

Taiye

TAIYE AWOKE TO A WARM SLICK OF DARK BLOOD sticking between her lean thighs. Menstrual fluid soaked through her green underwear and made a splotchy maroon map on the orange batik sheets of her bed. In recent mornings, since moving back home to Lagos, she awoke to thoughts of her bees; they lived in an olive-green hive underneath the dappled shade of the palm trees clustered in the backyard. Among the palms, lush bougainvillea cascading over the fence between the neighbour's compound dropped bright pink paper blooms like blessings upon the hive. Taiye had been romanced by the notion of keeping bees since she was a small girl, so the moment the dream was within reach, she seized it and clutched it tight. And learned hard lessons on loving the living.

On that particular morning, her first thoughts were of her sister, Kehinde.

Taiye stretched, breathing in deeply.

On the exhale, she whispered, "May I be safe," and hoped that her words would fall upon open ears. Kehinde was coming home with her husband. Taiye hadn't met him yet. She hadn't seen her sister in a long time.

"May I have peace."

She peeled off her damp underwear, pulled the stained sheets off the bed, and threw them in a pile at the corner of the bathroom. With a wet washcloth she wiped crusty streaks of drying blood from her thighs, and then inserted a silicone menstrual cup, discoloured to a light brown from many years of use, to catch her period as it left her body.

With her footsteps muffled by the plush emerald carpet of the hallway, she walked toward her mother's bedroom. The heavy wooden door squeaked in its tired frame when Taiye slowly pushed it open. Her

mother, a soft lump underneath white sheets, was illuminated by slits of light escaping past heavy red curtains into the otherwise dark room. She listened for gentle snores and shut the door quietly behind her.

“May I have joy.”

Early in the morning the house existed in a quiet hush, a spell destined to break moments after a power outage, when the generator would roar electronics back to life. Taiye liked quiet. She wondered if, and how much, it would change when Kehinde and Farouq arrived.

When she'd arrived almost a year ago with intentions to stay, she found the house in a sort of passive disarray. Thick cobwebs hung in dirty grey clusters in every corner. A layer of dust had settled in and covered all the surfaces. Really, the house seemed untouched, as if no one lived there. Hot rage shot through Taiye's travel-worn body at the sight of the place, because she'd paid a housekeeper to clean and cook for her mother. And when she saw her mother, saw how prominently the delicate bones of her clavicles pushed so taut against sallow skin, saw her sunken cheeks and the utter joy that brightened her face when Taiye appeared, she choked on the gasp that threatened to escape her throat. She'd embraced her mother, and then marched to the kitchen, where the plump housekeeper was eating a large portion of amala and chicken stew. Taiye said, “Please finish your food. I'll pay you for next month, but you have to leave today.”

Afterward, before unpacking, Taiye had tasted egusi soup from a pot in the fridge and found it flavourless and void of feeling. She threw it out and made a tomato stew with azu eke, smoked mackerel. She served it with boiled yam to her mother, who devoured the whole thing and licked the plate clean.

Now, walking down the stairs, Taiye was careful not to step on the cat, Coca-Cola; the ancient and volatile black thing slept curled up in the corners where the spiral steps changed directions. The cat moved out of the way and trailed behind Taiye into the kitchen.

“May I be healthy.”

Although it was still a soft whisper, Taiye's voice filled the high-ceilinged kitchen. She filled a fire-blackened stainless-steel kettle with

tap water and placed it on the gas stove. As she sat by the window, she let the cat curl up in her lap, and they waited for the water to boil.

A shrill beep from her phone told her that an email awaited. Even before reading it, Taiye knew she wouldn't reply.

Subject: I'm Sorry

Banke Martins <b.martins@sau.edu>

April 23, 2017, 7:43 AM

To <t.adejide@gmail.com>

Taiye, I know it's been a while, but your phone is still disconnected, and you haven't answered any of my previous emails. I'm really sorry about the letters, can we please talk? I heard that you had to go home. Something about your mother. How is she? Please write back.

Banke

Taiye rolled her eyes and put her phone down. Banke was a former lover, a flash in the pan. A mistake. The heat of Taiye's anger had fizzled out, and in its place was utter disinterest.

As a detour from the undesirable path down which her mind wanted to wander, Taiye abruptly decided that she would make a cake to celebrate Kehinde's homecoming. And jollof rice with smoked fish, curried chicken, and soft-boiled eggs.

"A feast," Taiye said, and lifted Coca-Cola's soft body from her lap to the cold tiled floor.

