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The first time I see her, she is crouched by the entrance of the bathroom on the third floor, equal distance between my office and the lecture hall where I teach. She is sobbing, and her shoulders are shaking, so I stop, crouch down to be closer to her level, pat her on the shoulder, and ask her if she's all right. She nods and mumbles something under her breath. Then she lifts her head, wipes away tears with her hands, and smiles at me, a weak smile. "I'm OK," she says. Her voice is faint and comes out like a croak. There is a pause, and then another croak. I'm not sure what she says that second time around, but the sound makes me think of frogs, small and slimy, of Exodus and the second plague, of the inundation of the Nile, of Pharaoh and his magicians, challenging God by creating more frogs. I think of all this because that's what's on my mind those days. That's what I teach that semester. The Old Testament.

I straighten up and look in the direction of my office. There is a yellow cart in the center of the hallway, and not too far from the cart, a janitor is pushing a tall broom across the floor. A clock hangs from the ceiling on the far end of the hallway. I look at it and then I look back down at her. "It's about five PM," I say, fumbling awkwardly with the pendant of my necklace. "They'll be locking up the building soon."

She nods and lifts herself up from the floor. She is clutching a handbag to her front, grasping it as if it is some kind of life support, and then all of a sudden she starts to bawl so hard that she seems to be gasping for air. I pat her on the shoulder again, and somehow I find myself leading her back to my office, pulling out a seat for her, one of the two seats in the room that are reserved for my students. Except I'm not even sure that she's a student of mine. And in my twenty years at the university, I've never seen any of them bawl like this before.

"I'm sorry," I say to her, because I truly am to see her crying so hard. She leans forward on the chair, still clasping her bag, rocking it and herself back and forth. Slowly her sobbing declines until I can only hear the occasional catch of her breath. She rises from her seat and heads for the door.

"If you ever need someone to talk to—" I say. I don't finish.

At the doorway, she turns to look at me. "Thanks," she says. Her head is covered with thin black braids down past her shoulders, and her skin is a dark olive complexion, unique in its hue. Her lips are swollen and reddish, and there are streaks of tears staining her cheeks. I wonder where exactly she is from. As she walks out the door, I find myself thinking what a shame it is that anybody should be made to cry that much.

A few days go by: Thursday, Friday, and the weekend. I've almost forgotten the crying incident by Monday when I step into the lecture hall for my Old Testament class. The class itself is larger than normal, and a different demographic than other graduate courses I've taught, Chaucer, say, or Milton, or even my Greek mythology class. These students are more zealous than any I've had before. I figure that maybe it's the Bible's effect. Or maybe it's a consequence of age, because from the look of things, most of these students are in their thirties and forties, older than my typical set of students. And, unlike former students, these ones are quite fond of scheduling meetings with me. They do it with such alarming frequency that at certain points in the semester, I consider putting a cap on the number of visits allowed per student. Not because I don't want to meet with them, but because after a while, I get tired of hearing the same questions over and over again, questions like why the books of the Old Testament are organized the way they are, or why it is that in Leviticus God bans cripples from approaching his altar. Often enough, my answer is that it's a good question, and that there are several possibilities, all of which are subject to debate.

In any case, I step into the lecture hall, and a group of my students walks in the door with me, making small talk about God and the weather. I nod and smile at the things they say, and after we enter, I head directly to the front of the room, the way I always do. I jot down some Bible verses on the board, write some notes about apodictic law versus casuistic law, about Hammurabi's Code versus the Ten Commandments, about goodness for goodness' sake versus goodness with an eye to some type of reward or punishment. I wipe the chalk off my hands and turn around to face the class, and I catch a glimpse of her with the long black braids, sitting in the corner at the very back of the room. I smile. She looks down. I figure she's embarrassed about the crying, so I go on with the lecture, and I try not to look her way.

After class, I'm packing up my notes, stuffing my Bible into my bag, when I hear her voice.

"Excuse me," she says. "I'm Grace," she says.

She asks me when my office hours are. I tell her. Thursday mornings, nine AM to twelve noon. She nods. I smile. She doesn't smile back. She says, "I'd like to come in and talk to you about the Bible."

"Sure," I say. No surprise there. That's all they're coming in to talk to me about this semester.

Before she turns around, I am struck by the intensity of her expression. There is something vulnerable about her, something akin to old age. I think how such seriousness should be accompanied by a fine set of wrinkles across the forehead, or around the eyes and mouth. But she is young, maybe a couple of years younger than my own daughter, who is thirty, certainly significantly younger than what I imagine to be the average age for the students in this particular class. Her face is so serious and her eyes so penetrating. But there are no wrinkles to be seen.

She turns to leave, and I notice the way her braids dangle from her shoulders, and something about the way they move as she walks makes me want to reach out and touch them. But I remain where I am and watch her walk out of the class, and I think of her name, Grace, and how there couldn't be a more fitting name for her.

On Thursday, I'm sitting in my office with my door cracked open, flipping through my stack of mail, when she knocks on the door. I invite her in, and she shuts the door behind her. They sometimes do, when what they have to talk to me about is personal.

