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Prologue

It was few minutes to midnight, with grave silence sneaking through the often ignored and somewhat complex fabrics of emptiness, leaping boundlessly into obscurity.

The faint *tick-tick* of Segun's one hundred and sixty gram heavy, gold Rolex Tudor Heritage wristwatch echoed like sweet soul music through a vast distance of nothing. The familiar white noise blazing from the garden beyond the walls of his *Banana-Island* mansion persisted throughout the night, and this drove Sasha, Segun's rare Dalmatian, crazy.

Of course, Segun wasn't left out of the late night party of crazies. He couldn't concentrate either,

even after downing five cups of hot Mexican coffee in order to stay up through the night and study for tomorrow's marriage-counselling test.

He was getting married to Amina, a girl he hadn't locked eyes on yet. *I know what you're thinking and yes, you're right—It was an arranged marriage.* Segun's father controlled *Adeleke Cement*, the largest cement factory in Sub-Sahara Africa, and Amina's father held the largest stake in *RefineOil*, the largest oil refinery in the continent. The marriage of the children was a way to foster the continuous growth of both conglomerates.

Segun wasn't a huge fan of arranged marriages or *Mallam Hassan*, his Imam. *Why grow your beards so thick and bushy?* he would think to himself each time he glared at the middle-aged figure of holiness. Earlier, his father had gifted him with what looked like a 'titanic pile of gibberish' to him, which he christened 'the answers to your tomorrow's test'. Every one of his four siblings, and six half-siblings, had been equally tested, and they all managed to scale through, and are now married at first sight to the child of some *Forbes'* billionaire.

'I best not fail this test,' he sighed heavily.

Edgily seated before a busy desk, Segun couldn't think of anything but role-playing video games and wild partying till dawn. It was a Friday night, and the only thing that kept him from an unholy celebration with like-minded friends was 'this stupid marriage-counselling test he'd to study for', else, he should be stamping his custom-made *Nike* sneakers to the deafening *Reggae* music blaring from the Dee-jay's five foot tall loudspeakers, clutching the

big ass of a loose girl with one hand, with his other hand holding a half-downed red cup of mixed alcohol contaminated with pure Jamaican *Indian hemp*, surrounded by cheering drunks he hadn't seen before, and sweating profusely on his day-old tee-shirt with an inscription that read, *'Live Your Life'*. That was how Segun spent his Friday nights for the past decade after graduating from *British International Secondary School* at sixteen. He'd refused to attend a university, even after acing his SATs and TOEFL, and gaining admission three times into the prestigious *Ivy League* Harvard Business School.

Across Segun's desk was a white laptop streaming a full-length *HD* pornographic film off *Pornhub*. The faked erotic noises were blocked out from the rest of the innocent world, and plugged deep into his violated ears by a twenty-four thousand naira *Beats By Dre* headphone, bought with his father's *American Express* credit card, of course. The key to his 2017 Range Rover, a bar of *Snickers* chocolate, and a broken grain of *Burger* peanut defaced the keyboard of his *MacBook Pro Retina*. A neat stack of lengthy graphic novels wasn't left out of the scene. A rare and expensive issue of *Amazing Spiderman* was flicked open beside his sinning laptop, with a broad inset of Spiderman's alter ego *Peter Parker*, kissing the beautiful Mary Jane Watson for the first time.

Realistic miniature models of famous superheroes stood tall, in line, on his desk.

Spiderman

Superman

Batman

Iron-man

Aqua man

Plastic man

Hawk man

Animal man

And any other ‘man’ superhero you’ve possibly heard of.

He had them.

He had them all.

A green ceramic cup of colorful *HB* pencils, a broken pack of chewing gum, a stripped and signed copy of the first edition of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, a half-filled Pepsi can with a straw tucked in it, a green miniature model of the 1957 *Chevrolet Impala*, a tall stack of *PlayStation 4* compact discs, a variety of valid premium credit cards with his father’s name engraved in all, a tray of smoked *White London* cigarettes, a stick of cheap candy, a postcard from his rogue writer brother, Lanre, experiencing first-hand love with his skinny French model girlfriend, *Adreanna*, in the beautiful city of *Nice*, and a perfect mini-library of untouched texts on Islam, defaced the top of his desk, and were beautifully lit by a table lamp mounted by the edge of the desk.

For a twenty-six year old man, he was way too immature and completely unfocused.

Quickly he flipped the *Spidey* issue close, and flung it against his classic collection of superhero models.

Spiderman was struck down.

He tapped the ‘spacebar’ key on his laptop.

It was time to get ready for tomorrow’s test, and he was putting away every form of distraction.

