

From an Empty Place

by Suzanne Ushie

It would have been quite melodramatic of me to have created a scene, as you sat across from my parents in our living room with the beige carpet, and told them you were going to marry Elohor. After all, people didn't protest over their cousin's marriage just because they wanted to. Your fingers were entwined with hers. I remember staring at her nails, at the natural greyness of them, and thinking she was very unlike Idide, your ex-girlfriend, whose nails were always painted one unsettling colour or the other. The day before, as I picked out stones from grains of rice on an enamel tray, Mama told my sister Umoligie, her lower lip stuck out in disapproval, that you had broken up with Idide because of Elohor.

I was home on holiday. They were usually boring, seeing there was really nowhere to go apart from church or the video club on the next street. When you and Auntie Felicia moved to Lagos, her visits back to Calabar were few. But yours were frequent. Perhaps you needed to hold on to what was real. It was this sense of truth that made your visits seem less fleeting.

When Auntie Felicia called to say you were bringing a nice girl to meet us, the preparations it caused were rather amusing. The white china set that Papa gave Mama on her fortieth birthday was taken out of the cupboard where it lived for years. Cups of rice were measured from the sack we opened only when Papa's lecturer friends came to visit. The artificial flowers on the dining table were replaced by another garish bunch. I chose what I thought was the most presentable from the stack of table linen, one in the cutest shade of blue, but Mama scolded me for being showy and replaced it with a chequered fabric that stank of camphor. Amidst the cooking and cleaning, the telephone rang. Umoligie ran to answer it. She must have thought it was that boy she fancied.

'It's Idide,' she announced when she came back. Mama left the kitchen, leaving the door ajar in her haste. Umoligie pulled it towards the jamb, leaving a few inches of space for us to spy into the corridor where the telephone sat on a table with curved legs. We went quiet, rather unnecessarily because she didn't lower her voice.

'Take it easy,' she said in the soothing tone reserved for the affronted. One hand was balanced on the thick address book and the black

telephone wire was curled loosely around her wrist.

'You know how men are,' she listened for a while.

'How do you know that he's serious about her?' She moved the receiver to the other ear and nodded as if Idide could see her.

I imagined her at the other end, her pretty face disfigured with pain, her fair skin flush with the sting of heartache, her brown eyes reddened by tears, and felt no pity for her. It was then, after she hung up, that Mama said you had dumped her for Elohor.

On the day you were coming, I shuffled through my appallingly few clothes, wearing and removing tops and t-shirts until I was too tired to pull off a sleeveless top with tight seams that bit my skin. It had a hole, caused by a candle during a power failure one night, on its sleeve. I hoped you wouldn't notice. I stood sideways in front of the mirror and sucked in my stomach, willing the fat on it to manifest on my chest instead. I pinched my cheeks like *Oyinbo* women did in movies, but my coffee coloured skin remained the same. I burst a ripe pimple, peeled off a strand of hair plastered to my glossy lips, lined my eyes with Umoligie's black liquid eyeliner. That didn't turn out right. I tried to wipe the greasy streaks off but worsened things instead. By the time I spotted the pack of Cussons baby wipes beside an open jar of Vaseline, Umoligie was in the room, asking why I was still getting dressed when you were already here.

You hadn't changed. Or so I thought when I walked in and saw you sitting there. Your woman-like lashes were still there, your skin still as dark as the wood panelling on the walls, your laugh still hoarse. But when you embraced me, I noticed that your midriff was firmer and your hair was thicker. Believe me, it was hard, but I tried not to stare at Elohor. The dreadlocks were a surprise. They were like her, slender and brown, framing her heart shaped face, falling against her shoulder blades. She wore a halter neck dress the colour of butter. It was the kind of dress that Mama would call indecent, but she wore it with carefree ease. I stood there with my smudged eyes, thankful that I didn't turn red like *Oyinbo* women in movies, as you introduced me to her.