I take in her face again—that startling combination of youth and old age—and I think how her clothes are an extension of that paradox: a white dress shirt, buttoned almost to the very top, prudishly, though I can see the outline of her bra through the white, diaphanous cotton. She has tucked the bottom of the blouse into the waistline of her grayish tweed skirt. On her feet, she wears simple leather slippers. Her only jewelry is a pair of pearl earrings. A very neat presentation, which makes me aware of my own not-so-tidy look. I tug the hem of my untucked shirt, as if tugging will straighten out the wrinkles. I fuss with my earrings, and I'm grateful that I even remembered them today. I run my fingers through my hair and hope that I catch and put back into place any strays. I cross my legs under the table, and I ask her to take a seat.

She is holding her Bible, a small King James with a maroon cover, and all over the inside are pink and yellow Post-it notes, as if she's been doing some serious research.

She clears her throat, and tells me she has a few questions. That they are probably silly questions, but that she would like to see what I think, since I'm the only Bible scholar she knows with an academic background. I'll probably give her a different take on things than she's used to getting, she says. She speaks with a bit of an accent, barely perceptible, just enough for me to conclude that she's probably from somewhere as unusual as her looks suggest.

She quotes me 2 Timothy: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." She asks me, how exactly do we know that God has inspired the Bible? Because the Bible has caused quite a bit of destruction in the world, she says. How do we really know that God even approves of some of the things in the Bible?

I smile and tell her, "Sorry, I'm only dealing with the Old Testament this semester. Timothy is the New Testament." I start to laugh, because it's meant to be a joke, but her face is thoughtful and disappointed, so I clear my throat, and I apologize.

I tell her that religion is all about faith. And one's faith is a very personal thing.

She tells me that there are things in the Bible that could not possibly be from God, contradictions, like the whole idea of God being a god of peace, but also a god of war. "Which one is it?" she asks. And what about love your neighbor as yourself, and yet, God forbids the cripples from approaching his altar? What kind of God bans the very creatures he created from coming to him just because of imperfections out of their control?

I tell her that she needs to keep in mind that the Bible was written within a particular cultural context. I tell her there are many ways to read it. I say that I believe it was inspired by God in many ways, but it was still written by humans, with human biases, shaped by the existing cultural norms of the time.

She nods and says, "So if humans are making their own rules, and writing the rules down in the Bible, where exactly does the godly inspiration enter?"

"Well," I say, "God inspired them to set down the rules in the first place. And when you look at all the ancient books in the world, none have lasted as long and have had as much influence as the Bible. That in itself is an attestation to some kind of divine inspiration, I think."

"I suppose," she says. "But then how do we know what rules are God's and what rules are man's? I need to know," she says.

"Are you worried about any particular rule?" I ask.

"Like divorce," she says. "Is it adultery to divorce and remarry, or is it permissible?

And shouldn't it at least depend on the specific circumstance? What about in the case of an abusive husband? Must the woman stay?"

I hesitate a bit. I wonder if she's contemplating divorce, or if she's just picking out an example. Then I think of my own divorce, nearly fifteen years ago now. I remember the loneliness of it all, the disappointment in failing at something as important as marriage. "Marriage is a sacred union," I say, even as I'm recalling my own. "When something happens that makes the union no longer sacred, I believe that is grounds enough for divorce."

"But is the Bible OK with that?" she asks. "Is God OK with that?"

"I don't know," I say. "It's difficult to know."

We stay quiet for a while. Then I look up at her. There is a trail of tears coming down one side of her face. The other side is still winning the battle, resisting the tears.

"I'm sorry my class is upsetting you this much," I say.

"No," she says. "It's not your class." She wipes her tears away. "I'm sorry about all this crying," she says.

"Don't be sorry," I say.

She looks at me, then she looks down at her Bible, flips it open. "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination." She pauses. "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death."

I'm intrigued by these verses that she reads. All of a sudden the conversation is taking a different turn. I remain quiet and simply listen to see where it'll go.

"Does this also apply to females?" she asks. "Is it also an abomination for women to lie with women?"

Aha, I think. "It's a tricky issue," I say. "Try not to take it all so literally. There are things in the Bible that should not be taken so literally."

"I don't understand," she says.

"Like the word *abomination*," I say. "It's hard to even know what that meant back then. Meanings change over time. It's hard to know."

She looks down at her Bible. She says, "It's hard to know right from wrong, especially when some things feel natural, and yet there are so many people telling you how wrong they are."

I nod, and I think how honest this conversation is. Usually, I'm listening to questions that don't have to do with anything personal. Just demonstrations of intellect and scholarship. I want to hug her and tell her that one day she'll figure it

out for herself. But I'm not so sure of that, and so I don't move. Instead I say, "The greatest commandments, according Jesus, are first, love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. And second, love your neighbor as yourself."

I smile at her. She smiles back. On her way out she tells me thank you for the talk.

"Anytime," I say.

Two weeks later, I'm sitting in my office, my back to the door, when I think I hear a knock so soft that I have to turn around to check if someone is really there. From the opening, I can see a bit of her face, standing by, waiting for me to answer.