She made a cup of Lipton tea with condensed milk and honey—the first offerings from her beloved hive. She fished a foil-wrapped block of butter out of the overstuffed freezer to let it thaw on the counter by the open window. Then, she listened for the low humming of her bees.

This is how you make a salted caramel chocolate cake for your twin sister whom you haven't seen in ... God, a long time. In hopes that you avoid talking about the things you haven't been talking about and just eat

in silence. For the batter, you will need as much butter as you can manage without leaving your cake too dense and greasy. Taiye would die in pure bliss if she were to drown in a tub of good butter, so she used plenty. You should use a little over two cups of all-purpose flour, three quarters of a cup of unsweetened cocoa powder—preferably fair trade; no need to have the exploited labour of children on your hands just for chocolate—a teaspoon and a half of baking powder, a quarter teaspoon of baking soda, a half teaspoon of salt, and three large eggs. You may add a cup of sugar, but Taiye used a cup of honey instead. And finally, some vanilla extract.

In place of buttercream frosting, Taiye made honey caramel to pour over the cake.

She lit the gas oven and turned the dial to 325 degrees. Some minutes crept by before the pungent odour of burning fish drew Taiye out of a reverie. Like her mother, she was prone to daydreaming and had forgotten a newspaper-lined tray of smoked mackerel in the oven the previous night. In a rush to take it out, she burned her hands on the metal tray and dropped it with a loud clank on the floor tiles, startling Coca-Cola, who jumped and darted out of the kitchen in a blur of black fur. At the sink, she ran cold water over her burned fingers. It wasn't too bad. Smirking at the memory, she recalled a previous lover who had cooed and treated her like a fragile thing. An anxious woman who was always so concerned for Taiye's well-being, she'd treated every scrape or bruise like it were life-threatening.

"You know, I think I'll survive," Taiye would tease her. "I might just pull through this time."

She picked up the hot tray, hands now protected by a tattered dishrag, and put it on the counter. Then she wrapped the pieces of dried fish in sheets of old newspaper from the towering stack on the floor beside the fridge, tied it all together in a black plastic bag, and tossed the whole thing in the deep-freeze. She washed the fish smell off her hands and began whisking butter, eggs, honey, and vanilla extract in a large red ceramic bowl. She let Coca-Cola lick some of the sweet mixture off her fingers when the cat slunk back into the kitchen. Taiye poured in the dry

ingredients and divided the batter among three springform pans. The smell of burnt fish wafted into her face when she opened the oven door. She supposed the cake would have a bit of a fishy flavour. Fishcake.

For the caramel, Taiye poured dark golden honey, corn syrup, and water into a saucepan before bringing it to a boil. She moved swiftly between the pan of browning caramel and a double boiler fashioned out of a stainless-steel pot and an orange ceramic bowl filled with chunks of milk chocolate. The bowl just barely fit over the pan, so Taiye had to be careful not to burn her hands on the steam shooting out in livid spurts whenever she moved it. She let the caramel cook down to a deep amber that brought to mind baba dudu—burnt sugar and coconut milk sweets their nanny, Sister Bisi, rewarded them for good behaviour when they were small. Taiye poured some condensed milk into the caramel, whisking until the mixture was near silken, and then added the glossy chocolate. She balanced the bowl in the freezer to cool.

WHILE THE CAKES BAKED, TAIYE BATHED. On her way to the bathroom, she tiptoed to her mother's bedroom door to check on her again. Still asleep.

"Are you my shadow today?" she asked Coca-Cola, who trailed behind her.

She undressed, and the cat promptly lunged atop her clothes and blinked languidly at her. Taiye turned on the hot water, but it trickled out cold, so she let it run until it was tepid—as warm as it was going to get. She let it slowly fill the purple plastic basin, and then entered the tub bottom first, leaving her feet to dangle over the side. She flicked water at the cat, who flinched and widened her eyes before meowing a loud accusation. With a small blue plastic bowl, Taiye poured the lukewarm water from the basin over herself before she remembered the half-full bottle of Dettol sitting on the windowsill next to some liquid black soap that her mother had made. She lifted herself out of the tub, sat on its edge with her back to the cat, and stirred two capfuls of the pungent yellow-brown antiseptic liquid into the basin of water. Then she poured some black soap into her palm and rubbed until the grainy black liquid turned into a

slippery white lather. Still seated on the edge of the tub, she rubbed soap into her skin, up her arms and shoulders. She stopped at her chest, her small breasts. Quite suddenly, there was a swell of want in her lower belly.

Perhaps in your life you've come across a force that matched and moved you. Maybe it changed you so profoundly that when you look back at the landscape of your life, you are struck by the indelible the mark it left. For Taiye, that force was a woman named Salomé.

