Purple Hibiscus

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Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère. We had just returned from church. Mama placed the fresh palm fronds, which were wet with holy water, on the dining table and then went upstairs to change. Later, she would knot the palm fronds into sagging cross shapes and hang them on the wall beside our gold-framed family photo. They would stay there until next Ash Wednesday, when we would take the fronds to church, to have them burned for ash. Papa, wearing a long, gray robe like the rest of the oblates, helped distribute ash every year. His line moved the slowest because he pressed hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross with his ash-covered thumb and slowly, meaningfully enunciated every word of "dust and unto dust you shall return."

Papa always sat in the front pew for Mass, at the end beside the middle aisle, with Mama, Jaja, and me sitting next to him. He was first to receive communion. Most people did not kneel to receive communion at the marble altar, with the blond life-size Virgin Mary mounted nearby, but Papa did. He would hold his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace, and then he would stick his tongue out as far as it could go. Afterward, he sat back on his seat and watched the rest of the congregation troop to the altar, palms pressed together and extended, like a saucer held sideways, just as Father Benedict had taught them to do. Even though Father Benedict had been at St. Agnes for seven years, people still referred to him as "our new priest." Perhaps they would not have if he had not been white. He still looked new. The colors of his face, the colors of condensed milk and a cut-open soursop, had not tanned at all in the fierce heat of seven Nigerian harmattans. And his British nose was still as pinched and as narrow as it always was, the same nose that had had me worried that he did not get enough air when he first came to Enugu. Father Benedict had changed things in the parish, such as insisting that the Credo and kyrie be recited only in Latin; Igbo was not acceptable. Also, hand clapping was to be kept at a minimum, lest the solemnity of Mass be compromised. But he allowed offertory songs in Igbo; he called them native songs, and when he said "native" his straight-line lips turned down at the corners to form an inverted U. During his sermons, Father Benedict usually referred to the pope, Papa, and Jesus—in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the gospels. "When we let our light shine before men, we are reflecting Christ's Triumphant Entry," he said that Palm Sunday. "Look at Brother Eugene. He

could have chosen to be like other Big Men in this country, he could have decided to sit at home and do nothing after the coup, to make sure the government did not threaten his businesses. But no, he used the *Standard* to speak the truth even though it meant the paper lost advertising. Brother Eugene spoke out for freedom. How many of us have stood up for the truth? How many of us have reflected the Triumphant Entry?"

The congregation said "Yes" or "God bless him" or "Amen," but not too loudly so they would not sound like the mushroom Pentecostal churches; then they listened intently, quietly. Even the babies stopped crying, as if they, too, were listening. On some Sundays, the congregation listened closely even when Father Benedict talked about things everybody already knew, about Papa making the biggest donations to Peter's pence and St. Vincent de Paul. Or about Papa paying for the cartons of communion wine, for the new ovens at the convent where the Reverend Sisters baked the host, for the new wing to St. Agnes Hospital where Father Benedict gave extreme unction. And I would sit with my knees pressed together, next to Jaja, trying hard to keep my face blank, to keep the pride from showing, because Papa said modesty was very important.

Papa himself would have a blank face when I looked at him, the kind of expression he had in the photo when they did the big story on him after *Amnesty World* gave him a human rights award. It was the only time he allowed himself to be featured in the paper. His editor, Ade Coker, had insisted on it, saying Papa deserved it, saying Papa was too modest. Mama told me and Jaja; Papa did not tell us such things. That blank look would remain on his face until Father Benedict ended the sermon, until it was time for communion. After Papa took communion,

he sat back and watched the congregation walk to the altar and, after Mass, reported to Father Benedict, with concern, when a person missed communion on two successive Sundays. He always encouraged Father Benedict to call and win that person back into the fold; nothing but mortal sin would keep a person away from communion two Sundays in a row.

So when Papa did not see Jaja go to the altar that Palm Sunday when everything changed, he banged his leatherbound missal, with the red and green ribbons peeking out, down on the dining table when we got home. The table was glass, heavy glass. It shook, as did the palm fronds on it.

"Jaja, you did not go to communion," Papa said quietly, almost a question.

Jaja stared at the missal on the table as though he were addressing it. "The wafer gives me bad breath."

I stared at Jaja. Had something come loose in his head? Papa insisted we call it the host because "host" came close to capturing the essence, the sacredness, of Christ's body. "Wafer" was too secular, wafer was what one of Papa's factories made —chocolate wafer, banana wafer, what people bought their children to give them a treat better than biscuits.

