

# Falling Leaf

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Ebisan had barely raked the dingy leaves littering her front yard into a pile when another leaf fell from the cashew tree. A month before, the tree was still dense with green leaves and had borne more fruits than previous years. It amazed her how the tree could quickly lose itself to the Harmattan, which spread its haze over the Benin skyline, casting the gloom of an early twilight on the troubled city.

Ebisan sighed and looked at her neighbor, the widow MamaVero, who motioned at the stray leaf. Did MamaVero understand that Ebisan was tired going back and forth raking the ground around the tree? She set a match to the pile. The flame shimmered turquoise, then it opened its mouth wide, releasing its yellow tongue to lap at the leaves, engulfing them like a burnt offering. The women retreated from the crackling flames, coughing as cigar-like vapors caught in their throats.

“Those robbers should be burned alive,” MamaVero said. She was in her forties, but from the canyon-like crevices lining her face, she might as well have been eighty. Ebisan and her husband often gave MamaVero money to help support her and her five daughters. MamaVero’s in-laws had robbed her of her husband’s property because she’d borne no son.

Ebisan met her neighbor’s gaze, keen to continue their discussion about the bandits. These days, a discussion



in Benin that didn't begin with talk of the robberies was rare. Lawrence Anini and Monday Osunbor's most recent pillaging had left four policemen and two civilians dead. The notorious pair made daily headlines, and their attacks were now considered a national emergency so much that when Nigeria's military dictator General Babangida had ordered the inspector general of police to stop the robbers at all costs, Nigerians—who had loathed him for his International Monetary Fund-induced austerity measures—commended him.

“Only if the police can catch them,” Ebisan said.

“People say the thieves use powers that make them invisible to the police.”

Ebisan smirked. “I don't believe the rumors.”

“They're true. Anini traveled to India to acquire his mystical powers.”

“Who said that?” Ebisan asked.

“Lots of people.” MamaVero shifted on her feet. “Some say he has a magic mirror that shows him the movements of the police.”

“Maybe the police are just inefficient.” Ebisan looked at the flowers her husband had planted. Sooty dust colored them drab brown as it had every surface. She hadn't watered them today. “Well, everything that has a beginning must have an end.”

“On the day they're arrested, I'll celebrate like never before.” MamaVero swung her arms around in mock dance.

*Why shouldn't you rejoice?*

Each time news broke of Anini and Osunbor's robberies, MamaVero came to Ebisan and cried that another woman somewhere had become a widow. An arrest would surely put her neighbor's mind at ease. The last of the flames died as the Harmattan unleashed its chilly breath, drawing the ash up in a



whirlwind above the women's heads.

MamaVero limped homeward. A few feet from the road, she fell, shrieking.

Ebisan's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, Christ." She rushed to her friend, checked that she was okay, and helped her up. "You need a cane to support your footing."

"I'll get one." MamaVero managed a plastic smile.

"You always say that."

MamaVero's face drooped in agreement.

"Wait for me." Ebisan trotted into her house and emerged a moment later. She handed MamaVero seven crisp five-naira notes. "Get one. You need it."

The fainting light behind MamaVero's eyes picked up wattage. She hugged Ebisan and said good-bye. Ebisan headed indoors. She'd do nothing but prepare dinner and then huddle under her blanket in bed—as the cold weather had forced her to do in recent nights.

\* \* \*

*He wobbled into the house, his forehead dripping blood, his white shirt red-blotched.*

*The sight sent her stomach churning. "Nath, oh Christ! What happened to you?"*

*He slumped onto a chair, limbs splayed, head thrown back.*

*Shuddering, she got a washcloth and dipped it into a bowl of water. She washed the wound—a deep gash. When she dipped the cloth in the water and squeezed, the liquid turned bright red. More blood dripped from his head. He gasped and closed his eyes.*

*She shook him. "Nathaniel! Nath!" She slipped and upturned the bowl on the stool beside her. The bowl struck*



*the floor with a clang. The water splashed her face.*

Ebisan bolted up, panting, her hands pressed to her chest. Her pajamas clung to her body like a damp funeral shroud. She stared around the darkened room, her accelerating heartbeat thrumming in her ears. “Please, God,” she whispered, mopping her face with her blanket, “I don’t want this for Nathaniel.”

She snapped on the bedside lamp to check the time. It was twenty minutes after ten, but it felt like midnight. She slid out of bed and crossed the chilly floor to the window. The street was deserted. The moon, a pale crescent, was barely noticeable through the fog.