I pull open the door, invite her in. She is holding a white paper bag in one hand and a card and an envelope in another. She tells me she's brought something for me. She sits down, signs the card in front of me, and as she's signing it, she's muttering something about my having to excuse her cursive, because she never really learned how to write in cursive. I ask her why. She looks up at me, all thoughtful, and says, "They didn't teach cursive in Nigeria." She puts her head back down and continues to write.

I say, "Oh, I would have thought maybe it's because of your age. I don't believe they're still teaching it in schools these days. I don't believe they've taught it for at least a couple of decades now. Probably they wouldn't have been teaching it for people your age, even if you were in America."

She looks back up at me and smiles. "I'm not so young," she says, handing me the card.

"Does it say something sweet?" I ask, and immediately, I'm embarrassed by the question.

"Not really," she says. "But what it says should be good enough."

I feel the heat rise in my face. I tell her thank you. She gets up, tells me to have a good day. She leaves the room. I take out the card and see a picture of a wide, expansive sky. Above the clouds, the sun is bright.

Inside the card, she has written the words: "I saw this in the store. It somehow reminded me of you." In the bag, a brooch of a hummingbird.

In class the next week, I keep from looking her way. I'm not sure exactly why. Maybe residual embarrassment or something like it.

Another week passes by, and then she comes back to my office. It's the same routine each time, and it repeats every other week or so. She knocks on my door,

peeks in, and asks me how I am. I tell her fine. She says, "Good." And then she wishes me a good rest of the day and leaves.

Thanksgiving comes and goes, and we all start to wrap ourselves up with thick scarves and wool mittens.

The last week before Christmas break she knocks on my door, and I tell her to come in. She is wearing a brown hat, some kind of knit, and half her face is covered by a matching scarf. She enters the room, closes the door behind her, raises her hands to her face, and it's only then that I realize that she's upset—and quite a bit angry.

She unravels the scarf from her face, and I see that she is crying. I stand up and hug her. "Somehow it all works out," I say. I used to tell this to myself during my divorce, and the weeks afterward. Then the weeks turned to months, and months to years. And I found myself chanting it less.

She mumbles something about letters, about her mother. Then she stays silent for a while.

"It'll be all right," I say, my arms still wrapped around her. Suddenly I have this image in my head of John Rosenberg making out in his office with that female student of his. I don't remember who it was that walked in on them; it was several years ago. But I know he lost his tenure that way, created a scandal in the department that lasted quite a while. It occurs to me that if someone were to walk into my office at that very moment, things between Grace and me would appear inappropriate. I've never consoled a student like this before. And with my closest family members half a country away, in Massachusetts, it's been a while since I stood this close to anyone, minus cursory hugs from friends and co-workers. It occurs to me that I should take my hands off her waist, but I don't, and, thinking back now, the reason I don't let go is quite clear. But at that very moment, all I am thinking is that I prefer to leave my hands where they are, that anyway, it couldn't possibly be inappropriate, being that I'm a woman, and she's a woman, and I'm probably older than her mother.

After some time, she sighs, an extended sigh, one of those sighs that seem to tumble out after hours and hours of tedious contemplation. Then she tells me that she was the one who signed for the packet the day the first batch of letters came, nearly a year ago.

"What letters?" I ask.

She starts to laugh, softly, as if she's suddenly in some kind of trance, but then she stops. I release her, motioning to a chair, but she makes no move to take the

chair. We are still standing there, with a little more space between us—no longer in an embrace—when she really gets into the story.

She tells me that the forecasts that day called for snow, but that the deliveryman only wore the yellow-and-red polo shirt, with a red collar and a red hem around the sleeves. He wore a hat, she says, which, when he removed it, revealed a head of graying hair. She looks at me. "Salt-and-pepper, like yours," she says. Then, she shakes her head slightly and looks down as if suddenly embarrassed or shy.

The DHL man handed her the yellow package with a smile on his face, she says. Always the same deliveryman, she tells me, with the same truck. She thought she knew what the package was, some silly correspondence for her mother from Nigeria, because silly correspondences were often coming for her mother from Nigeria.

It is as if she now grows weary of standing because she proceeds to take the seat that I had offered. I follow her lead and pull out an opposite-facing chair for myself from which I can continue to look directly at her.

"Did I tell you I have a brother?" she asks suddenly.

"No," I say.

She nods. "Arinze," she says. "Five years older than me. When we were little, he and I used to take turns climbing a stool that my mother kept in the attic. It was our playroom, that attic room. It only had one window, which was so near the ceiling that we had to climb the stool to open it up."

My office reminds her a bit of the attic room, she continues, with its exposed brick walls, with the tiny holes between the bricks. Millipedes and centipedes crawled out of the holes in the spring and the summers. This last part comes out like something between a statement and a question, and I wonder if she's asking me about my office or telling me about her mother's attic.

