

The Invitation by Oyindamola Shoola

Since the last time he hit her, her mind has become a battleground of unusual thoughts. One minute, she is admiring everything and the other minute, she is jumping off a bridge, screaming, as the pressure of the air caresses her face. Her clothes are parting ways and her body is plunging into the river beneath the bridge. She never drowns. She swims to the river banks and finds her way to the top of the bridge again.

These days, she says that as she moves,
her body feels
like heavy steels,
from loose thin
threads, dangling
making melodious sounds at life's grooves.

She says that her knees have the feeling
of two wooden sticks rubbing
against rough edges
and unsmooth surfaces.

And her hips sway,
alternating the pressure on each side
it feels like their strength has gone to hide,
as her control over them has withered away.

The rosary hanging on her neck with a cross absent of Christ's body loses itself underneath her blouse. She prays to it every day just like the priest does. I refuse to wear mine.

I remember one of the nights that we all gathered to pray in the living room. It was my mother's turn to pray and as she did, my father and I in loud unified voices chorused *Amen!* She prayed for the protection of our finances and the new car that our neighbor bought. She prayed that *God should take the fishes in father's belly that made him drink all day long.* That was how the devil received an invitation to participate in our prayers.

By the time she completed that sentence, my father, still holding a bottle of beer in his left palm, struck her face with his right palm. I sat still with my eyes firmly shut because the priest always instructs that *no eyes open while praying.*

The next Sunday, after the church service, my mother and I went to the priest's office for a *brief meeting* as she said we would do when we walked out of the auditorium. The meeting lasted for about 2 hours because she would not stop crying.

He has done it again. She said, with a teary voice and sobs between her syllables. *He-ha-has-done-it-it again.* She fumbled her hands through her bag to find a napkin for her face. Her eyes were a swollen red. The left side of her cheek where my father struck was covered with lies and her cascading tears slowly revealed the truth.

She dabbed her eyes and the mascara from her eyelashes scared her cheeks. She blinked to push back her tears and gasped between words to catch her breath.

When the priest spoke, he mentioned how true love prevails, emphasizing that she needs to be patient and *pray more.* His coarse voice with thick Nigerian accent swept through my ears violently.

When the meeting was over, the priest escorted us out of his office and bade us goodbye. He waved and said, *may the Lord's peace be with you.*

The voices from the prayer sessions that Sunday night was louder. I said my prayers and asked for forgiveness so that we could be happier. I dangled my small feet above the ground and occasionally peeped through the spaces of my little fingers.

When it was my mother's turn to pray, she became silent. The room was quiet for about two minutes and I could hear the whistling of breaths sneaking in and out of our nostrils.

Then she said, *In Jesus name, we have prayed*. It was the first time she prayed like that. I said a firm *Amen!* My father did not say amen to finish the prayer with me.

Stuttering through his drunkenness, he yelled, *What-what-is that su-su-pposed to mean?*

She did not respond to him. She stood up and lifted me from the dining chair into her arms. She walked to my room, laid me on the bed and drew the blue blanket that was rolled beneath my feet, upward, to cover my shoulders. She kissed my forehead and turned off the light bulbs in my room before going to her room.

In the middle of the night, I heard my mother screaming. I gently climbed down from my bed, walked out of my room and proceeded quietly down the hallway.

The closer I got to her room, the louder her screams were. The door to her room was partially open with a blue curtain made from batik covering the entrance. I knelt by the door and peeped through the curtain. I saw my father hovering over her like a hungry lion on a prey. He was swinging his arms all over her body. The movements of their bodies looked like shadow puppetry against the wall. My mother coughed as she continued screaming and begging. I pushed a corner of the curtain very slowly to the left to get a clearer view.

I saw her mouth dripping blood mixed with saliva. Her eyes were swollen and they looked like the size of my small fists. Her black hair strands were scattered all over, on the bed and the floor. She gasped for breath as her hands fumbled in the air while attempting to catch my father's palms.

Suddenly, he grabbed her shoulders and tossed her on the floor like a bag of trash. The sound of her body slamming against the floor caught me off guard and I gasped.

My father climbed off the bed and slowly moved towards the curtain where I was kneeling.

The shadow of his huge figure slowly built against the blue curtain. I turned away and ran as fast as my feet could move, towards my room. My footsteps sounded like two palms clapping in the church and my heart beat rapidly.

I was out of breath as I jumped on my bed. I pulled the blanket up to my shoulders, just like my mother did before she left for her room that night. I shut my eyes very tightly and tried not to breathe as hard, even though my nostrils failed me.

Oyindamola Shoola is a poet, short-story writer, a book reviewer, a feminist, and a blogger. She is also the Co-founder of Springing Literary Movement, a non-profit organization dedicated to curating, revitalizing, and transforming Nigerian literature. In 2017, she was awarded by Nigerian Writers Award as one of the top 100 influential Nigerian Writers under the age of 40. She published her first collection of poems titled *Heartbeat* in 2015. Her second book titled *To Bee a Honey* was republished by Jeanius Publishing in March 2018.

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