Sharp raps rattled the front door. Ebisan shivered. *Christ, are they here?* She imagined Anini and Osunbor standing at her door, clutching guns and machetes. Her mouth went dry. She pressed her frame against the wall beside the window, as if willing it to open for her escape. Her daughter, Adaobi, and her niece, Bome, were in the other bedroom. *Go*, said a voice inside her. *Carry them. Flee through the back door.* Hadn’t her niece heard the knocks?

Ebisan sank to her hands and knees, and she crawled to her door with feline quietness. She stopped and listened for a moment. Each tick of the clock thundered in her ears. She eased the door open a few inches. The parlor was as dark as a tomb. She crept out and bumped into something. She shrank back—a mollusk recoiling into its shell—before realizing it was Bome, also on all fours. Ebisan grabbed onto her and smelled urine. Bome had wet her pants.

“I was scared,” Bome whimpered.

“Shush,” Ebisan said, holding Bome closer, to prevent herself from falling apart.

More hard raps, this time at the back door. Ebisan froze like a deer catching sight of a wolf. The sound of shuffling



feet outside the house sent her and Bome curling up behind the couch. All they could do was wait.

Moments later, the knocks sounded again at the parlor door. A gentle, familiar voice called, “Ebisan.”

“Nath? Is that you?” Ebisan said just above a whisper.

“It’s me,” the voice said.

It couldn’t be Nathaniel! He’d left on Monday for the shoe factory in Kano where he was a line manager. That was just four days ago, and the factory was almost eight hundred kilometers away. He only came home every twenty-one days to spend three days with them. Why was he back? Was somebody imitating his voice? Were the robbers trying to trick her into opening the door? There’d been instances of criminals using such deception.

“Nath... aniel?”

“Eby, it’s me.”

It was Nathaniel. Only he called her by that pet name. A sigh escaped her throat. She rose and switched on the ceiling light, then slid back the burglar chain and unlocked the deadbolt.

Nathaniel—beefy, towering, and stoop-shouldered—entered. He wore blue corduroy pants and a wrinkled, white short-sleeved shirt with the tail hanging out. Dirt streaked his clothes and a bandage was wrapped around his head.

Ebisan gasped. “What happened?”

Wasn’t this her nightmare actualized right in front of her? He didn’t return with his Volvo. She threw the deadbolt home and slid the chain back into place. The front light illuminated an empty yellow haze, and the houses across the road loomed like ghosts.

Bome crawled out from behind the couch. “Welcome, sir.”

Nathaniel waved to her and headed into the bedroom.



Ebisan puzzled over the wound on her husband's head. What manner of coincidence was this? The injury appeared the same as in her dream. She looked over at Bome, who stared back with furrowed brows. "Go and clean up," she told her niece.

Something was terribly amiss. Usually on his return he'd hug her, and she would nestle her head on his broad chest, listening to the thrilling rhythm of his heart beneath her cheek, filling her lungs with his apple scent. Then he'd look at her as if he wanted to see if she'd added weight or changed from the petite, plump wife he'd left behind weeks before. But he had ignored doing all that and had brought no *kilishi* and fried cheese for them to feast on.

Ebisan's chest drew taut. She minced into the bedroom, hoping to get answers.

Nathaniel was taking off his clothes. He'd switched on the overhead light, which glared on his face.

"I wasn't expecting you," Ebisan said. "What happened? Where's your car?"

"Accident," he said as if forcing the word from his mouth.

"Accident? When? Where? How?"

"On my way to the office four days ago." He tossed his shirt into the laundry basket. "I had a head-on collision with a trailer."

"Oh my God!" Tears choked Ebisan's throat. "And I was here expecting your letter."

Normally, when he arrived in Kano, Nathaniel wrote her about his safe arrival. The letters usually took ten days to reach her. Twice, the letter he'd sent had met him at home, and he'd laughed with Ebisan at the snail's pace of the Nigerian Postal Service.

"I was rushed, unconscious, to a hospital. When I woke



up, I found my head bandaged. The doctor said they'd had to stitch my forehead—"

"Oh, Christ!" Ebisan held her head.

"The doctor told the company, and my boss said I could take sick leave."

"Aren't you due for a leave?" It was December, and he hadn't taken any leave all year.

"It could've been disastrous if I'd reacted a half-second slower."