"But it's been years since either of us used the stool," she says, "years since either of us opened or closed the window. Which explains the scent," she says. "Building up and then settling into every corner, into every item in every corner of the room. The scent of mothballs, and of Mentholatum." She laughs softly again, shaking her head as she does. Then she tells me that she's wrong. That my office is nothing like the attic, because even though there are the brick walls and the tiny holes, the scent is missing. "It's a good thing," she says.

I nod and say, "OK."

"I handed the envelope to Mama," she says. As she speaks I can see their kitchen in my head, her mother sitting on the short stool, her legs wrapped around the circumference of the mortar, pounding yam with the pestle. "All this time in

America," she says. "And still, Mama must pound her yam in the mortar, the old-fashioned way."

"How long have you been in America?" I ask.

"Years," she says. "Just over ten years." She came at twelve, she tells me. I do the math and find myself disappointed to realize that she's only twenty-two. Her seriousness, her self-possession: I had thought perhaps twenty-eight or twenty-nine.

She breathes deeply and continues. "I walk into the kitchen and hand the envelope to Mama. Meanwhile Arinze is downstairs; I can hear the hammering and the drilling. He is putting together a shelf for Mama. Always stopping by, helping Mama around the house, fixing or putting together something for her. A perfect son, really," she says. "Which is why Mama put him in charge of managing her stores, coordinating the shipments of the products from Nigeria, that sort of thing."

I nod.

"There was a whole batch of letters in the envelope," she says. "And this time they weren't for Mama," she says. "They were all for me."

"From whom?" I ask.

"Men," she says. "Marriage proposals." Her voice begins to break, and something in my stomach takes a nose dive. I tell myself that the nose dive is because I don't want to watch her cry again.

"Do you know the men?" I ask.

She shakes her head and then leans on my shoulder. I can feel the roughness of her braids rubbing my jaw. Her scent is fleshy but sweet.

"There's one," she says. "Obinna." She lifts her head. "An Igbo man who lives in Lagos, Lekki, in one of those big houses with uniformed gatemen. Owns his own accounting firm." She pauses. "Mama likes that part," she says. "The part about owning his own business. And she likes that he really wants to marry me," she says.

She tells me that his letters are filled with things like, "You're the wife of my dreams, my African queen." She pauses, then she exclaims, "How silly it is for Mama to expect me to marry a man I've only seen in pictures!"

I ask her if *he* has seen *her*, if he has any idea what she looks like, or is he just operating under some kind of divine guidance?

She tells me, yes, that he's seen her picture, too. That her mother took the picture herself, that her mother placed the stool by the empty wall of the dining room and asked her to sit there, arranged her braids so that they framed her face and shoulders just so. After posing her, her mother rubbed some maroon lip gloss on her lips and lent her a pair of gold-and-pearl chandelier earrings. Then she

snapped pictures until finally she got the one that she said was just right. This was the only picture of Grace that Obinna had seen, as far as she knew. Somehow, she tells me—and she can't even begin to understand how—it was all he needed to make the decision to marry her.

I'm feeling devastated about her having to marry this Obinna guy, and I wonder if it will be terrible, if she will have to endure an unhappy marriage, or if she will come to love him. It occurs to me how little thought I've given to the whole idea of arranged marriages. Until then, it's been a sort of abstract concept. I tell her that I'm sorry.

"Has a date been set?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says. At the beginning of this semester Obinna made the official request to her mother, in a letter. And, of course, she says, her mother said yes, told her that it was all for the best, that Obinna had her best interest at heart. That any girl her age had no business not being married. Any girl would be a fool to decline a man who wanted her as much as Obinna did. All of this, she tells me, happened the day that I found her by the entrance to the bathroom.

I ask her what's been going on in the months since then.

"Waiting," she says. "And praying that Obinna or Mama would have a change of heart."

I say, "No luck, I take it."

She shakes her head. "No luck," she says. She tells me that this morning she finally got the courage to say something to her mother. That she walked down the hallway in their house, climbed up the stairs into the attic, because her mother was there, sorting piles of paper, business papers, or marriage papers. She said to her mother, "I'm not marrying him." As she speaks I imagine her mother hunched over, slowly straightening up, a pair of glasses hanging on the bridge of her nose. At first her mother doesn't answer. And then she clears her throat, adjusts her glasses. "Stop that nonsense," her mother says.

Her brother Arinze walks into the attic room, holding a box, the one into which she assumes her mother will be sorting the piles of paper.

"Mama, I'm not getting married," she says.

Her mother doesn't answer, so she raises her voice and says, "Did you hear me, Mama?"

"She's not deaf," Arinze says.

"Mama?" Grace says, softer.

Her mother still does not answer.

Then suddenly her mother speaks. "All that studying," she says. "You'll marry your studies? Marry your books?" "You already have one degree," her mother says. "But you want another. You'll marry your degrees?"

She doesn't answer.

"Am I talking to the wall?" her mother asks. "Answer me!" And then she doesn't wait for an answer. She says, "Before you know it, you'll look around and find yourself all alone, just you and your degrees. And then what?"

She tells her mother that it's not for her.

"What's not for you?" her mother asks.

"Marriage," she says.

