

Adamma's Perspective – Leaving America

The airport is overcrowded with noise and the shuffling of tourists. The plane's smell of American perfume suffocates you and the thing around your neck stiffens, claiming territory once again. You want to sleep, to weep or anything that can occupy your thoughts and suppress them. You laugh instead at the irony; you wanted out of Lagos and craved the American dream, complete with the car and the big house, like those Americans. You wanted to believe that you belonged, that you would never leave America. The plane signals its landing and you're forced back into reality, a sad and bitter reality.

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The air outside was humid and sticky that cradled your hair and puffed up your coils. The scenery was familiar, yet foreign as you stood at the baggage claim and watched the oversized bags made in America strangle your ragged one, punched with holes.

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The door was the African blanket your father once wrapped you in during the colder months, the vivid colours that once satisfied your boredom was now spoilt with dirt and mysterious stains. It hung to the corners of the narrow opening to the poorly built structure they called a house. You were home, where you belong.

The smell of akara welcomed you inside with your uncles and aunts and your cousins and siblings feasting, all seated on chairs. They flood you with questions and joke that you had a South African face and won't be able to handle the MSG. You laugh and kiss each of them on the cheek and want to tell them that America was racist and white people were the most condescending.

You wanted to tell them that your uncle in America was a despicable man and that you hated him, but he was right; that America was give and take.

Instead, you tell them that rich Americans ate expensive salad and poor Americans were fat and could only afford fast food.

You tell them that not all Americans had a big house or car and almost all of them were surprisingly open and overly curious.

Your mother stood in the corner of the room and watched you answer questions and make up stories about how lavish you lived in America. She tells your family that you're tired from the jetlag and ushers them outside after saying goodbye, then silently stands beside the blanket your father left as a futile token after his death. Your mother turns to you and flashes a forged smile, then bursts into tears and tells you she's just happy that you're back, how much your father loved you and your siblings. The pain seeped out in her words and it hurt to hear them.

You look down at your father, his lips a pale white with whip marks engraved into his bare skin left exposed because it was too expensive to buy a covering. You remember when father bumped his car into another rich man's rear of his wide, foreign vehicle complete with golden headlights. His boss threatened to fire him and when your father begged for mercy, he was whipped and told to not make another mistake. 'Yes sir, thank you sir!', he recited.

It made you sick to the stomach. You thought he looked like dung on his knees. He came home that night and lashed out at your mother, slapping her across the face and barking like a dog. Some nights you would come home and the spreading of purple with yellow blotches on the surface of mother's wounds would sit fresh on her face and arms. Mother was simply a thing to bear the brunt of the rage he failed to process. That's how father was and that's how he went down to the grave.

The funeral was bittersweet sorrow for those in raw pain. You sit at the back of the small, cramped room and watch them carry your father's body outside for burial through a carved opening in the wall. It was over now, you thought. Your mother can rest while you provided for the family, you thought. Your thoughts are interrupted by a loud screech of a car, then a sudden halt. The same wide foreign car your father bumped into years before was now parked next to his coffin, your mother looking on amongst your family. The small crack in the wall was large enough for you to see a big man in the back seat, wearing a crisp business suit like the dollar bills you sent to mother from America. He smiled at your mother and said that he was sorry for her loss. It was a fake smile which you saw so often on your mother's face after a beating from your father. You see him reach for your mother's elbow and grip it hard, her skin bulging between his fingers. Your mother remains still, then reaches into her side and hands him a brown envelope. The man snickers, then turns to leave. The thing around your neck fused with your skin, choking you no matter where you turned. It was now permanent.

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You hold your mother's hand and she smiled in response. You've seen so many pretend smiles that made you gag and cringe. But your mother's smile was genuine, tired but real. She looks down at the only black dress she owns and picks off the fluff. You know that mother wants you to stay, that she needs you to stay. But you can't and you both know it.

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Night falls and you slip out of the confined room that your cousins and siblings slept in, careful not to wake them. The crooked wooden table that stood helpless in the main room was bare as you gently placed a long brown envelope that enclosed most of your earnings you were saving for a trip to America, hoping to bring along your mother and family. You were leaving and you didn't know when you were coming back. You grasp the thing around your neck and pull at it, desperate for its release. It lifts and you breathe out. You're not restricted anymore, you thought. You choose to accept the bitter reality in which you were raised in, deprived of the American dream. Nevertheless, you choose to be free.