"Should I warm dinner for you?" She sounded maternal. "I made stew and rice."

"Don't bother."

"Are you sure? It's your favorite stew." He would eat *ofe akwu* all the time if she let him.

He shook his head. "It's late already."

"When was the last time you ate?"

"Afternoon." He ambled toward the bathroom.

His indifference puzzled her. He was usually the lively one, always leading conversations between them and giving humor to every issue. She called after him, "That was a long time ago, Nath. There'll be no food in your stomach now."

He looked over his shoulder. "I'm not hungry."

"Okay, let me fix you a cup of Bongo."

"Don't bother. It's almost eleven."

"Just a cup?"

"You should be back in bed. Or aren't you going to school tomorrow?"

Ebisan taught biology at Akenzua Secondary School.

"I'll go," she replied, but he'd already stepped into the bathroom.

Ebisan got into bed and leaned her back against the headboard. She thought about the strange heaviness she'd felt about his departure, the first time such burden had settled



on her. Was it a premonition that she'd taken lightly? What if he'd died? Oh, Christ! She was angry at herself for not persuading him to stay back, perhaps for a day.

Nathaniel came out of the bathroom, armored himself in a sweater, flipped off the light, and joined her in bed. She snuggled close to him, and her nose filled with the scent of citrusy soap. Her tempest of thoughts resumed: He could've died, and you could've become a widow at twenty-eight. Your life could've shattered... just like that. Her eyes itched with tears.

Nathaniel snored lightly. Lamplight highlighted the earth tones of his face. The memory of last night's dream and worries over its meaning disturbed Ebisan until she fell asleep.

Ebisan woke at three-fifty in a sweat. Unsettling thoughts had again intruded her sleep, one springing upon her after the next like a hydra-headed monster. Nathaniel wasn't in bed. She checked the bathroom, but he wasn't there either. She moved toward the parlor. Roosters crowed somewhere in the neighborhood. She halted in the doorway between the bedroom and the parlor, watching Nath examine the framed family photographs sitting on the shelves. The selection of items—the Sanyo TV, the turntable, the green flower vase, the baby-blue brocade chairs sleeved with linen antimacassars, the checkered carpet—had been done to please Ebisan.

Nathaniel grasped a sepia photograph of himself in a wooden frame had been taken the previous Christmas. In it he wore a black suit, his best, and a poker face. Ebisan had commented once that he'd hoarded away his usual photogenic smile as if he were part of a funeral procession. And he'd said, *if you look closely enough, you'll see grinning faces even at funerals.*



She folded her arms. “Why are you looking at that like you’ve never seen it before?”

The photograph dropped from his hand and clunked on the floor. He whirled around.

“Did I scare you?” Ebisan said. “I’m sorry.”

Nathaniel picked up the picture. As he turned to put it back on its shelf, she sidled up to him and slipped her arms around him, pressing her face against his back. “You should still be in bed.”

He pivoted out of her embrace to face her. “I couldn’t sleep well.”

“Why?”

“Thinking about a lot of issues. You and Adaobi, especially.”

“Thinking about me when you should be asleep?” A yawn took a bit of coherency away from her words.

His reply held no mirth. “Thinking of the things I should’ve done for you that I haven’t.”

He cupped her face and brought it close to his. His humid breath smelled like the fried cheese he used to bring home. “Stop worrying about us for now.”

“It’s not a crime, is it?”

“It’s not, but your health is more important now.”

“You didn’t have to tell me that.”

She dug a light fist into his ribs. “Are you putting up a fight?”

“Fight? Fighting my wife is like fighting myself.”

She touched his beard, a short five o’clock shadow, then brought her hand down to hold his as if inviting him to look at her pink-polished nails. “I wanted to tell you something before.”

“What?”

“The dream I had before you came in last night.”



She sat on an armchair, and he settled on a hassock. She recounted the dream. Then she said, "How could one see a wound in a dream and then actually see it when awake?"

He sat straighter. "Maybe you've become the biblical Joseph, dreamer Josephine."

"Don't downplay it, please. I was worried last night."

He stroked her fingers. "Nothing to worry about."

His palms grew moist, and his touch was tender. Had they been in bed, she'd have closed her eyes and let his hands explore her in places so intimate.

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The next night, Ebisan awoke and found her husband not sleeping yet again. Something wasn't right; it was as if some part of him was missing. His disposition gave the room a pall.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm—"

"Don't tell me you're fine. I haven't seen you like this before." She touched his cheek. "You're quieter since you came back. Is this about the accident?"