"Marriage is not for you?" her mother scoffs. "Your papa, God rest his soul, would cringe in his grave if he heard you say such nonsense. What good is having that doctorate that you're going for, if your life is empty, no husband, no children?"

"It's not for me," she tells her mother again. But she doesn't tell her mother the entire truth. It's not the marriage part that's not for her. It's the fact that she doesn't like men in the marrying way. She's never been interested in them like that. She tells me this now, though of course I already knew.

"A woman needs to marry, have children," her mother says. "Life is more satisfying that way."

"She'll marry her books and degrees," Arinze says, chuckling.

"Shut up," she tells her brother, in a whisper.

"You shut up," Arinze says. "And better watch how you talk to me, old maid."

"Be quiet," her mother says to her. "You'll get married. That's final." And her mother turns back to the floor, toward the piles of papers that she is sorting.

Grace turns around to leave her mother, to leave her brother, to leave the attic room. But something makes her turn back. So she stands facing her mother, but she fixes her eyes on one of the holes on the brick wall. She takes in slow, calculated breaths to steady her voice. Then she says, calmly, in a clear, firm voice, "I won't."

Suddenly her mother is slapping her, screaming at her about defiance. She is trying to push her mother away, and then she feels Arinze towering above her, pounding his fists down on her shoulders. "Don't you dare disrespect Mama like that!" he shouts. "Don't you dare!" More pounding. She struggles to breathe, but every breath is suffocating, saturated with the scent of mothballs, and of undiluted Mentholatum. And then the brick walls in the room start spinning around her, and her shoulders are throbbing, because she is now down on her knees, she tells me, and still Arinze's fists are pounding down on her.

"I can't," she finishes, like a sigh. I can see the tears in her eyes. I sit there and allow her to lean her head against my shoulder.

Before she leaves, I mention to her the counseling services at the university. I ask her if she's ever been there. She shakes her head. I tell her that perhaps there is someone there who can help her more than I can. She shakes her head again. "Try it out," I tell her, trying to sound adamant. "At least think about it," I say. But even as I say it, there is a part of me that is scared that if she finds the counseling staff helpful, she might stop coming to me.

That night, I take a walk around town. Christmas lights hang above every doorway, and the ground is covered with snow. The air is cold and feels as if it is pricking the skin on my cheeks. I imagine pins and needles, thin, rusting metal wires, stabbing my skin. I tell myself that perhaps this is my punishment, for these new thoughts, these inappropriate desires. Perhaps a little stabbing is what I deserve. All the same, I tug at my scarf and my hat, adjusting them so that they cover the exposed portions of my face.

There is a strong hazelnut aroma in the air. It leads me to a coffee shop, Brewed Awakenings. Even with the cold, the scent is so strong and oddly appeasing, like a balm, that for a moment I consider stopping to buy myself a cup of coffee, even if coffee is not my thing, has never been. But I don't. Instead, I take a seat at one of the outside benches a short distance from the tall glass window. And I breathe in the aroma. And I watch the people inside.

There is a couple sitting by the window. I can't see them clearly at first, because they are seated sideways in the shop, and they are wearing hats, and they have muffled themselves with oversized scarves that appear more like cloaks. Then he removes his hat and scarf, and she does the same. He smiles at her, reaches out and stirs the contents of her cup while she is still struggling to take off her gloves. Their hands come together, his dark skin on her fair skin, and I think of Grace, and I imagine Obinna putting his hand on her. And then the woman takes her cup, takes a sip out of it, and she laughs at something he says. She looks happy, and I find myself wishing that Obinna makes Grace happy like that. So long as she is happy, I say to myself. And I find myself trying really hard to remember if I've ever heard of or read about or watched any stories in which an arranged marriage ends up being successful. Of course the only examples that come to my mind are from the Bible. I think of Isaac, how Abraham asks his servant to go find a wife for him. And that woman ends up being Rebekah. And the servant asks her father for

permission to take Rebekah back home to Isaac. And her parents give the permission. She does not know what Isaac looks like; neither does Isaac know what she looks like. And yet the marriage ensues and for all intents and purposes appears to be a success. Of course, the big difference is that Rebekah agrees to marry Isaac.

"Will you go with this man?" they ask her.

"I will go," she says.

Just a few days before Christmas, my daughter calls me from Massachusetts, tells me that because of a mess-up in plans, they will be spending this Christmas with her in-laws, that they will no longer be coming down to be with me. It's been this way since my grandson was born, three Christmases now, and each time she comes up with a new excuse as to why they won't be spending Christmas with me. She tells me it has to be done because her husband's family will be very upset if they don't make it.

"What about me?" I ask.

She says, "Mom, it's just you. He's got the whole family, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins. They'll all be angry with me. Please understand," she says. "I'll make it up to you. In the meantime, better for one person to be mad at me than the whole gang."

