

Itoro Bassey

HOW TO GIVE UP BEING A GOOD AFRICAN DAUGHTER

Be born somewhere they weren't. Somewhere where you'll have the space to become more porous than they were ever allowed to be. Start in a place where saying "good morning" to everyone is not a way of life, where people who look nothing like you are the majority and could care less if you or your parents live or die. And since you're nine, and can't imagine death, you take everyone's ambivalence as proof that no one outside your parents will love you, so it's better to cleave to them, or as they've told you, obey them. And you accept that your parents are your wardens, deciding when you pray, eat, sleep, go outside. Inside those four walls you call home is their re-envisioned Nigeria.

Jiffy is now stirred into boiling water in a saucer to produce substitute fufu because your mother knows you don't prefer the real taste: cassava or yam. You don't get to see the time it takes to peel away the hard skin, pound the vegetables till they turn into a gelatinous mush. Your understanding of their homeland comes in a blue box filled with white powder, with a cooking time that runs for about five minutes. Substitute fufu for a daughter plucked away from the land her parents loved the most. It's one of the few concessions you're granted.

But beyond their hobbled-together country is a winding forest where you can go into another world with the neighborhood kids: Skip, Luisa, and Jimbo. From rock to rock you leap, enjoying the crunching of dead leaves beneath your sneakers. You touch tree bark with the palm of your hand, the scaly

surface bringing delight though you can't say why. You're panting hard, about to lose your breath as you wind through the forest, a forest your parents would call a bush. Recalling this—that to your parents a mass of trees is a bush and to you, it's a forest—makes the delight you had seconds ago evaporate. You trip over a rock and scrape your knee. Now your father's words bounce inside your head, his warning—*don't play in the bush. You'll meet ghosts there.* You've left parts of skin and blood on the rock, the rock where you forgot that good daughters can't come home dirty. The neighborhood kids are angry that you fell. You've ruined their carefree flow, the way Skip went first, you went after, and Luisa and Jimbo followed, moving through the green like blood moves through veins. Such fun before you stupidly became a clot. Skip glares your way. Being the nicer one, Jimbo corralls everyone to help take you home. They'll drop you off as a courtesy before going behind your back to wind through the forest well past their bedtime.

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Focus your mind on goodness, though you're not sure what that means entirely, you decide it means to do as you're told with few objections. After the scraped-knee incident, you'll become a good girl. That's what they told you to be, it was spanked into you that day. The palm of your hands turned red with their anger, though it was your father holding the stick, it was your mother's words echoing behind every lash. *There's no money for a doctor.* This isn't punishment, it's discipline, that's what they call it, with every strike. *You children don't know discipline.*

You're seventeen now. Though you still can't understand them entirely, something inside you wants to make them proud. They have enough to deal with outside the four walls. Your dad—thankfully—can hold onto his job, but it's a precarious situation for your mother. Your mother is being haunted by

a wicked white woman who terrorizes her every chance she gets. This time she left a banana on your mother's desk, it's psychological warfare, the stuff of thrillers. Your mother is convinced she has met a demon bent on mangling her mind. *Last week she called me a monkey. It's a subliminal message.* You listen to the ghost story your mother tells and feel hopeless. You have your own wicked white woman snapping at your neck. She's your Precalculus teacher. You don't want to complain, but after hearing your mother lament about her wicked white woman, you decide you'll do something about yours. You tell the principal about how this teacher never calls on you when you raise your hand in class. You use your mother's words. *It's a subliminal message.* But the principal is confused. *Maybe you're reading into things.* Your wicked white woman finds out you told on her, and although she's angry, she backs off after she explains to the principal it was all a misunderstanding. That's how you learn every ghost needs airing out.

You go home and tell your mother what she should do about her ghost. *Human resources. Go to human resources.* For the first time in years, the forest runs through your veins, that freedom of chasing another possibility. It's such a wild thought that it frightens you a little. Your mother considers your suggestion. Seeing how you've saved yourself causes her to think it might work out after fifteen years of eating crow. She files a complaint. For a month her wicked white woman is on her best behavior. Your mother's more chipper around the house, given to humming those Linda Rondstadt songs she once played on vinyl records. It's a month of bliss. Till she finds another banana on her desk. She goes back to HR, who diplomatically tells her that if she doesn't like her job, she's free to quit.

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Devote yourself to your culture, wholeheartedly. And decide your culture must be right about everything since your people speak with such conviction. It's hard to believe they're actually insane. If they were, you'd have to consider your own insanity. Since the grimmer aspects of your culture bring distress, you laser in on the good. In about five years there will be a term for what you're doing: toxic positivity.

There are things you adore about where you come from. The geles, the jollof, and the history of a people stirred into boiling water with a wooden spoon as the yam flour morphs into a firm ball, you realize your taste for a homeland expands beyond Jiffy. You're closer to the real thing, but not exactly because you're stirring powder from a box shipped from who knows where. Your palms are now rougher, the lines darkening with every year, you're twenty-eight. The days of thinking about the forest are distant. Getting dirty and discovering strange creatures disgust you. Running belongs on that which is containable: treadmills and manicured running tracks.