"Maybe not."

"Maybe not?"

He pursed his lips. When he finally spoke, his voice was like windswept grass. "I'm stressed out, I guess. The driving back and forth might be taking a toll."

"That's why you have to speed up your transfer back to Benin."

"I wish I'd done that earlier."

She stared at the Formica wardrobe and its constellation-like patterns. She tried to decipher the subtext of Nathaniel's words. He was all a mystery lately.



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The fourth night after Nathaniel's return was pitch-black. The Harmattan had descended on the city just after sunset, carrying dust that had swallowed up the house opposite in an almost lifeless cocoon. After she tucked Adaobi in, Ebisan went to her room. She rubbed her palms and slid under the covers. The heat rising from Nathaniel's body like waves warmed her, and she desired him to move closer.

"I've caught a chill," she said. That was her language any time she wanted him, no matter the weather. Their time in bed had always been an equal exchange, with either of them initiating intimacy. She savored his mouth nibbling her lips, took pleasure in the sound he made when they made love—half moan and half whimper. And when she curled on her side, after they were done with lovemaking, she liked his arm to fall across her, liked his sleepy breath stirring the small hairs on her nape.

Tonight, Ebisan hoped for much more. They could make another baby. Ever since Adaobi had turned eleven months old, Ebisan had wanted to conceive again. Among her husband's kinsmen, a woman was without honor unless she bore at least one son. But Nathaniel wasn't in a hurry to have another child. He'd become a disciple of the PPFN (Planned Parenthood Federation of Nigeria), which disseminated the gospel of three years between births.

"Go for child spacing today," was the PPFN's message on radio and TV. A mantra Ebisan didn't like. More babies couldn't come soon enough for a woman who longed for a male child. Could having her children in quick succession really affect her health, as the campaign claimed? Her mother had borne all nine children within sixteen years without



birth complications. In years past, families had at least six children. But these days the PPFN advised couples to have only three children, at most four, in order to adjust to the country's austerity measures. Ebisan and Nathaniel had decided to have three children, fewer than either her mother or MamaVero had. It was Ebisan's wish to have two boys after Adaobi.

Just that morning, she'd taught her students fertilization and how a baby's gender was determined; an X- or Y-chromosome sperm cell met either of the fallopian tubes' X-chromosome ova to produce a fetus. When she explained that an XY fetus ultimately turned into a boy, she'd prayed silently that when her husband lay with her, one of his Y-chromosome sperm cells would reach her fallopian tube first.

Ebisan stroked the fine hair on Nathaniel's his forearm. He flinched.

"The contraceptive's been removed," she whispered. Then to his mumbling: "What did you say?"

He said nothing else.

Ebisan sat up, dropping her face in her hands. "We should have another baby." Her voice broke. "Didn't we agree on it before you went to Kano?" Before he'd left, she'd told him she wanted to have her intrauterine contraceptive removed. By the time she delivered their next baby, Adaobi would be three. He'd labeled her a "mathematician" and agreed to her decision.

"It was in my mind," he said.

She laughed without joy. "No longer in your mind now?"

He kept his eyes trained on the ceiling, at his fading blue cursive script: *The presence of my absence—I'm with you even away from home.* One Saturday long ago, he'd placed a hassock on the bed, stood on it, and written those words. He



told her that whenever he was away and loneliness visited her in bed, she should look up at the ceiling and read the words. They'd reassure her that he was with her. But reading them had done nothing to ebb her tide of lonesomeness. When your better half was absent, your bed wasn't the same. No matter how she imagined his presence, it couldn't fill the void on the other side.

Now Ebisan saw those words in reverse: *The absence of my presence*. How could she explain his mood? He was in bed but wasn't with her.

"I have to see my lawyer friend tomorrow," Nathaniel said.

Ebisan made a rude sound with her lips and rolled away. It took her some moments to realize he was in tears—something she'd never seen before. A pang of guilt struck her. She had been self-centered and allowed her craving to get the better of her, caring less about his feelings. She should've given him space to recuperate, to return to the jolly man he'd always been. It was only the husband who was alive that a wife could be angry with, MamaVero had once told her.

Ebisan's desperation had emanated out of the fear of becoming like MamaVero. What had she been implying? That Nathaniel could die anytime? That thought made her shudder and pushed her upright. The sheet lay twisted at the foot of the bed, as though her angst could only wrinkle the fabric of their long-held bedroom intimacy.