I tell her fine, that I have research to do and lectures to prepare for anyway. And the truth is that I'd much rather not be dealing with the chaos of family Christmases, all four of us gathered together in the small space of my apartment, the noise and bustle and lack of privacy so different from the order of the lecture hall. Still, it'd be nice to bake pies and help prepare the meal, to sit around and chitchat, catch up. Not to mention that it'd be nice not to have to eat alone, because these days, maybe because of the Christmas season, or the cold weather, I'm feeling more lonely than ever, and eating has begun to feel like a chore, something that needs to be done, a solitary task without any enjoyment in it. In any case, I tell my daughter, "Fine." She thanks me profusely.

I immerse myself in work the entire break, but between the research and the preparation for lectures and conferences, I find myself thinking of Grace. I think of the feeling of her braids on my skin and of her smile and of all that crying she did. I remember her collared dress and her musty perfume scent. And every now and then there is a feeling of dread when I think of the possibility that she will be a married woman the next time I see her.

* * *

The New Year arrives, and then a week later, classes resume. The first week, I don't see Grace. The second week, I'm sure she will show up, but she doesn't. Her name is on the roster for one of my seminars, but she does not appear; nor does she come to office hours. I begin to mope about. Every passing day becomes a great disappointment, though there are those brief moments of hope, moments when I find myself recognizing Grace's features in another young woman. But then the young woman turns around and I see that it's not her, and I'm left feeling even emptier than before.

Then the third week, I'm sitting in my office, flipping through the pages of the New Testament when I hear the knock. She enters without my inviting her in. I'm expecting that she will head straight to one of the two empty seats. Instead she stops near me, hugs me from behind before taking a seat. She apologizes for being gone all this time, for returning so late into the beginning of the semester. She asks me if I had a good Christmas break, and all I can do is nod.

She stretches out her hand to stroke my arm. "I'm sorry," she says. Maybe the look on my face somehow tells her how miserable I've been.

I look down at my arm, at her hand on it. She retracts it, shyly, as if she's suddenly aware of an indiscretion. I want to tell her that I've been thinking of her, but instead I find myself saying, "Are you married now?"

She looks curiously at me, and for a moment I feel as if I am trespassing, as if the question is not mine to ask. But her curious glance quickly fades away, and she shakes her head and tells me no, but that soon she'll be. This time it's I who reaches out and strokes her arm.

"It's OK," she says. "It's not the end of the world."

"Isn't it?" I ask, wanting her to tell me that it is in fact the end of the world, wanting her to begin crying again so that I can hold her.

She shakes her head. "No," she says. Then she clears her throat. "I'd like you to come," she says.

"To your wedding?" I ask.

She nods. It will be in May, after the semester comes to an end, she tells me. It will be held here in America, she says, because it is what Obinna wants. Something to the effect of his taking their marriage as an opportunity to make his first trip to America.

"You'll come?" she says again, this time a question.

I shake my head and tell her I can't. That I'll be teaching the summer session, that it might not even be appropriate for me to attend given that I'm her professor.

"Really?" she asks.

"Really," I say, forcing myself to stick to the excuse.

We both stare at each other for some time. Neither of us speaks. Then she says, "I was in Nigeria over the break."

"To see family?" I ask.

She nods.

She tells me her cousin Ogechukwu was getting married, and her mother wanted her to attend the wedding ceremonies, the traditional and the white, to remind her firsthand how authentic Nigerian weddings were done, so that she would know what was expected of her at her own wedding.

She stops there, and when she doesn't continue, I ask whether her brother and her mother went with her.

"Mama went with me," she says. "Not Arinze," she says. Because, she tells me, according to her mother, Arinze already knew the culture, already knew what it meant to be Nigerian. It was she who caused her mother concern.

She tells me her mother is right. That sometimes she barely feels Nigerian, which she knows has never been the case with Arinze. Growing up, Arinze was always speaking Igbo with her mother while she could only understand, not speak, and had to respond in English. Arinze would always swallow his balls of *garri* after dipping them into the soup. She, on the other hand, chewed hers. Arinze knew the Igbo names of all the food items they sold in the store, from the crayfish to the oils to the seeds. He could differentiate *egusi* from *ogbono*. She could not. And, of course, there was the time that Arinze told their mother that he would find himself a good Igbo girl and marry her. He was much younger then, she says, and she laughs a dry, sarcastic laugh. She tells me that perhaps he has changed his mind by now. But even that far back, she says, she had no desire to marry a man, much less a Nigerian man who she'd never actually met.

"Did you finally get to meet him, then?" I ask.

She nods but doesn't say any more. Instead she tells me how an aunt of hers, Aunty Nora, waited for them at the airport gate. How Aunty Nora screamed and danced around and waved her hands in the air when she saw Grace and her mother. The cousin, Ogechukwu, a thin girl with an oval face and prominent cheekbones, accompanied Aunty Nora. Grace tells me that there was something like surrender in Ogechukwu's face. As if hers, too, was an arranged marriage. As if it was also by force.

Anyway, they all hugged and then Ogechukwu and Aunty Nora helped Grace and her mother to carry their luggage out of the airport.

She and her mother only stayed a week, she tells me. They helped to prepare the food for the wedding, pots of *egusi* soup, okra soup, *jellof* rice, fried fish, and of course, the *ishi ewu* delicacy—fried goat head in pepper soup.