‘Time to get serious,’ he took a long shot at being part

of the real world. The headphone, Pepsi can, and broken pack of *Orbit* chewing gum were casted to a neglected corner of the desk as he wiped a large portion of the desk clear with his right hand. He slammed with a bang, the 'pile of gibberish' titled 'Marriage, the Islam Way', an empty jotter from his older sister's wedding at *Saudi Arabia*, a hot cup of rich black coffee, and a broken bar of white eraser, on the cleared portion of the desk. With the white noise from the garden still buzzing in persistently, he shoved himself forward, closer to the desk for some serious '*jacking*', like he fondly called it in secondary school. He flicked the text's cover open, hunched over, and began to read aloud with a deep crooked voice that sounded almost serious, tracing through the printed words on the text with a green HB pencil.

It was obvious that green was his favorite color. Even his Range Rover was Army green in color.

'Both the groom and the bride are to consent to the marriage of their own free wills. A formal, binding contract is considered integral to a religiously valid Islamic marriage, and outlines the rights and responsibilities of the groom and bride. There must be two Muslim witnesses of the marriage contract,' Segun read out with a growing frown. The words 'free wills' failed to make any sense to him.

This was by far nothing like free will.

Staying up all night, forcefully reading a boring lengthy text for a test tomorrow, in order to get married to a complete stranger, didn't, in any way, or any form, fit into the simplest meaning of the words 'free will'. To be certain he wasn't wrong, he

flicked his laptop open again, maximized his *Chrome* window, and googled up the words ‘free will’ for himself.

Free will (noun)

The power of acting without the constraint of necessity or fate; the ability to act at one's own discretion.

Synonyms: *volition, independence, self-determination, self-sufficiency, autonomy, spontaneity.*

Antonyms: *under duress.*

‘Under duress’—that was exactly how he felt, so this certainly wasn’t ‘Marriage, the Islam Way’, but ‘Marriage, my father’s way!’ he revolted within himself.

‘Bullocks!’

He stroked his hair with the butt of his pencil.

‘I can’t believe I’m even doing this!’

He shook his head twice and dropped it, still seated upright. ‘You need to stay focused, mehn! Pass this test, get married and inherit a cool billion naira, that’s the goal, and that’s what this is all about, nothing more, nothing less.’ He raised his head up again, and stared hard at the wall before him. His eyes wandered across the wall defaced with stripped *Playboy* magazine pages of *Pamela Anderson*, *Sarah McDaniel*, *Camille Rowe*, and *Eugena Washington*, and then across the desk, freezing on the Spidey issue. He tried to avert his gaze, but his effort was futile. *If I’m not going to study tonight, at least I shouldn’t spend the night watching half-naked models or reading graphic novels*, he cautioned himself.

The familiar *Skype* ringtone streamed from his laptop's speakers into his ears.

It was Rasheed calling!

He grinned at the name on the screen.

Hurriedly, he sat up and tapped the 'Enter' key almost immediately.

'You're a lifesaver, mehn! You called at the right time. Al-ḥamdu lillāh!'

'Is your old man troubling you again?'

'It's enough nightmare that I'm getting married in order to claim my inheritance, and all my nights of drinking parties are over, but he's making me study for a marriage-counselling test taking place tomorrow at the Central mosque! What is that all about?!'

'Yeah, that's true. Everybody takes it. It is tradition.'

'I'm not everybody! I'm Segun! In a few weeks, I'll be a billionaire. Someone should better write that test for me.'

'Anyway, I called so we could play 'Call of Duty' together. I heard the city of Lagos is insane in that game, but it seems like you have your hands full. Maybe some other time.'

'Connect your console to the Internet, mate. Let's do this!'

'Right away!'

And that was it—study was over for Segun, before it even began.

Immediately, he slapped his MacBook close with a smirk, stared hard for a bit, at the beautiful French ceiling suspended above him, then shoved his chair backwards. Excitedly, he rose to his feet, spun around with a reckless swing, leaped high into the

frozen air, and freefell on his seven foot wide water bed with a scream of self-satisfaction.

His bed was an eyesore.

Samantha King's *Born to Love, Cursed to Feel* was buried under his *SpongeBob* duvet, flicked open, and page down. That was exactly how he felt—willing to love, but no one to feel it with—heart wide open to love, but shut down whenever he tried to reach for it.

He was on a blue *Star Wars*' socks that terminated few inches below his knees, a sky-blue underpants that exposed his skinny hairy thighs, and a disgustingly simple grey tee-shirt, much like those of billionaire *Mark Zuckerberg*, and he also had a dozen of those—same color. Sealed envelopes of elite party invitation were littered all over his white bedsheet, including his *Levi* sleeveless jean jacket, more graphic novels, a Rose-gold iPhone 7, a sealed jar of *TomTom* mint candy, a green bandana, a red British travel passport, and remote controls to his fifty-four inch wide television, home theatre and air-conditioner.

All *Samsung* electronics.