"I'm sorry, Nath. I didn't mean to burden you." She wiped his tears.

She surrendered to sleep in his embrace.

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*His wound leaked fluid in sallow circles onto his*



*bandage. She unwrapped it and peeled off the gauze. The gaping wound shocked her. "It should be healing by now," she said.*

*"The cut was deep. It'll take time."*

*She redressed the wound with ointment. As she covered it with new gauze, he vanished. Panic knocked the air from her lungs. Her gaze darted from the bed to the window. The towel in her hand dropped. She wobbled into the bathroom. He wasn't there. She swayed from room to room, shouting his name, her voice echoing as if the whole apartment had been stripped bare.*

*She dashed into the street. It stretched onwards with no visible end and seemed as if littered with the aftermath of plundering. She picked her way through trampled shoes and clothes and rubble, which poked her feet. Daylight shone far ahead of her, but the sky overhead was dark. She quickened her pace towards the bright sky, which was ever more eclipsed by darkness.*

*She fell to her knees and clawed at her cheeks. "Oh, Christ, what's going on? Why is there so much darkness?" She caught a glimpse of a shadow entering a pathway between some withered grasses to her right. She ran after the shadow into a stretch of dunes, at the end of which stood a white castle. A gust rose and a wind chime tinkled somewhere.*

*A man went toward the castle. He stopped on the porch and glanced back. His face was snowy white, but Ebisan recognized her husband. She ran to meet him, but was winded by the sand, which also pulled back her feet.*

*A giant crow swooped toward her, screeching and flapping its wings. She went down. The carrion bird flew past. Ebisan—panting, sand grinding into her palms—staggered up and started for the big house. The wind howled, smacked*



*her face, and muffled her ears.*

*Two giant black iron gates burst out from the sand and slammed shut against her. She dropped to her haunches, shouting “Nath!”*

“Nath? Nath?” Ebisan woke disoriented and found herself in Nathaniel’s arm.

It was midnight. Her nightgown was sticky with sweat; her heartbeat pounded in her ears like those *taiko* drums she’d seen in Japanese movies.

Nathaniel pulled her in. “I’m here, Ebisan. It’s me.”

“You disappeared in my dream,” she muttered against his chest. “I couldn’t find you.”

He gently patted Ebisan’s back, which flooded her with relief. There was nothing like finding her man to hold on to like a lifeline after her nightmares. There was nothing like feeling the soft beat of his heart steadying her hammering heart like defibrillator paddles. There was nothing like having his protective hug thawing the ice of a fear freezing her torso.

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When Ebisan came home from fetching Adaobi from kindergarten the next day, she found that Nathaniel was already back from seeing his lawyer. Adaobi squealed with delight as her father tossed her into the air, caught her, and turned her upside down. Ebisan pealed with laughter. Seeing Nathaniel return to his jolly self sent her heart soaring.

Eventually, worn out from play, Adaobi drifted off to sleep. Ebisan took her from Nathaniel, carried her into her bedroom, and returned to the parlor some moment later. Nathaniel had put a record on the turntable, which was playing Bob Marley’s “Zion Train.”

Ebisan joined her husband on the couch and laid her head in his lap. As he stroked her hair, she closed her eyes



and hummed along to the song. When his caresses became uneven, she opened her eyes. He was lost in thought. She tugged on his beard. “Your mind is far away. What are you thinking about?”

“I was thinking about the two people most important to me.”

“And who are they?” She knew the answer, but wanted to hear him say, *You’re the most important to me*. A smile spread over her face like sesame oil thinning in a hot skillet.

His fingers curled around her jaw. “Who else would they be?”

“You were thinking, ‘What should I have done for them that I haven’t done yet?’” Something in what she said triggered Ebisan’s memory. She snapped upright. “You haven’t told me about the meeting you had with your lawyer friend. Or don’t I deserve to know?”

“I was there to... I went there for my will.”

“Your will?” Her heart froze. People only prepared wills when they thought they didn’t have much longer to live.

“Why?”

He breathed to answer, but a car pulled into the front yard. “I think we have a visitor.”

She peered out the window. “It’s a blue Peugeot 504.”

“A blue Peugeot,” he repeated. Nothing in his tone sounded like a question.