They helped to fit Ogechukwu's outfits, too, pinning the sides of the wrappers and the white wedding gown, picking out the beads of her necklaces and the beads of her *jigida*, her waist beads, which were numerous, about fifteen sets altogether, all of different colors. They measured the *jigida*, fitted them, because she would wear them as she danced, and they would jingle, and onto them money would be stuck. But if they were not correctly fitted, the *jigida* would start to descend down Ogechukwu's buttocks, down her thighs, with all the dancing that she would do that day, and all the money would drop with them.

"Sounds very festive," I say, when she finishes. "Very rich in tradition."

She nods. "You should come to mine," she says.

"Will it make you happy?" I ask.

"Happiness is like water," she says. "We're always trying to grab on to it, but it's always slipping between our fingers." She looks down at her hands. "And my fingers are thin."

I'm not sure how to respond, but I say: "I wouldn't know how to behave, all the rites and rituals. I wouldn't know what to wear."

"Dress as you do to teach," she says. "Only remember that after you've dipped your *garri* in your soup, you must swallow, not chew." She laughs. "That will definitely give you away," she says.

"As if that's the only thing," I say.

We both laugh.

February comes and February goes, and March and April, all passing by with the snow and the bitter cold. We resume our meetings, and I find myself looking more and more forward to them, growing more and more impatient for her company.

The weather reports call for sun throughout the week of her wedding. That week we meet as usual in my office, but she asks that we meet again outside of the office, at the park by the river, under the light and dark shadows of the trees. And I agree.

It is midafternoon when I make it to the park. The sun is floating like an orange ball in the sky, reflecting itself on the river. Its rays cause the water to shimmer, like silver and gold threads on a bed of gray silk. I take in the trees which line the trail, spaced several yards apart, and choose a bench near one of these trees. The tree's oblong leaves dangle from frail branches and flutter in the air. I reach out and

touch the bark of its trunk, which appears jigsaw-like, akin to craters on the surface of the earth. I am still running my fingers across the surface of the trunk, about to pick at a piece of the bark, when I catch sight of Grace. My heart skips a beat.

She walks toward me holding a small red box, about the size of her small King James. But it is not the same shade of red as her King James, and around the box strands of gold ribbons have been tied into a bow. Others dangle freely in spirals. She approaches, with slow steps and long strides. She is wearing a beige dress that comes down to her ankles. Her shoulders seem to sag, and I feel my own sag in response. Her loose braids sway, and I take them in, thinking how pretty and dark and youthful they are. And suddenly I'm aware of my age, and of my slumping posture, of my gray hair, of the wrinkles around my eyes and mouth. I think how much more my slumping must be aging me. I sit up, square my shoulders, tuck the loose strands of my hair behind my ears, and wait for her to come to me. All the while, I'm wondering what's in the box.

She takes a seat by me on the bench, on a diagonal, so that she is facing me. Her hands rest on her lap. She taps the box softly, then runs her finger along the side of it, along the surface of the ribbons. I watch her fingers move, slowly, delicately. It is almost hypnotic.

I think of Obinna caressing those fingers, and there is resentment in me. I start to imagine her wedding, but it is interrupted by thoughts of my own divorce, of sitting alone by the fireplace at home, listening over and over to the sound of silence, the crackling of wood, the heavy rustling of the leaves outside my windows. And, really, I think, it was all my fault, if it came down to blame. It was my fault for not being able to devote myself to him, to love him completely, the way a wife should her husband. But there'd been something missing for me in the marriage. And I'd been lonely all the while. I'd have been lonelier if I'd stayed. Because, as if in rebellion, certain emotions become amplified at the exact moments when you are expected not to feel them at all.

The river is just ahead, and I turn my eyes to it. I imagine throwing pebbles into it, imagine the small splashes that the pebbles cause as they cut through the surface of the water.

"What's on your mind?" Grace asks me.

"Nothing," I say.

I can feel her gaze on me, and I imagine she is taking in my wrinkles and all the age spots on my forehead, all those age spots dispersed around the perimeter of my hairline.

"I'm old," I tell her, forcing myself to laugh. "See the age spots?"

"Yes," she says. "Like petals along the fence of a garden."

"That's a good one," I say, and I turn to look at her. She appears to be scrutinizing my forehead, getting lost in it.

Embarrassed, I change the subject. "The river makes me think of fishing," I say. "It would be nice to one day go fishing."

"I don't know how," she says.

"I could teach you," I respond. I imagine us farther down the river, in a canoe maybe, with paddleboats and catamarans sharing the water with us. "We could hook all sorts," I tell her. "Walleye, crappies, bullheads, catfish, bass, even bluegills."

She turns her gaze to face the river. She tells me that she hardly recognizes those fish names. Catfish, she knows. Bluegills, too. The rest are new to her, she says. "It'd be nice to go fishing with you," she says.

It's a nice thought, us fishing together, me teaching her. I feel the rays of the sun on my shoulders, and I hear the distant quacking of the waterfowls. I look at her, and I think how nice it is to just sit here with her. This is enough, I think. Just this.

