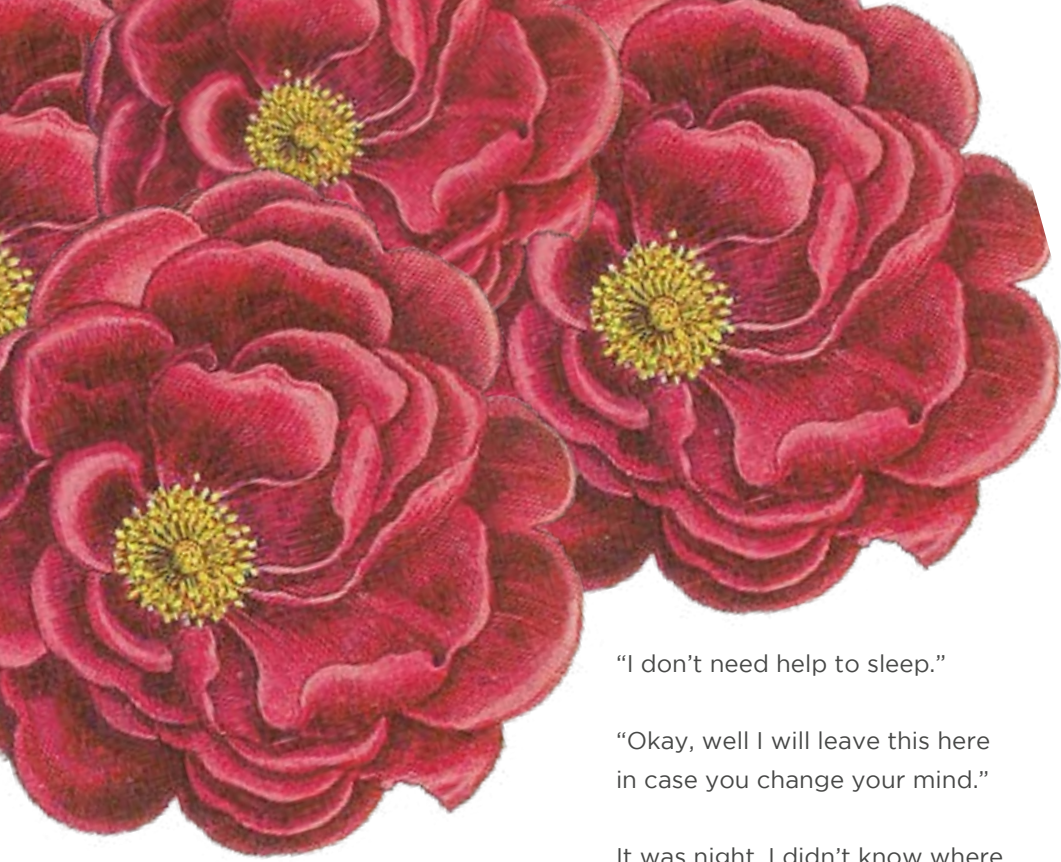
"Ma'am, what kind of medical attention do you need?" The nurse's voice was a bored monotone.

"I think I might kill myself if I go home. If you could put me somewhere that won't happen, I'd appreciate it."

She looked blankly at me, and then at the groundskeeper, who stood at a distance behind me, I assumed to afford me privacy. "Oh, can you answer a few questions—"

"No, I cannot. Just put me in a room somewhere."





and hard as you. You never let anyone see you sweat, or see you weak. You must know I feel so damn guilty for checking myself in here. I have your genes, I should have the strength to get through this by myself, right?" I wiped away tears I hadn't felt fall.

"You taught me how to yell in a sea of little girls who were all raised to whisper and whimper. The girls I grew up with, so many of them were forced to tolerate any and every imaginable discomfort in the name of being ladylike. You taught me to say fuck that and to be myself.

"I always felt a little small beside you. And big. Small because you are a giant. Big because you made everyone around you better. Stronger. Anytime I knew you were coming over, I would cook a more delicious meal, clean my house, straighten my back up. You taught me good posture.

"Just last week you were here."

I laid between cool sheets, hugging my too-thin blanket to me. My eyes made designs out of the shadows that tiptoed across the ceiling.