"And the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me," Jaja said. He knew I was looking at him, that my shocked eyes begged him to seal his mouth, but he did not look at me.

"It is the body of our Lord." Papa's voice was low, very low. His face looked swollen already, with pus-tipped rashes spread across every inch, but it seemed to be swelling even more. "You cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that."

"Then I will die." Fear had darkened Jaja's eyes to the color

of coal tar, but he looked Papa in the face now. "Then I will die, Papa."

Papa looked around the room quickly, as if searching for proof that something had fallen from the high ceiling, something he had never thought would fall. He picked up the missal and flung it across the room, toward Jaja. It missed Jaja completely, but it hit the glass étagerè, which Mama polished often. It cracked the top shelf, swept the beige, finger-size ceramic figurines of ballet dancers in various contorted postures to the hard floor and then landed after them. Or rather it landed on their many pieces. It lay there, a huge leatherbound missal that contained the readings for all three cycles of the church year.

Jaja did not move. Papa swayed from side to side. I stood at the door, watching them. The ceiling fan spun round and round, and the light bulbs attached to it clinked against one another. Then Mama came in, her rubber slippers making *slap-slap* sounds on the marble floor. She had changed from her sequined Sunday wrapper and the blouse with puffy sleeves. Now she had a plain tie-dye wrapper tied loosely around her waist and that white T-shirt she wore every other day. It was a souvenir from a spiritual retreat she and Papa had attended; the words GOD IS LOVE crawled over her sagging breasts. She stared at the figurine pieces on the floor and then knelt and started to pick them up with her bare hands.

The silence was broken only by the whir of the ceiling fan as it sliced through the still air. Although our spacious dining room gave way to an even wider living room, I felt suffocated. The off-white walls with the framed photos of Grandfather were narrowing, bearing down on me. Even the glass dining table was moving toward me.

"*Nne*, *ngwa.* Go and change," Mama said to me, startling me although her Igbo words were low and calming. In the same breath, without pausing, she said to Papa, "Your tea is getting cold," and to Jaja, "Come and help me, *biko.*"

Papa sat down at the table and poured his tea from the china tea set with pink flowers on the edges. I waited for him to ask Jaja and me to take a sip, as he always did. A love sip, he called it, because you shared the little things you loved with the people you loved. Have a love sip, he would say, and Jaja would go first. Then I would hold the cup with both hands and raise it to my lips. One sip. The tea was always too hot, always burned my tongue, and if lunch was something peppery, my raw tongue suffered. But it didn't matter, because I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa's love into me. But Papa didn't say, "Have a love sip"; he didn't say anything as I watched him raise the cup to his lips.

Jaja knelt beside Mama, flattened the church bulletin he held into a dustpan, and placed a jagged ceramic piece on it. "Careful, Mama, or those pieces will cut your fingers," he said.

I pulled at one of the cornrows underneath my black church scarf to make sure I was not dreaming. Why were they acting so normal, Jaja and Mama, as if they did not know what had just happened? And why was Papa drinking his tea quietly, as if Jaja had not just talked back to him? Slowly, I turned and headed upstairs to change out of my red Sunday dress.

I sat at my bedroom window after I changed; the cashew tree was so close I could reach out and pluck a leaf if it were not for the silver-colored crisscross of mosquito netting. The bell-shaped yellow fruits hung lazily, drawing buzzing bees that bumped against my window's netting. I heard Papa walk

upstairs to his room for his afternoon siesta. I closed my eyes, sat still, waiting to hear him call Jaja, to hear Jaja go into his room. But after long, silent minutes, I opened my eyes and pressed my forehead against the window louvers to look outside. Our yard was wide enough to hold a hundred people dancing atilogu, spacious enough for each dancer to do the usual somersaults and land on the next dancer's shoulders. The compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires, were so high I could not see the cars driving by on our street. It was early rainy season, and the frangipani trees planted next to the walls already filled the yard with the sickly-sweet scent of their flowers. A row of purple bougainvillea, cut smooth and straight as a buffet table, separated the gnarled trees from the driveway. Closer to the house, vibrant bushes of hibiscus reached out and touched one another as if they were exchanging their petals. The purple plants had started to push out sleepy buds, but most of the flowers were still on the red ones. They seemed to bloom so fast, those red hibiscuses, considering how often Mama cut them to decorate the church altar and how often visitors plucked them as they walked past to their parked cars.