You're preparing food for everyone sitting in the living room. They're wearing natives¹ because they want to forget that beyond the four walls is a world different from the one they prefer. You may not love all of them but it's your task to turn fufu so all of them can eat, and since you're a good daughter you keep the peace, even serve Uncle Frederick who has been eyeing your yansh² since you turned thirteen. You adore them somehow, though you're not sure why. Perhaps because adoration is the closest you'll ever get to being accepted as one of them. They remind you often that you're what they've dreamed of but not what they prefer.

Auntie Ginika said you don't pronounce your name right.

1 Yes, this word is used by many in Nigeria and its Diaspora to describe traditional clothing. Yes. Natives.

2 Nigerian slang for ass.

Though she scoffed, she still kissed you on the cheek to greet you, and this made it hard to figure out if love was doled out with a punch to the gut. You stewed on this as you turned fufu for the next five hours to accommodate the nearly sixty people in the house. Auntie Ginika's slight was darting across your mind like a ping-pong ball and you fell into an existential crisis, wondering about all the things: intimacy, contempt, and what was beyond your love of jollof, their laughter, and geles? So you find yourself a professional to speak to. You're eager to share how Auntie Ginika's comment hurt so much you played with the idea of not going home for the next holiday.

When you're in the session you try your best to be rational. *They sacrificed. Wasn't easy.* Whatever happened between those four walls is faded now, like the scrape on your knee. You're sitting on the couch and tapping your fingers on the armrest. Why you're there, you can't say, but there's a want inside of you and it floats around like an embryo taking shape. It's a word. A word you've never used before, but you figure that's how all desire is created.

Regard.

That's what you're after, the joy of being regarded. You won't admit your secret longing for fear of losing something. Maybe you're worried you'll lose your perfect bitch face, a face you've damn near bled for. People applaud those who manage their licks with grace, you're a product of such people, people you love. You focus on that, the fortified woman you turned out to be, your bonkers but lovable family. You think of showing off your hands as a symbol of your effort, how callused and bumpy they are. It's the perfect diversion to forget your desire, that growing amorphous ball that's making you second-guess yourself, not your unformed self but your resting bitch face self. The person in front of you is befuddled, as for twenty minutes you've been rambling, leading yourself to nowhere till she poses a question. *Sounds like you sacrificed too?*

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Obsess yourself with death. Let it hit you that one day you're going to die. This thought will lead to an existential crisis about all the things: life, death, the cosmos, heaven, hell, and you'll think, *where will I end up?* If death is imminent that means everyone you've ever cared for is gonna die. The next logical step is to love everyone in sight because life's too short. Isn't this the accepted platitude found in Hallmark cards, producing fuzzy Kool-Aid feelings most of us reserve for those oh-so-special moments? You realize that one day the parents you no longer speak to are going to die. Dad has diabetes and can't stop eating Big Macs, and Mom finally left that job that haunted her but never did find another job that paid as much. Will the American Dream die with them, in the house they raised you in?

You're thirty-six and can't get death out of your head. Yours, theirs, everybody's. Everyone is going to die, and the saddest thing is that you're not sure you've had a good practice in love. You wouldn't know it if it hit you in the face. The texture of it you're unsure of, maybe even afraid of it a little, so afraid you ponder if encountering it would be worse than death. You've spent the better part of your life fumigating ghosts from your past, things that took years to tell your therapist, tell friends who aren't even friends now, took its toll. Managing their judgment whittled the happy pictures you had preserved in your head down to nothing. It's been years since you've visited them.

I love you. God loves you the most. This is the standard text your mother sends. You text back a heart emoji and leave it at that. Your father emails every few months. It's the stuff of Shakespeare. Only a poet could write it. It's Jimmy's, 'The Fire Next Time', or Toni's, 'Jazz'. Such interiority laid bare! *Please*

accept this email as it comes from the bottom of my heart. My present communication is timely and timeless. For so long tears have been running down like streams of water from my eyes. My dear, I've handed you over to God.

For him, you give no response.

They're aware they're going to die too, and their prayer is probably that they leave the earth before you do. For all that has transpired, they love you, and that's all that should matter, right? On the Hallmark card, it would be only that as the final remark. *Love deeply.* The other troubling bits wouldn't sell the \$7.99 card. The thought roams your mind. *I should reach out...* but you've tried telling them, explaining the shape of the pain, the terror it caused, because *it* happened and it almost took you out. What you need moving forward now are all the things: kindness, regard, no more ghosts. They're convinced that nothing devastating happened, at least nothing that warrants a tantrum that's lasted nearly a decade. You'd go back inside those four walls if you had a box of matches to burn the house down, their dreams, your innocence, turned to ash, the only choice to start over.

You don't like yourself much for admitting this, but the relationship you have with them now is the sweetest it's ever been. You're a daughter fine with text messages and emails, markers of minimal contact. The good African daughter is gone and you've become more of yourself. What other choice do you have but to go back into the forest, and let your life become more open-ended as it leads you to your inevitable death? It's been difficult to exist, but if you play your hand well, you might get another forty, or fifty years, a chance to accrue memories you won't have to fumigate. So what do you tell the ones you've left?

I love you. Sorry. Goodbye. I love you. Sorry. Goodbye. I love you. Sorry. Goodbye.