Mama's questions were direct at lunch. What did Elohor do for a living? Who were her parents? What church did she attend? Elohor replied in clear, unaccented English that made it difficult to tell which part of the country she was from. She spoke of the scholarship that paid for her MBA in the UK offhandedly. Her folks were well off. Her father, a medical doctor based in Saudi Arabia. Her mother, whose name I recognised from gossip magazines, a well known socialite in Lagos. She was raised Presbyterian but

now went to Chapel of Restored Grace Ministry.

‘When Pastor Femi preaches, you just feel like, you know, he’s talking to you,’ she laughed.

When Umoligie asked if she liked Calabar, she smiled at you and the light inside me dimmed. You smiled back and whispered something to her. She told Umoligie of her shock at seeing people wait for the traffic light to turn green before they moved, about the white Egyptian cotton sheets on their bed at the Anchorage Hotel.

Papa, always content to listen while others did the talking, didn’t say much until you said that Elohor liked tennis. They started to talk then, Elohor’s hands moving almost as fast as her lips, about some tennis player with some unpronounceable name that ended with ‘vic.’ I bent over my plate of *jollof* rice and followed her hands, saw them tap on a pencilled-in eyebrow, grip a glass, ball up under her chin, dance in the air. With her seemingly makeup-free face, she could have passed for a sixteen year old like me. When you spoke to me, it wasn’t to say that I had lost weight, but to ask if I was still flunking maths in school. I should have told you that I got a P in my last maths exam, instead I sat there mute.

‘I hated Maths in school too,’ Elohor said. ‘Only God knows how I ended up with an MBA.’

I didn’t like her assumption that I hated Maths. Did that too-wide smile mask pity? The thought of bearing any likeness to her silenced my spirit. In the living room, she lifted the thin silver chain around her neck and showed off a diamond ring, the first I had ever seen, swaying daintily on it.

‘We haven’t yet told her parents so it’s still under wraps for now,’ you said.

That night as Mama and Papa got ready for bed, I heard Mama say that Elohor was an *ajebutter*, a spoiled rich girl oblivious to hardship.

‘I don’t know what is wrong with Martin. It’s like the money he’s earning in that bank has turned his head.’

‘Well she seems like a nice person.’ Papa’s voice was pitchy with conviction, just like it was when he vouched for other people, including our former houseboy who stole his gold cufflinks.

Mama went on as if he hadn’t spoken. ‘Why can’t he just marry Idide, *eh?* At least we know her family!’

‘Let it go,’ Papa said.

But Mama did not. We endured her familiar tread in the days that followed, one footstep heavier than the former, as she went about receiving calls from a hysterical Idide, startling Auntie Felicia with talk of probing into

Elohor’s past. She told Papa that Auntie Felicia was soft, that if your father, Uncle Paul were alive he would have handled the situation properly.

‘There is no situation,’ he replied in the same peremptory tone he used to deliver history lectures.

‘*Kaa!* If only my sister will do something for once. Martin is only twenty-seven. He’s just a boy.’ She shook her head in that exaggerated way of showing sadness.

‘Martin is only twenty-seven’ became a catch phrase – not when Mama was around of course – for me and Umoligie. I’d ask a random question that began with why and she’d go: ‘because Martin is only twenty-seven.’ We would giggle afterwards, only she didn’t know that the sounds I made weren’t giggles. They were nameless sounds from an empty place inside me.

Most times our house was quiet. Umoligie was often away, either studying for the university entrance exam in the library or hanging out with her friends under the pretext of studying. With the days stretched before me, there was time to imagine you and Elohor together. Those big hands caressing her gently, your hot breath teasing the hair on her skin. I wanted to feel the firmness of your grip. I wanted my hair, those coarse strands that refused to be tamed by relaxer, to be smoothed by your touch.