The first passenger alighted. He wore a blue shirt and Afro hair. Ebisan smiled. “Willy the Man.” Next came the driver. A woman followed him. The last person to exit was Uncle Madu, who had a bushy mustache. He wore his usual short-sleeved khaki shirt and matching khaki pants. “Uncle Madu’s there, too.” She glanced back at Nath. “I don’t know the other two.”

Nathaniel sprang to his feet and started toward the



bedroom.

Willy was Nathaniel's best friend. They were practically brothers, but Willy—like Uncle Madu—lived one hundred kilometers away in Warri, another town in Bendel state. Ebisan assumed Nathaniel planned to sneak up and surprise Willy. It was one of their usual pranks.

"This is no time for games, Nath. Uncle Madu is coming. Strangers too," she said, but he ignored her and disappeared into the bedroom.

She opened the door and ushered the quartet into the parlor. "Make yourselves comfortable," she said, smiling, then went to the stereo and silenced Bob Marley.

Quick, solemn introductions from Willy followed. The strangers worked at Nathaniel's company. The driver, Mr. Aku, was lean and had barely visible lips. Mrs. Lawson's gray-flecked hair was Jerry-curlled. She wore a red batik gown and flip-flops.

Ebisan bowed slightly to them, wondering why a forlorn shadow darkened Mrs. Lawson's features. "Thanks for coming. Let me call him for you."

Mr. Aku cocked his head. "Who?"

"Nath. Aren't you here to console him about the accident?"

The visitors exchanged looks. If they found it surprising that she knew about the accident, they gave no indication.

"Where is Adaobi?" Uncle Madu asked.

"She's in her bedroom." Ebisan hiked a thumb in the direction of the room.

Uncle Madu said, "Did you say Nathaniel was inside too?"

"Yes, sir, he went into the bedroom when you arrived."

Another exchange of looks passed around the room.

"Nath, what's holding you up?" Ebisan asked. "You're



keeping them waiting.”

She went into the bedroom, but he wasn't there. She flung open the bathroom door. No Nathaniel. Bewildered, she opened the wardrobe. Only neatly folded clothes stared back at her.

She peered under the bed. Nothing. How could a mountain of a man like Nathaniel have hidden himself in the closet or under the bed, anyway?

Ebisan returned to the parlor, her gut twisting. “Where’s my husband?” She didn’t wait for an answer before dashing out of the house barefoot. “Nath? Nathaniel?”

Nathaniel was nowhere to be found in the backyard. Ebisan stood under the cashew tree, her gaze wandering about and feeling some invisible hand squeezing her heart.

Willy and Mr. Aku came to her. They led her back to the parlor.

“Where’s my husband? Tell me where he is.” Her voice was tight enough to snap. “Willy, tell me I’m dreaming.”

Mr. Aku eased her down on the couch between Uncle Madu and Mrs. Lawson.

“Uncle, do you know where Nath is? Where he went?”

“Ebisan, God will keep you. He’ll be with Adaobi,”

Uncle Madu said.

Ebisan’s temper rumbled. “Why the prayers?”

Mrs. Lawson found her voice. “It’s your husband, dear.”

Ebisan’s gaze pinned her like nails to a coffin, then moved to Uncle Madu, veered off to Willy, and then drifted back to Mrs. Lawson. “Yes. Nathaniel’s my husband. Where is he?”

“He had an accident last Monday,” Mr. Aku said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“I already told you that, but he’s much better. We were sitting here just before you arrived.”



“Nathaniel was with you before we got here?” Uncle Madu drew a sharp breath. He released it with measured consideration. “This thing is a mystery. I’ve heard that some people appear to their loved ones after—”

“After what, Uncle?” It struck Ebisan that something horrific had brought them here.

“Madam,” Mr. Aku continued, “we’re sorry to tell you—”

“Sorry for what?” Ebisan’s mind was a sea of roaring waves.

Mr. Aku inclined his head toward Uncle Madu, who urged him to continue. Mr. Aku avoided Ebisan’s eyes. “Madam, your husband... he died in the accident.”

Silence blossomed out of those few words. They took a few moments to click in Ebisan’s mind. She glowered at Mr. Aku. She’d always been graceful with her words; she was not the type to be unthinkingly rude when she spoke, but the terror of the moment overwhelmed her, and she didn’t think much when she said, “You must be crazy. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Willy wept. “Nathaniel died last Monday.”

