If this story was a stack of photographs—the old kind, rounded at the corners and kept in albums under the glass and lace doilies of center tables in parlors across the country—it would start with Vivek’s father, Chika. The first print would be of him riding a bus to the village to visit his mother; it would show him dangling an arm out of the window, feeling the air push against his face and the breeze entering his smile.

Chika was twenty and as tall as his mother, six feet of red skin and suntouched-clay hair, teeth like polished bones. The women on the bus looked openly at him, his white shirt billowing out from the back of his neck in a cloud, and they smiled and whispered among themselves because he was beautiful. He had looks that should have lived forever, features he passed down to Vivek—the teeth, the almond eyes, the smooth skin—features that died with Vivek.

The next photograph in the stack would be of Chika’s mother, Ahunna, sitting on her veranda when her son arrived,
a bowl of udara beside her. Ahunna’s wrapper was tied around her waist, leaving her breasts bare, and her skin was redder than Chika’s, deeper and older, like a pot that had been bled over in its firing. She had fine wrinkles around her eyes, hair plaited into tight cornrows, and her left foot was bandaged and propped up on a stool.

“Mama! Ḟinjọ mere?!?” Chika cried when he saw her, running up the veranda stairs. “Are you all right? Why didn’t you send someone?”

“There was no need to disturb you,” Ahunna replied, splitting open an udara and sucking out its flesh. The large compound of her village house stretched around them—old family land, a whole legacy in earth that she’d held on to ever since Chika’s father died several years ago. “I stepped on a stick when I was on the farm,” she explained, as her son sat down beside her. “Mary took me to the hospital. Everything is fine now.” She spat udara seeds from her mouth like small black bullets.

Mary was his brother Ekene’s wife, a full and soft girl with cheeks like small clouds. They had married a few months ago, and Chika had watched Mary float down the aisle, white lace gathered around her body and a veil obscuring her pretty mouth. Ekene had been waiting for her at the altar, his spine stern and proud, his skin gleaming like wet loam against the tarred black of his suit. Chika had never seen his brother look so tender, the way his long fingers trembled, the love and pride simmering in his eyes. Mary had to tilt her head up to look at Ekene as they recited their vows—the men in their family were always tall—and Chika had watched her throat curve, her face
After the wedding, Ekene decided to move out of the village and into town, into the bustle and noise of Owerri, so Mary was staying with Ahunna while Ekene went to set up their new life. Chika stole a glance at Mary from the veranda as she watered the hibiscus garden, her hair tied back in a frayed knot, wearing a loose cotton dress in a faded floral print. She looked like home, like something he could fall into, whirling through her hips and thighs and breasts.

His mother frowned at him. “Mind yourself,” she warned, as if she could read his mind. “That’s your brother’s wife.”

Chika’s face burned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mama.”

Ahunna didn’t blink. “Go and find your own wife, just don’t start any wahala in this house with this girl. Your brother is coming to collect her soon.”

Chika reached out and took her hand. “I’m not starting anything, Mama.” She scoffed but didn’t pull her hand away. They sat like that, another picture, as the evening pulled across the veranda and sky, and something boiled slow and hot in Chika, thrumming at the back of his throat. This was before Vivek, before the fire, before Chika would discover exactly how difficult it was to dig his own grave with the bones of his son.

When Ahunna’s wound healed, it left a scar on the instep of her foot—a dark brown patch shaped like a limp starfish. Her son Ekene came and took his wife to their new house in
Owerri, a white bungalow with flame-of-the-forest growing by the gate and guava trees lined up by the fence, and Chika visited them there. These would be the happy pictures: Mary smiling in her kitchen; Mary plairting her hair with extensions and singing with her full throat in her church choir; Mary and Chika gisting in the kitchen while she cooked. Ekene had no patience for talkative women and he wasn’t the jealous type, so he didn’t mind that his junior brother and his wife got along so well.

As for Chika, the thing boiling inside him took on a new heat whenever he was around Mary. It sang and bubbled and scalded him where no one could see. He joked to his family that he just liked being in a house with a woman in it, rather than his empty bachelor flat, and Mary believed him—until one afternoon when he stepped behind her as she was cooking and put his mouth on the back of her neck. She whirled and started beating him with the long wooden spoon she was using to make garri.

“Are you mad?” she shouted, flecks of hot garri spitting off her spoon and burning the forearms he’d raised to block her blows. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Sorry! Sorry!” He dropped to his knees, bowing his head under his arms. “Biko, Mary, stop! I won’t do it again, I swear!”

She paused, breathing hard, her face confused and hurt.

“What’s your problem, ehn? Why must you try and spoil everything? Ekene and I are happy, you hear? We’re happy.”

“I know. I know.” Chika stood up slowly, one reversed knee at a time, keeping his hands up and looking into her eyes. “I know. I don’t want to spoil anything. Please, forgive me.”
Mary shook her head. “You can’t continue coming here if this is what you’re coming for.” Chika wanted to reach out to her, but her knuckles were tight around the spoon.