I’d had a crush before – there was that bucktoothed boy in primary school – but it was borne out of proximity not authenticity. Nothing like this unfettered feeling that hurt and pleased me at once. I cannot say when it began. Perhaps it was shortly after Uncle Paul died. I was in your house, in the room we called the ‘small parlour.’ I sat on the cool linoleum floor, a pile of insect-bitten phonograph records spread before me, plastic bowls embossed with ‘in memoriam’ stickers piled in a corner. I went in there to escape from the wild wailing, the sad faces, the saucers with alligator pepper that made me sneeze. You walked in and I was silent with the awkwardness that comes in the aftermath of death. But you were still caught up in teenage angst, the rebellious years where you thought that the whole world was against you so you didn’t expect any niceties. We sat there together, reading the old labels together, laughing at the afro hairdos that took up half the cover jackets. I could tell that it meant nothing to you. But to me, it was everything.

In school, I passed a picture where you looked bored around to my dorm mates. They looked at me, then you, and pouted with disbelief, then went ‘aha’ when I said you were my cousin. ‘I wonder why a man should get all the good genes in a family. It’s not fair,’ one of them said.

I wondered too, about what made you fall for Idide, and then Elo-

hor. The former's affectation was something Umoligie and I mocked. Her 'cuppa' for 'tea,' the poorly timed swear words. It didn't take long for me to be sick of hearing her call Mama 'Mummy.' Her superficial allure made your attraction to Elohor's quiet elegance more puzzling.

'I don't think that girl is a good influence on him,' Mama said to Papa when we were watching 7pm news one night. He bit a large chunk off a mango and laughed at something the newscaster said, his fingers dripping with the gooey orange flesh. I didn't care for their conversation. Titanic was in the VCR and I was eager to get back to it. I sat on the sofa and wished they would hurry up and leave. Then Mama said that Elohor would force you to join "that funny church." When Papa did not let out the grunt he used to show assent, she said 'Are you listening to me or not?' I didn't wait to hear his reply. I rubbed my eyes in feigned drowsiness and walked out of the parlour.

Another time Umoligie and I were sitting on the veranda, by the mosquito net with a tear in it, when she told me that she saw you and Elohor at the Mirage nightclub.

'It was really dark so I'm sure that they didn't see me. Elohor looked hot *sha*.' She said that bit grudgingly, as if by the admission she was giving her approval.

I said something vaguely nonchalant, even though as I looked out at the landscape of jumbled electric wires, with the warmth of the falling dusk stroking my skin, I longed to know more. When the telephone rang the next day, I picked it up in the absurd hope that it was you. It was that languid moment between midday and evening, and no one else was home. There was a spark of static when I first pressed the receiver to my ear. It cleared and ushered in Idide's breathy hello. I fiddled with the Swallow padlock encircling the dial buttons, delighting in the rising panic my silence caused, then hung up.

Umoligie called me, her voice faint as though she were far away. I opened my eyes and saw her bent over me, one hand poised to shake me. I remember that her breath was stale. I remember that I wasn't happy to be awakened.

'There was a fire in Anchorage. The whole hotel didn't get burnt *sha*,' she said. I was clear eyed in an instant. I grabbed the faded *Ankara* fabric that was both my duvet and dressing gown, wrapped it around my waist and knotted it. Together we walked towards the voices in the living room. I

heard yours first, subdued yet firm, and became conscious of the browned lace of my cotton nightgown.

Papa was philosophical. 'It could have been worse.'

Mama was grateful. 'We thank God.'

Elohor sat on a side stool, one with a rusty headed nail that left holes in sensitive places. She looked embarrassed to be causing such a fuss.



Model: Bethany Rand

'Aunty I'm fine, really. It was Martin's idea to come here.' She turned to you, 'You should have checked both of us into that room instead of bringing me here.'

'And like I said, that's not a good idea because I don't want anything to happen to you. We've had enough drama for one night,' you gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Papa and Mama agreed. You would stay back in the hotel while she would stay with us.