She clears her throat. And nothing prepares me for what she says next. "Have you ever been in love?" she asks.

"In love?" I ask.

"Really in love," she says, "the kind where every part of you feels like you could spend forever with the person. And you wish that forever could be more than a lifetime. The kind where you don't see all the things that are wrong with the person, all the negatives that should have prevented you from falling for the person in the first place."

"With love, you see the flaws," I tell her.

"Then that's what I mean," she says. "Only I wouldn't call them flaws."

I nod. "I suppose I was in love with my ex-husband," I say.

"And since then?" she asks. "How many years now, and you haven't fallen for anyone else?"

"People come and go," I say. "It's hard to find someone with whom you feel truly compatible."

"I've fallen in love," she tells me.

It shocks me, this confession of hers, and it scares me, too, and so I force myself not to look at her. "You've fallen in love?" I say, like an echo, and still I don't look at her.

"Yes," she says.

"It's not easy identifying love," I say.

"It's easy enough for me," she says. "Love is seeing someone the way God would see that person. Seeing in that person something pure and divinely beautiful, seeing in that person the true image of God."

"You're not God. You couldn't possibly know what it's like to see someone from the eyes of God." As I say it, I look up at her, and I examine her, as if examining will give me some clarity about what to feel. And it occurs to me that perhaps she is right. Because when I look at her, I see something all-beautiful in her, something all-perfect, if there ever was such a thing. Perhaps this is what God would see in us.

She crouches down in front of me, facing me. She is still holding her little box. She stoops on one knee and looks me in the eye and tells me how it's all wrong. She tells me that, beyond the fact that the Bible condemns that sort of love, she is almost certain that she'll not be good enough, that she couldn't possibly have experienced enough of the world to make it work, to rise to the level of the person she's fallen for. But that she's in love, and she's been trying to fight it, but she can't fight it anymore.

"You're getting married," I remind her. And I imagine the wedding, her mother tinkering with the wedding attire, fussing with the wrappers, placing the *jigida* beads just so. I imagine that I hear her mother's voice in the wedding hall, sharp and imperious, ordering Arinze around, telling him how to place the chairs, that sort of thing. I imagine Obinna's face, rough with stubble around the chin and cheeks. A man.

I imagine Grace running her fingers across his face, across his stubble, and I try to imagine her enjoying this, but I can't. I see his arms coming around her waist, I see her forcing her eyes shut, and when he is invited to kiss the bride, I imagine a stiff embrace, an awkward, lifeless peck.

I replace Obinna with myself. I imagine myself kissing her, and I imagine her leaning into me, running her fingers across my face, through my hair. And I feel myself aching. And I feel something like tears moistening my skin.

"You're getting married," I say again, in a whisper.

"I know," she says.

We don't say anything for a while, then she speaks, and the words gush out as if she's in a hurry to spill them. "You're much older, and I'm much younger," she says. Her voice is low, and there is a bit of a quiver in it. "One day, you'll begin to stoop, you might have to rely on a cane, and you'll lose your sight, your hearing, and maybe you'll even begin to lose your mind. And I will love you still. I'll love

you the whole way through," she says. "I'll take care of you, bathe you, and water your grave with tears full of love. I know that I will."

I turn to look at her, because I believe her. And suddenly I'm extending my hand to slap her across her face, because I understand what she's telling me, and I understand that she's giving me permission to feel a way that I'm not sure I want the permission to feel. But her hand catches mine, as if she has read my mind.

"But then," she whispers, "who's to say that I won't die first? Who's to say that you won't be the one burying me?"

"Hush," I tell her, quietly, shaking my head, and I begin to sob.

As I kiss her, I don't think of the practical things, like what this will mean for my job, the scandal it might cause, the shame it might bring. I don't think of how I will explain all this to my daughter, to her husband, how they will explain it to their son. I don't think of all the affairs that I've witnessed in my twenty years at the university. I don't think of my disbelief at colleagues who held such distinguished positions at the university but allowed fleeting romances between themselves and their students to interfere with their careers. I don't think of any of this as we kiss.

And I don't think of the Bible, of its verses about unnatural affections and abominations. Because it doesn't feel sinful to me. Because none of this is meant to be a challenge to God.

Instead I relent in her arms and think of how good it feels—how nice her skin feels on mine. And I continue to taste her lips, plump and sweet. And I breathe in her fresh scent, flowery and light, like lavender.

She pulls away then, fusses with the gold ribbons on the red box, tugs the ribbons until they come undone. She reaches inside the box and takes out a small, round object in gold wrapping. "For you," she says to me. "A wedding favor," she says.

I reach out to accept. She places the object into my cupped hand, and then she covers my hand with her own. Our hands linger in midair that way, mine in hers. Then I pull away, because the whole thing feels not quite like a celebration—more like unadorned acceptance, just a bit short of joyful.

And I think that perhaps all this will do. The waterfowls are still quacking, and the sun is high in the sky. The river is still glowing in shades of silver and gold. Grace is sitting next to me, and I can't help thinking that perhaps the verge of joy is its own form of happiness.