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The house lay so still and quiet, as if it were filled with cotton wool. In the kitchen, his aunt's dinner preparations were not accompanied by her usual tuneless humming. Even the clack of her knife on the chopping board seemed subdued. His father, in one of the other rooms, was busy as ever marking school papers. Taking refuge in his bedroom, Adebayo leafed through a battered copy of *Treasure Island*; the abridged version for young readers.

Someone tapped at the front door. Adebayo heard his father showing in the visitor. He jumped from his bed, ran towards the stairs and then hesitated at the top. If he took them in his usual fashion—two at a time—this would draw a rebuke from his father or his aunt. With great effort, he walked down slowly, like an adult. When he heard voices coming from the hall, he stopped again, hoping to overhear some uncensored conversation between his father and the unknown caller. He knew that if they became aware of him some subtle telepathy, possessed only by older people, would lead them to filter out information deemed unsuitable for him.

'Thank you for coming to see her, Reverend.'

'Not at all, Mister Oshodi. I only hope I can be of some help in your present troubles.'

Adebayo smiled when he recognised Reverend Akinole's voice, its kindly qualities shining through the formalities. The sadness in his father's tone was still there.

'Since our little Bandele...was taken...since then she refuses to eat. She sits in the same chair holding onto one of his toys. A cup of water a day is all she will take. The doctor says that if it continues she will have to be hospitalised, otherwise...'

Adebayo did not want the doctor to hospitalise his mother. When someone was 'hospitalised' they came home dead.

The last time he saw the Reverend was at Bandele's funeral service, nearly two weeks ago, where he made a long speech about his brother. He must be a very clever man, Adebayo concluded, for knowing so much about Bandele after only seeing him a few times. He understood all of the individual elements associated with the death: the mosquitoes, the malaria and the final fever in the hospital. However hard he tried, he could not make the direct connection between these recent events and the tiny white coffin in the church. It seemed too small, too

ordinary to contain everything there was of his brother. During the service, he'd wondered if all Bandele's toys were in there with him, or if some might be left behind. Not the fluffy animals and the rattles—these were beneath his seven-year-old dignity—but there were some things, such as the football, which he did covet. He'd wondered also if Bandele would always be two years old, or if people continued to age in heaven. From what he knew of heaven, it must be the latter. There would still be birthdays, surely?

All around him, the adults had wept and, because tears are infectious, so had he.

The Reverend stepped into the hall and his father showed him to the darkened room. Adebayo had not set foot in there throughout his mother's confinement. Once or twice, he'd glimpsed her through the open door, sitting in the chair, her eyes glassy and vacant. She clutched Bandele's toy dog—its fur still matted with his sweat—and stroked it with disturbing intensity. Whenever he went near the threshold of this room, his aunt, who was usually so kind, became harsh with him. Soon, he learned to stay away out of choice. Since no one who went into the room ever emerged smiling, he reasoned, his mother must be elsewhere. The mother who he remembered giggled at the pomposity of other adults and chased Bandele and him around the house until they cried with laughter.

Adebayo sidled up to his father, who stood in the doorway still talking to the Reverend, and clung onto his arm.

'I will need to be alone with your wife for some time. It is very important that we are not disturbed.'

'Of course...I understand...thank you.'

The wizened little man stood barring their way, tugging at his dog collar. For once, he did not smile at Adebayo, but looked straight through him in a way that made the boy edge closer in to his father's elbow.

'You may want to keep the little one away from this part of the house until...until I am done.'

'Adebayo, go up to your room, please.'

'But, Papa.'

His father gave him the schoolroom look, the one he used sometimes to silence an entire unruly class. Dragging his feet on every step, Adebayo plodded

back up the stairs. When he was out of sight, he marked time on the same step, estimating the number of paces back to his room. After he'd counted them out, he stopped and waited, barely breathing, wondering if his little subterfuge had worked.

When he heard the door close behind the Reverend and his father's footsteps leaving the hall, he crept back down the stairs and over to his mother's room. A subdued, yellow light played in the gap between door and frame. He pressed his nose against the wood and squinted.

Inside, several candles burned on a low table. They emphasised the shocking changes in the contours of his mother's face, transforming her sunken eye sockets into wells of shadow. The Reverend prayed, standing in front of her with arms outstretched like the prophets in Adebayo's Picture Bible. With startling violence, he tore off his dog collar, stooped and whispered into the stricken woman's ear.

At first, she was unresponsive, blank, as for so long now. Half an hour passed and still the Reverend stuck to his task. Then Adebayo noticed his mother's expression change. A frown replaced her blank look, as though she was concentrating hard to understand what the Reverend said. Adebayo craned, trying to make out the words, but all he heard was a low murmur, lacking any distinct form.

The Reverend continued his work. Adebayo's legs ached from crouching in the same position for so long. He wanted to give up and run out in the yard, but his curiosity kept him there.

Without warning, his mother shrieked, 'Give me something to eat! I must have some food!' Then she leapt from her chair and devoured the hot wax from the end of one of the candles, oblivious to the pain.

When Adebayo heard his mother's voice for the first time in so long, he wept, wondering why that should be, if he was so happy. He became aware of someone standing next to him and looked up, through a blur of tears, at his father. It shocked the boy to see—for only the second time that he could ever recall—his father crying, too. His face buried in his hands, the bulky, man's body shuddered, great forces unleashed within it.

Reverend Akinole opened the door and wandered across the hall. He slumped into a chair, utterly spent. He looked a full ten years older than when he'd

entered the room. With a hand gesture, he invited them to see the results of his work.

From that day, Adebayo noticed a permanent change in his father's appearance. Two deep lines, like parallel plough tracks, were etched into his forehead. They never smoothed out, even when he slept. Adebayo often wondered what had passed between the Reverend and his mother, and what influences he used to bring her back.