When Umoligie and I asked you what happened as if we didn't know already, irritation tightened your mouth because you were tired of retelling the story. Nonetheless you did, and we listened. To be honest I didn't believe that Elohor was as unfazed about the fire as you made it seem. After we chorused 'thank God nothing happened,' we took Elohor to our room. She took in the bleakness of the white walls and the dark hole in the carpet from an iron burn absentmindedly. Things that were familiar to me but must have appeared shabby to a stranger. My tangled heap of cheap jewellery stood out on the dresser, making me wish it was tucked away in a drawer, the same way my feelings for you were tucked away. Mama made some perfunctory comments before going away. Make yourself at home. Hook the curved nail across the bathroom door to keep it shut. Flush the toilet twice after you pee. Her tantrums were quieted by the knowledge of what might have happened.

There was a tentative knock on the door and when we said come in, you did. You had Elohor's luggage with you. A Louis Vuitton suitcase. Even in the dim yellow light I could make out the detailed finishing that told of its genuineness. You told her not to miss you too much and she scoffed. Umoligie laughed. You laughed. I laughed too and felt normal, until your lips sought hers, met hers. I bent down and straightened the bed. Umoligie watched with her mouth open. When you left, Elohor said she needed to shower.

'I can still smell the smoke in my tentacles,' she tugged at a woollen dreadlock.

I pointed at the en-suite bathroom and lay on the bed. I should have told her that we didn't take showers. We took baths out of buckets, and more times than not, our bodies were still slippery when the last drop of water crawled into the drain.

'So what really happened?' Umoligie asked again.

'We were in our room when we heard a scream. We ran out and saw smoke everywhere. They said that someone forgot to put out a cigarette. As

usual.' Elohor rolled her eyes and untied her wrap dress. With an unselfconscious snap of her flesh toned bra, her cone shaped breasts swung free. They were a lighter brown than the rest of her body. Her nakedness made me uncomfortable, so I faced the wall.

'Did anyone die?' Umoligie looked more excited than frightened.

'Nope. But the Igbo woman in the room beside ours fainted. Shock I guess.'

Umoligie made a commiserating sound. 'At least you guys are safe *sha*.'

Elohor shrugged in a blasé manner that suggested she hadn't given much thought to her safety. She wrapped an olive green towel around her chest, knotted it under her left arm and flattened her breasts. At the bathroom door, she stopped and unhooked the silver chain around her neck. There was a tinkle of metal as it landed on the dresser. A lone sparkle in a sea of darkness. Soon water began to splash inside the bathroom. In the morning it would bear signs of her presence. The blue g-string pegged on the underwear dryer, the sparkling sponge shaped like a glove.

Umoligie rolled over on the bed. 'I hope she doesn't sleep with the light on *ob!*'

Elohor's footprints were a dark, wet trail on the carpet as she entered the room. She shook her hair free of a shower cap and drops of water bounced off the grainy mirror, landing on my face. I noticed the pale stretch marks zigzagged across her buttocks like streaks of lightning. Sleep did not come until she turned off the light.

We always had beans on Wednesday afternoon. It was a family tradition I couldn't change, like the matching clothes we wore to church on Christmas Day. I was slow with the preparations, prompting irritated glances from Mama. I lingered in the kitchen, even when the fat pot was finally hissing and gurgling on the kerosene stove. I was about to invent another creative task when Mama told me to go and stay with Elohor. I was expected to entertain and please her. It was another thing I couldn't change.

I followed the sound of two voices, hers and Umoligie's, into the bedroom. The air was heavy with the acidic smell of nail polish. Elohor perched on the floor, back propped against the bed, as she applied a colourless coat on a fingernail. Legs that hadn't known the misfortune of scarring were folded under her, making me more aware of my black knees and my spots that looked like pawpaw seeds, mementos of tree climbing adventures

in the setting sun.

'I won't say he's very hot, but he's hot *sha*. He has brooding eyes,' Umoligie flipped through an old edition of *Essence*.