"Just last week..." I started again.

"I'm afraid I'll forget your face, I'm afraid I'll forget your voice. Your voice! The musicality of it. I took that for granted for so many years. Why didn't I record your voice?"

"I can't face Ricky and Sean, I know they're furious with me. Uncle Theo may be the only one who understands.

"I don't want to say goodbye. I'm not going to say goodbye. Is it selfish to still want you here?"

\* \* \*

"Good morning," Nurse Mary said.

Oh is it now? I peered at her, eyes opening, reluctant.

"You have a couple guests. Do you want a moment to freshen up before they come in?" The clock on the wall behind Nurse Mary read 8:17 am.

"Tell them to go home." My morning voice lent rough edges to my words.

"Are you sure?"

"No guests."

"Some patients draw on the support of their friends and—"

"I don't care." I shook my head. "No guests."

\* \* \*

Nurse Mary brought me breakfast. Then she brought me lunch.

"You have a guest," she said.

"I don't want to see anyone."

"It's your brother. He was here earlier this morning."

"Send him home." I turned my back to her. I know I was being cruel. I know he was probably hurt. But I couldn't. I just couldn't see anyone, not right now. They'd have plenty of time to judge me.

Later.

\* \* \*

"What's going on, why are you here?" were the first words I heard that morning. I sighed, recognizing my big brother's voice.

"It was incredibly selfish of you to not come to mom's—" Sean began.

"Get out."

"What is wrong—"

"Get. Out."

"Why are you being so difficult?"

"Did I ask you to come here? Did I ask you?" My voice got louder. "I don't give a fuck what you think."

"Everyone was there but you.

You should have been there."

"Take your judgmental bullshit out of my face. I will grieve how the fuck I want to grieve."

"Throwing a tantrum is how you grieve?"

"You want to see a tantrum?" I picked up my breakfast tray, meal untouched, and threw it at him.

"What the fuck—" He quickly jumped from where he stood by the window and dodged the tray, which slammed against the wall behind him.

"What kind of a person comes into a hospital to judge someone whose mother just died??" I yelled.

"She was my mother too. Are you forgetting that?"

"The difference between me and you is I'm not judging you. I'm not telling you how you failed your mother."



They began leading me down a hall, lined with stark fluorescent lights. Before following them, I turned back towards the groundskeeper. "Thank you," I said. He nodded, took off his worn baseball hat and held it in one hand against his chest.

I turned around and walked forward. Tears streamed down my face. What an incredibly sweet man.

\* \* \*

The next nurse I met was nicer. Nurse Mary.

"Here's a sedative to help you sleep."

She placed a small plastic cup with two white pills in it on my bedside table next to a cup of water.

"I don't need help to sleep."

"Okay, well I will leave this here in case you change your mind."

It was night. I didn't know where the day had gone. I was in some shapeless white gown with little navy stars on them in a strange place surrounded by people whose names I didn't know and faces I could barely remember.

I slept.

\* \* \*

"My mother was my favorite person."

The blackness of my room was my witness.

"My mother...was my favorite person. She was. And I'm sorry I didn't go today. I woke up in time. I got dressed today. I put my makeup on, painted my nails indigo for you, but somehow I just couldn't do it. I couldn't go.

"You are my favorite person. Because you are the only person I know who curses as loud



“You should have been there, it was the right thing to do. Me saying that--abeg that one na judgment?”

“Oh. It’s the right thing? Na you wan give pessin morality lesson? Are you serious? After I meticulously planned the funeral, chose the tombstone, the flowers, the casket. Was that the right thing to do? Or is all that irrelevant because I didn’t show up?”

A nurse rushed in, “What the— everyone needs to calm down.” We ignored her.

“Oga answer. I dey wait you!” I pressed harder. “Where were you when I planned every last detail?”

“You had it handled—”

“I had it ‘handled?’” I stared at him in disbelief at the words coming out of his mouth. “No one wants to ‘handle’ their mother’s funeral. Obviously you didn’t.”

“Guys—” Nurse Mary began.

“And did you bother to ask me

how the fuck I am?? Since I am in a hospital. Or will you wait until I’m dead to act like you love me, like you did with mom?” I sucked my teeth, rage in my fiery gaze. “Olodo. Useless goat.”

