

INVOCATION

God is no farther from you than the gap between your two front incisors.

His words not mine.

My feet dance along potholes, the object wedged between my ribs and arms held firmly, as if it could escape, and my eyes dart, houndlike as they read the people around me, asking the question;

“Are my sins that obvious?”

They never answer of course, so I bumble down pavement, tucking the object in my arms deeper, as the trees of Maitama provide shade from the sweltering heat, and God, as if in the days of Eden.

Heart pounding faster, I dial my phone again, gritting my teeth fiercely, as it rings.

“Hello, you’ve reached Father Ade’s Voicemail, if you’re hearing this I’m probably busy so I will reach you when I come. God be with you!”

I grit my teeth harder, fighting the sting in my eye, that threatens to break the dam, so hard the text on the object begins to show against the nylon, and when I notice, I loosen my hold, scanning the crowd again to see if anyone saw.

“God be with you,” I mutter, chuckling a little as the words play in my head, it brings memories, of intercession and admonishing.

A glimpse of God’s face, before his recession.

After walking for what seems like forever, a *once white* wall looms ahead, surrounded by iron railings, turned brown by the damp clothes hanging over them everyday. My steps pick up, as I race towards my door, fishing my keys from the pockets of my jeans and shoving it in the door.

I miss the hole, and I grunt, thrusting it in the keyhole again but it doesn't fit. My fingers are slippery with sweat and agitation. I try again, slower this time, pushing it into the keyhole, but the key is adamant, refusing me entry.

It can read me, my iniquity, and this apartment won't stand for it.

"God please!" I whimper, leading the key carefully towards the keyhole, and this time it fits. I let a sigh of relief, turning it, but it doesn't move.

"Open!"

No chance.

"God, what did I -"

The door bursts open, and I trip, my object hitting the floor with a thud.

"Merde," I mutter, brushing off dust from my jacket as I stand up only to see Mama Kehinde behind me, my next door neighbour.

"Ifeanyi what is it-"

Her eyes fall to the object on the ground, now loose from the nylon and then up to me, so slowly. I tilt my head away, but her gaze is a vice grip, forcing me to meet it, ensnared in her shock and becoming disappointment.

"I can explain ma."

I shouldn't have to explain anything, but I take a step forward trying to reassure her, but she edges back, as if I'm now infectious, capable of contaminating her.

"One day you'll bring a curse on this compound, God forbid!"

She throws her hands behind her head, snapping her fingers, before running back into her apartment, no doubt about to tell everyone in the block what she'd just seen.

I grab the object, fingers shaky, and storm into my apartment, slamming the door behind me, and then take a deep breath, chest burning with an unknown liquid. I can barely stand as I limp to my room, dropping the object on my bed, before falling in after it.

The object lies beside me, watching, waiting, and I have half a mind to throw it across the room, but I show restraint, looking at the words printed on it, the images, the symbol and in the quiet of this moment, dust streaking into the room from outside, turned gold by the setting sun, it's frightening to know that this box, will hold court over me.

Decide my fate.

I pick it up, holding it gingerly, then make to open it, lifting the cardboard lift, but I catch a whiff of sterility.

It smells of cleanliness, the kind that scrubs out soul.

The one that smothers hospital halls, and suddenly I drop it.

It bounces a few times on the bed, landing just at the corner.

“Watch it! That’s the second time you’ve dropped me!”

I pause, making sure I heard right.

“Hello?”

There’s quiet, and then,

“Hello there, how can I assist you today?”

I fly across the bed, grabbing the object, my heart pounding against my rib cage, scared I might have finally lost it, then I see a small screen on the box.

“I’m a smart kit, how shall I assist you?”

My breath slows, relief and agitation fighting at odds, as I observe it closer. The box is a machine, all its responses programmed, and yet, voice soft, motherly I can’t help but think that it might possess what some people would call a soul.

I blow a sigh, eyes closed for a few seconds, and it takes me back again, to intercessions, and admonishments.

“I have a problem.”

The kit chimes fast, “Do tell!”

“I feel far from God, and I think its killing me.”

Silence for a beat, and it weighs on me that I can only hear the ceiling fan groaning over my head, I almost ask the question again.

“I-”

“Tell me when did this start?”

DIVINE VISITATION

The last candle blew out, as the congregation emptied the church, leaving me the sole being on the pews.

All the lights had gone out, except for the dim glow from the confession box. I clasped my hands tightly, edging away from the light when something caught my eye, the cross behind the episcopal chair and on it a tiny Jesus, crucified for what must have been the umpteenth time.

I held his gaze, staring at his dejected face through the dimly lit space, and sighed, getting up from my pew before I walked to him. His head hung low, so that he couldn't meet my face.