“I know,” he said, keeping his voice soft.

“I’m not joking,” she said. “Don’t come back with this nonsense.”

Chika looked at the tears hanging wet inside her eyes and he put his hands down.

“I hear you. I swear, from now on, you’re just my sister.” He felt her eyes on him as he reached for his car keys. “I’m going. I’ll see you next week. Please, let’s just forget today, okay?”

Mary said nothing. She just watched as he left, her fingers relaxing against the curved wood of the handle only when the door closed behind him.

For the next several months, Chika kept his distance from Owerri. He got a job as an accountant at a glass factory in Ngwa, the market town he had moved to when he left the village. The company doctor there was Dr. Khatri, a pale Indian man with shocks of gray hair at his temples. Sometimes, Dr. Khatri would bring in his niece, Kavita, to help with administrative work. The first time Chika met her, he’d gone in to see the doctor about a cough and Kavita was at the front desk with files heaped around her, frowning as she flipped through them. She was a small woman with dark brown skin and a thick braid of black hair hanging past her waist. That morning, she was wearing an orange cotton dress; she looked like a burning
sunset, and Chika knew immediately that his story would end with her, that he would drown in her large liquid eyes and it would be the perfect way to go. There was nothing boiling in him, just a loud and clear exhale, a weight of peace wrapping around his heart. Kavita looked up and smiled at him, and somehow Chika found the liver to ask her to lunch. It surprised them both when she said yes, as did the affection that unfurled between them in the weeks that followed.

When it became apparent how serious their courtship was getting, the doctor invited Chika to their home, where Kavita served them tea and small bowls of murukku. Her wrists were delicate, and her dark hair rained off her shoulders. Dr. Khatri told Chika how, after her parents died, Kavita had passed into his care, eventually coming with him all the way from India to Nigeria. “We had some . . . family problems back in Delhi,” he said. “Because of her father’s caste. It was better to make a fresh start.” Chika nodded. That was the same reason he chose not to live in the same town as any of his family. Fresh starts were good; that separateness was where you could feel yourself, where you could learn who you were apart from everyone else.

Picture: the young couple in the back garden after dinner, walking along a line of bare rosebushes, Kavita running her fingers gently over the branches.

“I can’t wait for these to bloom,” she said. “I used to hate the smell of roses back when we lived in Delhi, but my uncle loves them, and now—it’s strange—all they do is remind me of home.”

Picture: Chika’s hand covering hers, serrated leaves crushed under their palms, a quiet kiss where their breaths tangle.
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THE DEATH OF VIVEK OJI

fterward, Chika went to the village and told his mother about Kavita. "I want you to meet her," he said, avoiding her eyes. Ahunna watched him, his bent shoulders, the way he kept taking his hands out of his pockets and putting them back in. Children never really change, she thought, no matter how much they grow up.

"Bring the girl," Ahunna said. "Nsogbu adighi." She went back to peeling yam, sitting on a low stool in front of the basin holding the tubers, throwing the rind out into the backyard for her goats. Chika stood above her, a dazed smile spreading across his face.

“Yes, Ma,” he eventually said. “Daalu.”

It was only then he finally felt ready to visit Owerri, to share the news with Mary and Ekene, now that he could go to their house with a clean conscience. He and Mary never spoke of what had happened, that moment of misplaced desire in a sweltering kitchen.

Three months later, Chika proposed to Kavita in the rose garden at her uncle’s house. By then, pink and red blooms filled out the branches and the air was thick with scent. Kavita smiled, blinking back tears as she threw her arms around his clay neck and kissed him yes. A few days later, the families started arguing about the dowry. Chika tried to explain to Dr. Khatri that it was the husband’s family who paid the bride-price, but the old doctor was enraged by the very idea. “We came all the way from India with Kavita’s dowry! It is her
inheritance. I cannot let her go without it as if she’s worth nothing to us!”

“And I cannot accept a brideprice from my wife’s father!”

Hearing that word—father—Dr. Khatri teared up, and their argument hiccupped. “She is truly a daughter to me,” he said, his voice thick.

Ahunna rolled her eyes and stepped in. “You men like shouting too much. Just let the dowries cancel each other, and no one pays anything.” Dr. Khatri drew in breath to protest, but she held up a hand. “You can keep Kavita’s dowry for her children. I don’t want to hear pim about this again.”

So that was that. Kavita’s dowry was a small collection of heavy gold jewelry that her mother had brought into her own marriage, passed down through the women before her.

Picture: Chika with Kavita in their bedroom, newlywed, the heavy necklaces and bangles pouring over his hands. “I don’t even know what to say. It’s like the treasure you read about in books.”

Kavita took them from him and returned them to their box. “For our children,” she reminded him, not knowing there would only be one. “Let’s just forget it’s even here.”