He stared at me, eyes a mixture of anger and resentment. I interrupted him before he could respond.

“You waited until mom died to turn into the perfect son,” I continued. “Oya clap for yourself!” I clapped sarcastically. “Good for you! You get the award, you the real MVP. Fuckhead, the fuck out my face!”

“Fuck you.” Sean said, not meeting my gaze.

“Fuck me?! Nigga, fuck you wit your bitch ass!”

“I’m going to give you a sedative,” the nurse said.

“No! That’s what you not gonna to do. What you’re going to do is get him the fuck out of my room.”

“Sir, I think it’s best you leave,” Nurse Mary said, turning to my brother.

“Obviously you’re hungry for attention,” he said.

I laughed. “Then starve me, nigga.”

Shaking his head, he walked out.

“I’m going to give you something

to calm you down,” Nurse Mary said.

“No. You’re not. I asked you to keep visitors out of my room for a reason. That was the reason. I don’t want shit in my system. No sedatives, no vitamins, I don’t even want food. I just want some quiet and to be left alone. Please.” I was shaking. The inside of my chest, shaking. Hands, shaking.

“I think he spoke to someone else on the floor who directed him towards your room. I’m sorry he was here if you didn’t want to see him.” She paused. “You sure you don’t want a sedative?”

“Yes.” My voice was hoarse.

“How about tea?”

“What kind?”

“What kind do you want?”

“Lemon ginger.”

\* \* \*

“I know you said no guests.” Nurse Mary stood at my in the doorway. “But your Uncle Theo is here. He asked me to tell you it’s him.”



“Let him in.”

I sat up in my bed, straightened my hospital gown and smoothed out the sheets around me.

Uncle Theo walked in wearing a three-piece suit. I think he’d worn a suit everyday of my life. He looked at me calmly and said nothing.

“Aren’t you going to ask me why I didn’t come to mom’s funeral?” I asked.

He unwrapped his scarf, removed his coat and placed both neatly at the foot of my bed.

“No.”

“Why not?”

Uncle Theo sat down beside me at the edge of my bed. He leaned over and cupped my cheek fondly, briefly. “I think you’ll tell me when you want me to know.”

“I...couldn’t handle it.” The words rushed out of my mouth. Guilt fluttered in my chest. “I’m sorry, Uncle Theo, I’m really sorry. I’m sorry, I know I let everyone down—”

“Don’t apologize,” he said, beaming love at me. “I

understand completely and no one is mad at you.”

“My brother is.”

He rolled his eyes. “You know how he is.”

I laughed.

“He’ll get over it. The most important thing isn’t what any of us think. Although, as I said, everyone understands. The most important thing is that you’re alright, and that you trust your mother knows you love her. She knows. Whether you were at the burial or not, without a doubt, she knows.”

Uncle Theo looked at me and I felt little again. A tiny child in front of him, his presence always brought me solace. “My pikin, shey you know? The cassava today fit be garri tomorrow.”

“I don’t see myself ever getting past this.”

“Don’t worry about getting past it. Just let us take care of you. Everyone loves you. We dey miss you na,” he cajoled gently. “We’re worried about you.”

I said nothing.

“Naija no go carry last!” He said suddenly, with a soft emphasis.

I laughed, despite myself. I was instantly transported back to the countless World Cup games over the years where Uncle Theo would triumphantly declare that

everytime Nigeria was playing against any other country’s football team.

“Finally, a bit of laughter,” he said. I smiled at him. “Like Naija, my dear,” he continued, “you no go carry last. Remember that.”

I reached over and held his hand. “Was there a family meeting about me?”

Uncle Theo smiled. “Of course there was.”

“What did everyone say?”

“We want you home, pumpkin. Are you ready to come home?”

I released his hand, drew my knees to my chest and held them tight. “I just know they’re mad at me. I don’t want to face that.”

“They’re not. We love you. Come home. I’ll make rum cake.”

“But it’s not Christmas.”

“I’m not above bribery to get you home. Is it working?”

I smiled and nodded. He embraced me. And I cried.

I cried. For the first time since my mom died.

A bruised thing, a human being healing. ■