“You must be that ashamed of me,” I muttered, but no response.

I bent, nearly kneeling to look into the face of Jesus.

“You are, aren't you?”

His head hung low still, unresponsive.

I'm not even worth the answer.

“Answer me you little shit,” I muttered, louder this time.

I can't imagine that Calvary was this quiet, not after he went dilly-dallying healing the sick and blessing the poor.

“You can’t fix me,” my voice heightens, dangerously shrill, “You won’t heal me, don’t love me, can’t even answer me, but you want my worship! Some God.”

I spat on Jesus, praying he could feel the venom in my mouth through his bronze corporeal, one more sin to bear on Calvary.

Feet shuffled behind me, and I turned to meet a face, and it was as if I could see myself thirty years ahead.

“Hello,” his voice boomed, echoing through the empty church.

“Hello,” I replied, stepping down from the altar, now wary like a child that had been caught stealing meat from the pot.

Moonlight poured in from the windows, casting a ghostly shadow on one half of his face, haunting, except for his friendly smile. It was a pull, one that continued to drag me down from the altar, until I was a few steps from him.

“Any offense with God?”

He posed the question politely, not shocked, like he felt that God too was capable of err, and he was just the good kid. Here to mediate any and all transgressions.

I rubbed the back of my neck, struggling to pick up my anger in lieu of this softening voice, disarming my vex.

“Perhaps a few.”

He chuckled, tugging at his Roman collar.

“You’ve been here after mass quite a few times, didn’t think one of those days you’d actually spit on Jesus,” I winced, shrinking into myself, “no matter, I’m sure he’s used to it.”

I stared at this man, a bit curious. I had never seen a priest talk so irreverently about his master, but he just sat on the front pew, patting the space beside him for me to come sit.

“Let’s see if there’s anything we can do about God.”

My feet moved suddenly, on their own accord, filing into the space beside me, and once seated I took in the scent of his musk, how it traced a shape around him, the likeliness of Plato, benching the effort of brain and brawns.

“So, whatever is the matter with you?”

I felt uncomfortable, so near to holiness, like he could burn me just being near me, but it already felt like it.

My throat, and my chest suddenly heated in his midst.

I shuffled my arse an inch down the wooden seat, coughing into my arms to act as disguise. The priest didn't seem to notice.

After five counts, I let my mouth open, “Forgive me father, for I have sin-”

He placed a firm hand on my shoulder, squeezing it a little, and I turned to meet him smiling again, and it was warmth, what my mother told me God would feel like.

“There's no need. I'm just your friend here.”

I grinned, “Usually I know my friend's names.”

The joke left my lips before I could catch it, I'm already at ease.

His voice booms, a deep laugh echoing once again through the church, and a verse comes to mind; *Be not forgetful to entertain strangers... for by doing so some have entertained angels.*

I watched him laugh, shaking the seat until he calmed down, and then, wiping a tear from his eyes, he announced,

“I'm Father Ade.”

“Ade,” I say, running the name over my teeth.

“Yes, and I know that you're Ifeanyi.”

The acknowledgment warms me, pleads me to lower my inhibitions.

“Nothing is impossible -”

“With God. Ifeanyichukwu,” he finished.

The name fails me lately.

“Ade, I’m hell bound I tell you.”

He didn’t say anything, just let me talk.

“I don’t, I’m not normal. My mother has been begging me to find a wife, to fix me, but I can’t. Can’t do that to anyone, because I can never love a woman. Not the way I’d love a —”

“Man,” he chimed.

I nodded.

“All she’s told me is if I don’t repent I’m going to burn, and I’ve tried,” my voice turned shrill again, squeaking between words, “I’ve said all the prayers, done everything, abstained, said I’ll avoid every temptation. I give to charity, I’ve been attending all the masses. What is it? God doesn’t love me?”

I was so lost in myself, I hardly noticed Ade put a hand on my lap, squeezing it gently.

“Ifeyi.”

The call is comfort, but it’s also a command.

I turned to face him, shocked to find him mere breaths from me.

The closeness was dangerous, almost sensual in the dimness of the church.

“What your mother said doesn’t equal truth.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

He shifted on the pew to face me better, dark gaunt eyes holding mine.

“I believe that God’s love is truly unconditional,” his hands moved slowly up my thigh, forcing a twitch reaction in my groin. I ignored it, driving all my attention to his words, looking to grasp any word that could affirm my existence, that I could exist and be loved.

“What do you see when you look at me?”

The question baffled me, jolting me out of my trance. I looked into his eyes, smile still warm.

“I-”

What could I say?