'He sounds like a character in one of those awful romance novels,' Elohor said.

'I don't read those things. I outgrew that phase long ago.' Umoligie snapped her fingers, as if the piles of Mills and Boons novels on the top shelf of our closet belonged to me, not her.

I opened a drawer and played with random things I did not need. The diary I had abandoned in fear Umoligie would read it, mass bulletins with year old dates, an old list of provisions for school in my cautious handwriting: *Bournvita, Peak, Sure, Close Up, Vaseline, Omo*. There was an angry slash of ink where Mama replaced Peak with Nido. The dresser was devoid of the cosmetics I expected to see. Jars of expensive moisturisers that promised ageless skin. An arty bottle that housed her spicy scent. In their place a book called *Love in the Time of Cholera* sat beside a pair of pearl stud earrings. The pages were strewn apart, like they had been opened too often. The title fascinated me; it reminded me of the books in Papa's study. Sombre looking books that I never read, their grand titles memorised in an illusion of cleverness.

'So what do you like to do?' Elohor asked. It took me a while to realise that she was talking to me. She repeated the question and the words seeped out of my brain, clotted into a lump in my throat.

'That one, she's an introvert,' Umoligie said.

'Oh,' Elohor said slowly.

'Have you heard from Martin today?'

'He's coming here in the evening.'

Umoligie's smile was wide and coaxing. 'Ah ah. See how your eyes are shining because of my cousin.'

'The way your eyes are shining because of your brooding eyed man *abi*? The slang sounded awkward, forced even, on Elohor.

Umoligie giggled. She giggled again when Elohor said that the beans porridge was delicious. Mama waved off the compliment even though her lips loosened into a one-sided smile that wiped away her preference for Idide. Surely Elohor was just being polite because the sourness of the palm oil was obvious. I stirred my beans and the palm oil swirled inside my plate like a ripple in a stream. It was a diluted red, not the vibrant red of the ixora flowers beside the garage. "Your mother's pet project," Papa would call them with an indulgent laugh.

The sharp after taste hung onto my tongue when you came. I didn't look away when you kissed Elohor, not this time. I wanted to see if you would wince, wanted to know if she tasted like bad food too. I watched you and told myself that the kiss was clumsy because my presence made you uneasy.

'I can see that you're enjoying yourself. Maybe I'll leave you here and go back to Lagos alone on Friday,' you teased.

'Like you can get on that plane without me,' she teased back.

She helped Mama with the dishes when you left. They stood side by side, arms not quite touching. In the unforgiving fluorescent light their differences in size and age were clearer. Her body was compact, devoid of the ridges of fat on Mama's waist. There was a defiance in her back that time had taken from Mama's. Or perhaps it only seemed that way because I was accustomed to Mama's peculiar softness, to the odd way she scolded and praised us in the same sentence. Mama spoke gently, asking about her plans, her dreams. There was no arched eyebrow when Elohor said she planned to start a Youth-focused NGO, no admonishment to use smaller amounts of Morning Fresh. But when she turned her back, Mama discreetly re-rinsed all the glasses she had washed.

She slept in a faded grey t-shirt that smelled like you at night. When her arm grazed my elbow, I leaned closer and inhaled a fragrance I later learned was Old Spice, and the strange drum beating between my thighs increased its tempo. I couldn't sleep, not when my mind was pelted with different thoughts, some lucid, others not, all as wide and as endless as the speckled sky.



Self Portrait

On Thursday you took her to the museum. She wore a black dress that made her look slimmer. She smacked her lips until the near nude gloss shimmered. She told you that she would meet you at the gate.

‘Never allow a man to think that you’re helpless,’ she told Umoligie in an assertive tone.

Umoligie looked alarmed but she agreed.