Sometimes, though less and less often with the more time that passed between them, Taiye would become overwhelmed by a thorough thirst for Salomé. To be in her presence, to hear her voice, to be touched by her. Taiye touched her own self, firm and slow. She traced light circles around her dark nipples. Let her hands slide over her belly, across her hips. Traced the lines and dots tattooed on her left hip, zodiac constellations marking the birth months of the people she chose to love, spreading like geometric veins growing around her buttock and up her side. She moved her fingers between her legs, with thoughts of Salomé swirling on the brim of her mind. Salomé's smell, the dark bronze ochre of her skin, her warmth.

Coca-Cola meowed, and Taiye stopped.

"You're right," she said.

It was no use, no good. Her memories turned on her. She winced at flashes of Salomé's crying face and bloodshot eyes, her nose running.

Taiye pulled down her blue net sponge from where it hung on a hook by the frosted glass window, scrubbed her body quickly, and rinsed. She left the bathroom, but the longing never left her.

BY THE TIME TAIYE HAD RUBBED OIL INTO HER SKIN and pulled on a long-sleeved linen kaftan, the cakes were done, and her mother was awake. Taiye found Kambirinachi sitting on the kitchen counter, with a vacant smile on her face as she stirred milk into a white mug filled with hot cocoa. Coca-Cola was on the floor, batting at her swinging legs.

"Mami, good morning." Taiye smiled and kissed her mother's warm forehead.

“Good morning, my love.” Kambirinachi beamed up at her daughter as she received her kiss.

“How did you sleep?” Taiye asked, removing the cakes from the oven. She placed them one by one on a tray and put them safely on top of the fridge, away from the cat.

“Dreamlessly,” Kambirinachi responded. “And you, my love?”

“Fitfully.”

“Oh, darling! What’s bothering you?”

Taiye shrugged, and then she smiled. “I’m making a triple-layer cake.” She made her eyebrows jump up and down. “Chocolate caramel.”

“Yes!” Kambirinachi clapped and squealed. “Let the deliciousness commence!”

Taiye made them a breakfast of fried plantains and eggs scrambled with onions, tomatoes, and peppers. They ate on a blue striped aso oke on the carpeted floor of the parlour.

“What time does your sister’s flight come in?” Kambirinachi asked, mid-chew.

“Twelve.”

“Uh-oh, cutting it close, are we?”

“It’s only after eight,” Taiye said. “I’ll finish making the cake and go.”

“Will you drive?”

“No, I organized with the car hire guy yesterday. He’ll pick me up.”

“Okay.” Kambirinachi smiled wide. “We’ll finally get to meet your brother-in-law!”

“Yeah, it’s about time.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Nothing.” Taiye shook her head. “I’m going to make jollof rice.” She knew that her mother knew she was being less than honest.

The ceiling fan whirred loud, spinning sluggishly, as if protesting the low power with which it was fed, half-heartedly stirring the heavy air around them. Taiye thought she should ask the gateman to turn on the generator so they could use the A/c when Kehinde and Farouq arrived.

TAIYE FETCHED THE COOLED CAKES from the top of the refrigerator and placed them on the counter by the window looking out into the backyard. Taiye had painstakingly cleared the overgrown mess. She'd spent many many hours on her knees, under a fierce and boastful sun, tension pouring out of her pores in pools of sweat, as she pulled weeds from the hard, clayey soil. She'd wanted a garden, alive with tomatoes, basil, and spinach, but she needed better soil.

She built the frame of a Langstroth hive—a vertical beehive—with salvaged wood from discarded furniture and a manual she'd printed off the first website that showed up in her search. The idea of keeping bees, with gorgeous raw honey as a reward, filled her with a delicate kind of optimism, a tender, pearlescent sort of threshold to joy. She'd thrown herself into home beekeeping; it only took eight months and many fuck-ups, but she'd achieved a considerable healthy hive. The garden, however, remained mostly bare but for tufts of parched grass and purple heart vines that wandered out of their pots by the fence and encroached on her garden beds.

Taiye retrieved the chocolate caramel from the freezer and beat the thick mixture until beads of sweat formed along her hairline and rolled down, tickling the sides of her face. Until the caramel was just stiff enough to be spread without oozing down the sides of the cake. She iced the three layers with a large butter knife and assembled the dessert. Cake, caramel, a sprinkle of salt. Cake, caramel, a sprinkle of salt. Cake, caramel, a sprinkle of salt. She spread the rest of the caramel on the sides of the cake, and then she licked the bowl clean before leaving for the airport.