I’d seen him around the church a few times, and had gotten the idea that he was a visiting priest, but I knew he had a gravitas, and an ability to draw people. He was all my sister talked about when she came last week, the priest who had wasted his chance to spread beautiful genes.

“You’re warm, gentle,” he nodded, pushing me on, “when you speak, you’re everything I’d want God to be.”

His hands squeezed tighter, holding my thighs in a firm grip.

“Let me tell you something.”

I leaned in, near desperate to hear every word that he would ever say.

“God is only as far as the gap between your two front incisors,” he pointed to his, showing perfectly aligned teeth that gleamed white even in the dark.

“He’s never far,” I stated, leaning back on the pew only to find Ade’s other arm there, but I didn’t flinch, instead allowing myself to feel his embrace as he began to grip my shoulders.

“Never,” he repeated, inching closer.

I could feel my pants tighten, breaths shorter as he continued to talk, my hands limp at my sides.

“Ade,” I murmured, and I heard him grunt, pressing harder at the mention of his name.

“Don’t let your mother tell you otherwise,” he whispered against your chin, “you’re made in the image of God, and that— is never far.”

I held his gaze, the way his lips parted to reveal those two front teeth, and suddenly, under the dark of night.

I closed that gap between his incisors.

RECKONING - THREE WEEKS LATER

Morning’s first touch, and my heart already knows iniquity.

It’s in the steps I take off my bed, towards the bathroom, and my head spins, dizzy, while Hephaestus drives a hammer through it. I can hardly breathe as I grab my toothbrush, vision blurring in and out.

My mind goes back to the feel of callused hands, racing along my body under moonlight, God the only witness as he did Adam and Eve, Ade’s gravitas replaced by a frenzy, a fervor to know God he called it.

I wince through my headache, staring at the mirror.

“God is no farther from you than the gap between your two front teeth,” I murmur, opening my mouth wide to reveal my dentition, misaligned and overcrowded by subtle poor choices, like one evening in Johannesburg as a kid, where I chewed on the beaded stuffing of a SpongeBob plushie, wedging it into the space where my wisdom teeth were supposed to grow, misaligning my dentition and giving way to a deep cavity, manifestation of my state of being.

I can pass my tongue halfway through my two front teeth, like all the times I used to press it against my teeth, holding back prayers I knew deep down God would never answer. A ring comes from my bed and I race toward it, ignoring the mindsplitting headache in hopes

that it will be him, there to reveal God to me again and help me understand what's happening with me.

It's my mother.

"Hello."

"Ifeanyi, you don't call anymore. Did I do something to you?"

I put a hand to my neck, squirming as the heat becomes unbearable.

"Mummy, can I call you back, I'm not feeling well."

I feel the air shift.

"What do you mean?"

"I have a headache, and my neck is hot," I suddenly notice a patch of red on the left of my chest, "it's probably malaria."

She groans, voice clearly strained.

"I had a dream son."

Here we go again.

"Ifeanyi you slept with a man!"

The statement chills my blood, shivers cascading down my spine, its enough to dull the throbbing in my head for a moment.

"No, I-

"In my dream, you defied God, Ifeanyi. I don't know how, but it can only be because of a man, that's where you and God have been fighting, and he decided to punish you."

My mouth is dry now, throat painfully contracting as I struggle to swallow.

"Mummy it's not true, I never-

"If you lie you'll make it worse," her tone is condemning but I can hear the underlying resignation, "Go to the doctor today, you have HI-

"God forbid!"

I end the call tossing the phone onto the bed.

The screen goes black, but her voice still rings, escalating the way my body burns like a hearth.

“You have HI-”

I shake off her voice, putting on my clothes.

I have to meet Ade.

Church of the Ascension looks above me, its gothic spirals an oddity among the shoddy structures around it, an encampment of the poor to bear witness to divine majesty. My head throbs louder as I walk down the aisle, toward the altar where there’s a clergyman erecting the cross.

My steps slow as I approach him, now wary of the piece of bronze I once spat on.

Is he really punishing me?

The clergyman turns in time to face me, but his visage has none of Ade’s warmth, replaced instead with the gaunt and idle fury I’d come to associate with God.

“Hello, how may I help you?”

My eyes scan the church for a glimpse of a tall figure, shrouded in a cassock like night.

“I’m looking for father Ade, I’ve been told he’s been working here for a while.”

The clergyman furrows his eyebrows as if I had mentioned some abstract concept.

“Who?”

“Fa- Fa- Father Ade.”

A gentle breeze blows through the halls but it hits me like a gust of wind, and I nearly buckle, shivering inside.

“I don’t know a father Ade son. Not here anyway.”

No.