It was mostly Mama's prayer group members who plucked flowers; a woman tucked one behind her ear once—I saw her clearly from my window. But even the government agents, two men in black jackets who came some time ago, yanked at the hibiscus as they left. They came in a pickup truck with Federal Government plates and parked close to the hibiscus bushes. They didn't stay long. Later, Jaja said they came to bribe Papa, that he had heard them say that their pickup was full of dollars. I was not sure Jaja had heard correctly. But even now I

thought about it sometimes. I imagined the truck full of stacks and stacks of foreign money, wondered if they had put the money in many cartons or in one huge carton, the size our fridge came in.

I was still at the window when Mama came into my room. Every Sunday before lunch, in between telling Sisi to put a little more palm oil in the soup, a little less curry in the coconut rice, and while Papa took his siesta, Mama plaited my hair. She would sit on an armchair near the kitchen door and I on the floor with my head cradled between her thighs. Although the kitchen was airy, with the windows always open, my hair would still manage to absorb the spices, and afterward, when I brought the end of a braid to my nose, I would smell egusi soup, utazi, curry. But Mama did not come into my room with the bag that held combs and hair oils and ask me to come downstairs. Instead, she said, "Lunch is ready, *nne.*"

I meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, "I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama."

She nodded quickly, then shook her head to show that the figurines did not matter. They did, though. Years ago, before I understood, I used to wonder why she polished them each time I heard the sounds from their room, like something being banged against the door. Her rubber slippers never made a sound on the stairs, but I knew she went downstairs when I heard the dining room door open. I would go down to see her standing by the étagère with a kitchen towel soaked in soapy water. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face. The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the

black-purple color of an overripe avocado, she had rearranged them after she polished them.

"I will plait your hair after lunch," she said, turning to leave.

"Yes, Mama."

I followed her downstairs. She limped slightly, as though one leg were shorter than the other, a gait that made her seem even smaller than she was. The stairs curved elegantly in an S shape, and I was halfway down when I saw Jaja standing in the hallway. Usually he went to his room to read before lunch, but he had not come upstairs today; he had been in the kitchen the whole time, with Mama and Sisi.

"Ke kwanu?" I asked, although I did not need to ask how he was doing. I had only to look at him. His seventeen-year-old face had grown lines; they zigzagged across his forehead, and inside each line a dark tension had crawled in. I reached out and clasped his hand shortly before we went into the dining room. Papa and Mama were already seated, and Papa was washing his hands in the bowl of water Sisi held before him. He waited until Jaja and I sat down opposite him, and started the grace. For twenty minutes he asked God to bless the food. Afterward, he intoned the Blessed Virgin in several different titles while we responded, "Pray for us." His favorite title was Our Lady, Shield of the Nigerian People. He had made it up himself. If only people would use it every day, he told us, Nigeria would not totter like a Big Man with the spindly legs of a child.

Lunch was fufu and onugbu soup. The fufu was smooth and fluffy. Sisi made it well; she pounded the yam energetically, adding drops of water into the mortar, her cheeks contracting with the *thump-thump-thump* of the pestle. The soup was

thick with chunks of boiled beef and dried fish and dark green onugbu leaves. We ate silently. I molded my fufu into small balls with my fingers, dipped it in the soup, making sure to scoop up fish chunks, and then brought it to my mouth. I was certain the soup was good, but I did not taste it, could not taste it. My tongue felt like paper.

"Pass the salt, please," Papa said.

We all reached for the salt at the same time. Jaja and I touched the crystal shaker, my finger brushed his gently, then he let go. I passed it to Papa. The silence stretched out even longer.

"They brought the cashew juice this afternoon. It tastes good. I am sure it will sell," Mama finally said.

"Ask that girl to bring it," Papa said.

Mama pressed the ringer that dangled above the table on a transparent wire from the ceiling, and Sisi appeared.

"Yes, Madam?"

"Bring two bottles of the drink they brought from the factory."

"Yes, Madam."

I wished Sisi had said "What bottles, Madam?" or "Where are they, Madam?" Just something to keep her and Mama talking, to veil the nervous movements of Jaja molding his fufu. Sisi was back shortly and placed the bottles next to Papa. They had the same faded-looking labels as every other thing Papa's factories made—the wafers and cream biscuits and bottled juice and banana chips. Papa poured the yellow juice for everyone. I reached out quickly for my glass and took a sip. It tasted watery. I wanted to seem eager; maybe if I talked about how good it tasted, Papa might forget that he had not yet punished Jaja.