They explained that on the Monday he’d left for Kano, Nathaniel had died in the wreck in Niger. It took the police a long time to trace his office.

But how could this be? Nath had stroked Ebisan’s hair some minutes ago. She made to stand up, but Uncle Madu and Mrs. Lawson held her back. As if resigning to their hold, she leaned against the backrest. She giggled. Then a rattling speech, a wild pendulum, which swung from hysterical to incomprehensible. “Nathaniel... oh no, dead? Please... not now... tell me.”

She quieted, but then tore free from the hands around her and ran out of the house. Bome was returning from school and hurried to greet her aunt, but happiness turned



to bewilderment as Ebisan's mad flight nearly knocked her down.

The visitors pursued. Mrs. Lawson stopped to walk a confused Bome inside.

Willy and Mr. Aku approached Ebisan and guided her toward the house. She sat on the veranda step. The flowers had hung limp, their life drained by the Harmattan. Yet again, she hadn't remembered to water them. But in a dizzying spell, she remembered her dream: Nathaniel's disappearance, the sky turning black over her. She squalled like a child.

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That afternoon, Ebisan's visitors badgered her to go to the mortuary to identify Nathaniel's body. On the drive to Central Hospital, she spoke gently with Mrs. Lawson, who responded with a ghost of a smile. Nath might as well have been recuperating at their destination.

Mr. Aku pulled into the parking lot. Mrs. Lawson held Ebisan's hand as they ambled toward the outermost building on the expansive premises. When she saw the sign "MORTUARY" over the door of the building, a chill surged through her body.

A sparsely built attendant received them at the door. He led them through rows of stainless steel embalming tables and past a counter holding instruments and bottled chemicals. At last, the man stopped at a table. There lied Nathaniel, the newest tenant in the house.

A dreadful weight pressed on Ebisan's chest. She pushed forward to view her husband's body. No, they were mistaken. They shouldn't put the living among the dead. He couldn't be dead. He'd been with her but an hour ago. Her hands trembling, she moved his head side to side. She'd knelt over him in bed one morning long ago and shifted his



head the same way. He'd grabbed her arms, wrestled her under him, and tickled her. She'd savored the apple scent of his aftershave. But now he emitted the same metallic scent of formaldehyde she'd used that morning in her school's biology lab to prevent some rat specimens from smelling as they decayed.

"No, no," Ebisan whimpered, denying Nathaniel's death. Her lungs constricted from the surging misery; her mouth went dry. The floor shifted beneath her feet. A dark pit opened and sucked her in, closing after it swallowed her whole.

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Ebisan came to on a gurney in a long, sterile corridor. She blinked up at a woman in a ghost-white coat. *What's happening here?*

The woman pressed her thumb to Ebisan's wrist. "Are you feeling better?"

"Are my feel better?" Ebisan replied incoherently. Then her eyes focused, and she saw Willy and Mrs. Lawson standing behind the doctor. It all came back. The mortuary.

"Where's your husband?" she asked the doctor.

"He's gone to work. Relax."

"May he come back safely." Ebisan turned onto her side and gritted her teeth. *Mine is no more. So I'm not all right. I can't be all right.*

By the time they left the hospital, news was spreading that the police had arrested Anini. They drove through jubilant, cavorting women and children celebrating the arrest. In Ebisan's brimming eyes, the street turned hazy; the women, children, cars—all dissolved into the fog.

Mr. Aku pulled up to Ebisan's front yard. The men



withdrew from the women into brooding silence. The Harmattan haze had begun to smother the sky, dimming the listless sun into another early twilight.

Mrs. Lawson squeezed Ebisan's hand. "We're home. Let's go inside."

Ebisan freed her hand and looked at her front door. "So this is how you become a widow," she moaned. "Your husband walks out your door alive, then some folks walk in the same door to tell you he is dead." A sobbing Mrs. Lawson leaned against her. They sat there for a long time, crying against each other.

As they headed into the house, it struck Ebisan that the olive-green façade had been robbed of its luster more than she'd ever noticed. The color paled to a mournful shade.

"Ebisan," a voice called from behind.

It was MamaVero hobbling toward them on a cane. She came to a standstill a few feet away but kept an anxious silence, reading into their tear-blotted faces.

"Nathaniel is dead," Ebisan wailed.

MamaVero dropped her cane, her mouth flying open in horror and then retreating into gloominess.

A stiff wind whipped through the yard. Another leaf fell from the cashew tree.