I shake my head, “he’s been working in this church for about five weeks, a visiting priest.”

His eyebrows furrow even more.

“The only priest that has been working here as a visiting priest is Father Goddey. He died last week.”

No. Could he be?

“He was here!”

The priest's idle fury reignites in his eye, and I can tell I'm stepping on his toes, but I can't go through this alone, and I need answers, I need closure.

“Son, there is no father Ade here, you're either mistaken or playing games, and if so then I will have to ask you to please leave this place.”

Under moonlight, in the darkness, in front of God.

It happened here.

I swear it.

“Okay, How did Father Goddey die sir?”

He grunts, resting his hands on his waist.

“Son, I don't know the full details, but he was sick, now please I have to prepare for Afternoon Mass. You're welcome to join us.”

“Thank you sir,” I mutter, stumbling up the aisle and out of the church.

I can barely fathom the last hour, incapacitated by the fire within and the cold outside.

“God, where are you?” I whimper, marching down the road, despair seeping into the cracks forming in my heart.

I feel used.

The streets blur, people passing and conversations I would once listen to and immerse myself into minutes of peoples lives, now merge like cacophony.

In the universe, I am alone.

The sole being.

Until I come across a pharmacy, by a traffic junction and my mother's voice resurfaces.

I take down one button to pull open my shirt and peek at my chest, sure enough, the red patch is still there, bright in its vehemence, and I can tell it seeks to kill me.

See the doctor, Ifeanyi. Face justice.

I walk into the space, grabbing the first kit I see, and in a haste to not see the collective judgment on the faces of the nurses I storm out, tucking it into my jacket, wedged between my ribs and an arm, to face my reckoning.

Sealing the memory of touch with the promise of punishment.

God's gift to every wayward child.

WHERE IS GOD?

I take the stick out of my mouth, dropping it in the mysterious liquid and then I sit back, wrapping swaddles of blankets around myself.

"While we wait, how do you feel now?"

I look at the kit.

Nervous is to hit the first flint of stubborn soil, and be shocked by the light. My body is turmoil inside out, a vessel awaiting the fulfillment of prophecy.

I watch the kit, as it draws bloody lines, small, white, merciful in its ability to know when to keep quiet.

God in a plastic box, or maybe the Devil.

I can't really tell anymore as I cough, a deep throaty ejection.

In the swelter of my fever, I can feel him, warm eyes, warmer smile as he places a hand on my chest.

“It’s not much of a life you’re living.”

In this memory, I nod mirroring his hands as he kisses another part of my neck, revealing joy where I didn’t even know it could exist.

“God is alignment with yourself,” he shifts his weight onto me, “and being out of it is the biggest sin you could commit.”

“Get out,” I groan, wavering between the memory and this room.

The fan continues to groan, blades of air providing temporary relief. I’ve never been more out of alignment than this moment, and to think that it’s his fault.

“Why did you take this test then, if you already blame me?”

That can’t be the kit, I open my eye to see him still standing beside my bed, just as the power goes out, and like that we’re back in the dark.

The same darkness I met him in.

“Go away,” but he remains, still smiling as he opens his mouth.

“When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void, and darkness covered the deep.”

That doesn’t make any sense.

“Your liberation begins now.”

I shiver harder, as the fan comes to a stop, a thin sheen of sweat forming on my forehead.

“Fifteen minutes!” The kit chimes.

“I stand at the crossroads of hell, and you call this liberation,” I spit, through gritted teeth.

“If God is alignment, perhaps this pain will set you straight.”

I stare at him, disbelief turning my legs to lead.

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” I reply, vehement this time, I stretch my hand towards the bedside drawer, where there’s a plier. I grab the tool, holding it firmly in my right hand.

“What are you doing?”

I ignore him, holding it to my mouth, before setting it on a tooth.

“Are you mad?”

Always.

I clamp down on the plier, dragging at the tooth, tears begin to streak down my face.

The pain is numbing, silencing even the fever, so much that I begin to cry, matching the cadence of the Muezzin’s call outside.

“Five minutes!”

My tongue licks the cold metal, as it clamps harder on my tooth, uprooting it from my gum.

“Ifeanyi, stop.”

I continue to pull, eyes bulging, blood pouring, while I scream harder, only a matter of time before the neighbours come knocking, but before then I yank, and suddenly the tooth comes out in splinters.

“Results ready!”

There’s no one in the room anymore. Just me and my condemnation, or liberation.

I pull the kit over to me, blood still spilling from my mouth as I open it.

“God is as far as the space between your two front incisors,” I mutter, coughing on the blood, and then laugh, looking at the shards of tooth scattered over the grey blanket.

His words not mine.