I knew the car that drove into our compound wasn’t Papa’s. I knew this because the engine sounded new, not rusty like that of Papa’s silver 505. So when I looked out of the living room window and saw the blue Toyota with a rental sticker beside the ixora hedge I wasn’t surprised. I stood there, uncertain if you were coming in or not. You pulled Elohor back when she

As you slammed the boot shut, I stared at the curly film of hair on your arm and wondered what you would do if I stroked it.

opened the door; she pushed you away then came out of the car. You touched the side mirror and I imagined that it was anger that made you pull it back. I feared you would see me so I walked away and left the curtains fluttering in

the evening air.

‘I’m ashamed to admit that I heard of most of those places for the first time today,’ Elohor said to Papa when he came home.

He went into his study and came back into the living room with two hard cover books. Elohor ran her fingers over one with embossed gold lettering before flipping it open. The title page had tiny brown stains that resembled age spots. She scanned the pages from left to right with the intensity of an academic. Papa gave her names and dates and facts, thankful that someone under his roof was showing more than a passing interest in history. I picked up the raffia fan on the centre table and waved it in my face until my arm ached.

Elohor made what she called vegetable sauce in the evening. I flinched when she sautéed an onion in butter. Umoligie’s face was straight with the indifference that disguises shock. ‘Don’t rub your eyes,’ Elohor said when the onions made us blink our burning eyes. She stepped back from the hot oil leaping out of the pan, and told us that their cook had taught her over and over until the sauce was near perfect. I could just see her flinging moist onion rings into a bin. No one ever threw food away in our house; not unless the person wanted to hear Mama’s legendary sermon about how much luckier we were than our relatives in the village.

I lied that I wasn’t hungry. When they left the dining room, I dished food out of an ugly brown Pyrex. The rice was too salty, too mushy. The *ugwu*

suddenly looked so alien, tasted so exotic. I peered at Elohor over the flowers on the dining table when she took your phone call in the corridor. She scraped at a dried patch of candle wax on the table and repeated the time of your flight after you. 10:45 a.m. Back then I had been on a plane just once, on a trip to Lagos. All I remembered was the see-through panty hose on the air hostesses’ legs and the brittle scone that tasted like air.

In the room, she folded a dress into a cube and squeezed it into her suitcase, tossed a bottle of Poison by Dior at Umoligie.

‘Makes my chest burn,’ she said.

I drew the curtains together and shut out the fading daylight. I didn’t want her to think I was hovering around for a hand-me-down.

‘You guys are coming to Lagos for the wedding, right?’ she asked.

‘I guess so,’ Umoligie sounded distracted. She spurted Poison on one wrist then rubbed both wrists together with glee. ‘Thanks.’

Elohor had the same modest look Mama had when our church members thanked her for giving them our old clothes. She lifted her silver chain and fiddled with her engagement ring until it let out a prism of translucent light.

The farewell was subdued. We were that kind of family. When Papa dropped me off at boarding school, he always said ‘see you’ as though I’d be at home when he got back there. Papa and Mama shrugged off Elohor’s thanks. ‘Don’t mention,’ they said. You stood in the living room with your hands in your pockets, your feet in palm slippers that were too big. You thanked them for taking care of Elohor. You laughed when they told you to beware of robbers in Lagos. They always did, right before they said ‘take care’ and ‘greet Felicia for us.’ The muscles in your arm tensed when you placed Elohor’s suitcase into the boot of the yellow taxi where an engine oil stain was spread out like a map. As you slammed the boot shut, I stared at the curly film of hair on your arm and wondered what you would do if I stroked it. I did not feel the chest tightening that came in anticipation of distance. What I felt was something akin to *déjà vu*. The certainty that you would be back. You turned to me and my heart did its happy beat. You were going to heal me, make me whole, right there under the clouds floating above like a cluster of white marquees. The driver pressed the horn twice and stuck his head out of the window. His face was marred by a frown. You turned and eyed him then got into the taxi. I stood there, burning, like the engine that was screeching to life. The tyres munched on the gravel, and the figures on the number plate faded out, slid through the gate.