Most of the jewelry stayed in that box for the next two decades, nestled against the deep red velvet, gemstones and gold links gleaming in the dark. There were times when Chika and Kavita sold one small piece or another, when things were difficult, but they held on to most of it, planning to use it to send their son, Vivek, to America. But when the jewelry finally came out of the box, it was Vivek’s hands that lifted it.

Picture: the boy, shirtless, placing necklaces against his
chest, draping them over his silver chain, clipping his ears with gold earrings, his hair tumbling over his shoulders. He looks like a bride, half naked, partially undressed.

There is another boy in this picture now. His name is Osita. He is as tall as Vivek, but broader at the shoulders, his skin like deep loam. He is Ekene's son, born of Mary, and his eyes are narrow, his mouth full beyond belief. In this picture, Osita's face is carved and dark with alarm. He stands with his arms folded, his jaw set against something he cannot predict.

Vivek smiles at his cousin with gold droplets falling into his eyebrows. “Bhai,” he says, with a voice like a bell. “How do I look?”

Osita wished, much later, that he’d told Vivek the truth then, that he was so beautiful he made the air around him dull, made Osita hard with desire. “Take it off,” he snapped instead, his throat rough. “Put it back before they catch us.”

Vivek ignored him and spun around. There was so much light trapped in his face, it hurt Osita's eyes.

“I would do anything,” he said, after Vivek’s burial, “give anything to see him like that just one more time, alive and covered with wealth.”

The market they burned down used to be just after the second roundabout if you drove down Chief Michael Road, past the abandoned office buildings and the intersection with the vulcanizer, that short man with a scar breaking his right cheek. His name was Ebenezer and he had been working at
that junction for as long as anyone could remember. Kavita used to bring their family car to him when the tires needed repair. It was a silver-gray Peugeot 504, which Chika had bought after years of working at the glass factory, replacing the old run-down car he’d been using. As a child, Vivek would place a small palm against the hot metal of the car, balancing from foot to foot as he watched Ebenezer work. The scar was thick against Ebenezer’s skin, a shiny clotted red pushing out from the brown of his face. When he smiled at Vivek, the scar fought the folding of skin and his mouth rose properly on only one side.

“Small oga,” he used to tease, as his hands moved metal wrenches and tubes and force-fed air. Vivek would giggle and hide his face in Kavita’s skirt. He was young then, alive. Kavita could drop her palm and it would fall to the back curve of his boy skull, the soft hair and the warm skin underneath, the formed bone shaping him. Years later, when she found the length of his body stretched out on their front veranda, under four yards of akwete material in a red-and-black pattern she said she’d never forget, the back of his skull was broken and seeping into her welcome mat. Kavita lifted his neck anyway, to press her cheek against his and scream. His hair fell over her arms, wet and long and thick, and she wailed.

“Beta!” she screamed, her voice carving the air. “Wake up, beta!”

One of Vivek’s feet was twisted sideways next to a fallen flowerpot, soil spilled around his ankle. Everything smelled of smoke. His shoeless feet revealed the scar on his left instep: a soft starfish, colored in deep brown.
On the day Vivek was born, Chika had held the baby in his arms and stared at that scar. He’d seen it before—Kavita always commented on its shape whenever she rubbed Ahunna’s feet. Kavita had been without a mother for so long, her love for Ahunna was tactile and rich with childlike affection, a hundred thousand touches. They would sit together, read together, walk in the farm together, and Ahunna would give thanks that she’d given birth to two sons and been gifted two daughters. When Ekene and Mary had their child Osita, Ahunna had wept over his little face, singing to him in soft Igbo. She couldn’t wait for Chika and Kavita’s baby to arrive.

Now it was a year later, and Chika felt something building in him slowly as he held his newborn son—like folds of pouring cement hardening into a sick fear—but he ignored it. These things were just stories; they couldn’t be real. It wasn’t until the next day that a messenger boy from the village came to Ngwa to tell Chika that Ahunna had died the day before, her heart seizing at the threshold of her house, her body slumping into her compound, the earth receiving her slack face.

He should have known, Chika told himself as Kavita screamed in grief, Vivek clutched to her chest. He did know. How else could that scar have entered the world on flesh if it had not left in the first place? A thing cannot be in two places at once. But still, he denied this for many years, for as long as he could. Superstition, he said. It was a coincidence, the marks on their feet—and besides, Vivek was a boy and not a girl, so how can? Still. His mother was dead and their family was bereft, and in the middle of all this was a new baby.
This is how Vivek was born, after death and into grief. It marked him, you see, it cut him down like a tree. They brought him into a home filled with incapacitating sorrow; his whole life was a mourning. Kavita never had another child. “He is enough,” she would say. “This was enough.”

Picture: a house thrown into wailing the day he left it, restored to the way it was when he entered.

Picture: his body wrapped.

Picture: his father shattered, his mother gone mad. A dead foot with a deflated starfish spilled over its curve, the beginning and end of everything.