"It's very good, Papa," I said.

Papa swirled it around his bulging cheeks. "Yes, yes."

"It tastes like fresh cashew," Mama said.

Say something, please, I wanted to say to Jaja. He was supposed to say something now, to contribute, to compliment Papa's new product. We always did, each time an employee from one of his factories brought a product sample for us.

"Just like white wine," Mama added. She was nervous, I could tell—not just because a fresh cashew tasted nothing like white wine but also because her voice was lower than usual. "White wine," Mama said again, closing her eyes to better savor the taste. "Fruity white wine."

"Yes," I said. A ball of fufu slipped from my fingers and into the soup.

Papa was staring pointedly at Jaja. "Jaja, have you not shared a drink with us, *gbo*? Have you no words in your mouth?" he asked, entirely in Igbo. A bad sign. He hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English. Papa's sister, Aunty Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product. She had said this about Papa in a mild, forgiving way, as if it were not Papa's fault, as one would talk about a person who was shouting gibberish from a severe case of malaria.

"Have you nothing to say, *gbo*, Jaja?" Papa asked again.

"*Mba*, there are no words in my mouth," Jaja replied.

"What?" There was a shadow clouding Papa's eyes, a shadow that had been in Jaja's eyes. Fear. It had left Jaja's eyes and entered Papa's.

"I have nothing to say," Jaja said.

"The juice is good —" Mama started to say.

Jaja pushed his chair back. "Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Papa. Thank you, Mama."

I turned to stare at him. At least he was saying thanks the right way, the way we always did after a meal. But he was also doing what we never did: he was leaving the table before Papa had said the prayer after meals.

"Jaja!" Papa said. The shadow grew, enveloping the whites of Papa's eyes. Jaja was walking out of the dining room with his plate. Papa made to get up and then slumped back on his seat. His cheeks drooped, bulldoglike.

I reached for my glass and stared at the juice, watery yellow, like urine. I poured all of it down my throat, in one gulp. I didn't know what else to do. This had never happened before in my entire life, never. The compound walls would crumble, I was sure, and squash the frangipani trees. The sky would cave in. The Persian rugs on the stretches of gleaming marble floor would shrink. Something would happen. But the only thing that happened was my choking. My body shook from the coughing. Papa and Mama rushed over. Papa thumped my back while Mama rubbed my shoulders and said, *"O zugo*. Stop coughing."

That evening, I stayed in bed and did not have dinner with the family. I developed a cough, and my cheeks burned the back of my hand. Inside my head, thousands of monsters played a painful game of catch, but instead of a ball, it was a brown leatherbound missal that they threw to each other. Papa came into my room; my mattress sank in when he sat and smoothed my cheeks and asked if I wanted anything

else. Mama was already making me ofe nsala. I said no, and we sat silently, our hands clasped for a long time. Papa's breathing was always noisy, but now he panted as if he were out of breath, and I wondered what he was thinking, if perhaps he was running in his mind, running away from something. I did not look at his face because I did not want to see the rashes that spread across every inch of it, so many, so evenly spread that they made his skin look bloated.

Mama brought some ofe nsala up for me a little later, but the aromatic soup only made me nauseated. After I vomited in the bathroom, I asked Mama where Jaja was. He had not come in to see me since after lunch.

"In his room. He did not come down for dinner." She was caressing my cornrows; she liked to do that, to trace the way strands of hair from different parts of my scalp meshed and held together. She would keep off plaiting it until next week. My hair was too thick; it always tightened back into a dense bunch right after she ran a comb through it. Trying to comb it now would enrage the monsters already in my head.

"Will you replace the figurines?" I asked. I could smell the chalky deodorant under her arms. Her brown face, flawless but for the recent jagged scar on her forehead, was expressionless.

"*Kpa*," she said. "I will not replace them."

Maybe Mama had realized that she would not need the figurines anymore; that when Papa threw the missal at Jaja, it was not just the figurines that came tumbling down, it was everything. I was only now realizing it, only just letting myself think it.

I lay in bed after Mama left and let my mind rake through

the past, through the years when Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips. Until Nsukka. Nsukka started it all; Aunty Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do.

But my memories did not start at Nsukka. They started before, when all the hibiscuses in our front yard were a startling red.