Yes, Segun was born in East London, like the rest of his siblings, but he lacked a fancy British accent because he returned to Nigeria shortly afterwards with his mother and had refused to return to England ever since.

Seated on a jade-colored seven-foot long couch by his seventy-two inch wide window, with muffled crackling sounds of dry leaves whooshing through the air as he surfed through *Cheki* for the latest automobile to add to his twenty-car capacity garage—that was a typical boring night for Segun.

Fierce-looking and heavily-built bodyguards stood ten foot apart and around the mansion to ensure Segun didn't sneak out late at night to one of his infamous Island club parties. As a result, he would revert to flipping through comic books he'd read before, or taking bedroom photographs with his twenty-two thousand dollar *Leica* 10803 camera, which he posted to his *Tumblr* photo-blog.

He had considered a degree in Photography, but his billionaire father had always wanted a Harvard Business School graduate instead, so Segun discarded college completely. He didn't want to be part of the booming family business. *It just isn't me*, he would think to himself.

His wallboard was completely defaced with pinned photographs of his last trip to *The Bahamas*. It was an insane adventure—one he would love to experience again. His refrigerator was always stuck with junk foods. He would spend the night watching movie adaptations of his favorite comic books, body frozen, breath held, eyes glued on the television screen, and mouth munching a delicious *Skippy* peanut butter sandwich.

It was 5am already, and Rasheed had already gone to bed, so Segun decided to study again. He boorishly paced through his half-black bedroom, towards his study desk. He sank into the chair exhaustedly, sipped his coffee, flicked the text open again, and dropped on the desk, fast asleep.

I know what you're thinking.

Keep it to yourself.



Fast forward five hours later.

10am.

Segun was still fast asleep!

A familiar bang dropped on his door nicely made of mahogany, but he failed to rise up on his feet. ‘Open the door, Segun! Son, you’ll be late for your test, open the door now! What are you doing in there?’

Segun rubbed his eyes open, still half-asleep.

‘Open the door! You’ll be late for your test.

It’s ten in the morning already!’

It was the familiar voice and banging of his mother that struck him awake and back to his senses.

Hurriedly, he picked his Rolex, and glared at its face. *It was 10:05am!*

Segun’s face morphed into disappointment.

He shoved the chair backwards, dashed for the door, turned the key in the locks speedily, gripped the doorknob firmly, and swung the door open. There his mother stood by the doorway with his breakfast.

‘Mom?’

‘Yes it’s me. Your eyes are red. Are you still asleep?’

‘Mom! Why didn’t you wake me up sooner? Now, I’ll definitely be late for this stupid test, and father will start his famous whining.’

‘I didn’t want to disturb your studying. And it’s not a stupid test. You better ask Allah for his forgiveness. And I thought you’d be up by now. Did you study at all? Don’t forget what you get if you pass.’

Segun abandoned his mother at the doorway, spun around and marched back into his room. His eyes circled for his jean trouser pant, which laid on

the bed, next to his Levi. He quickly slipped into the *Wrangler*, pulled out his green *Timbaland* boots from underneath his bed, and jumped into them.

‘Aren’t you going to have breakfast before you leave? At least put on something better than these rags you have on. Remember you’re going to the mosque. It’s a holy place and you need to look good for Allah,’ his mother pleaded with a squint, but Segun snatched his black *Vaschy* backpack from the closet and breezed away without uttering a single word. ‘Best of luck, darling!’ His mother stood frozen until his footsteps were heard no more.

2



The Marriage-Counselling Test

Tensed moments for Segun in a hall-like examination room as he stared at the exit—hard and long.

He expected or dreamed of a tiny dusty room with just him before an old rotting desk, but rather, he was received with a neat room of some fifty-something examinees quietly seated in an orderly manner, in five rows, and desks well-spaced apart.

Memories from his WAEC examinations some ten years ago came flooding, floating and flowing into his head, and this sent cold and frightening quivers through and down his backbone.

The room, struck with grave silence, had this rattling sound of four wrecking ceiling fans blaring into his ears. He was dripping profusely in sweat, partly because the room was hot, and he was beyond nervous. He stared hard and ahead at the question paper that laid before his eyes, and then at his empty answer sheet to the right.

‘What a shame?’ He shook his head.

It was already thirty minutes into the one-hour-long test, and he hadn’t answered a single damn question, correctly or not. All fifty objective questions though printed in simple day-to-day English, seemed to Segun, to be inscribed in Hebrew or some foreign ancient language that had gone extinct for more than a century ago. He tapped his green HB pencil on the wooden desk before him, creating a sharp disturbing sound, as he panted uneasily. Mallam Hassan sat at a well-appointed desk in front of the entire class, next to a huge pile of backpacks and handbags, and each time Segun had a sneak peek at his roughly bearded face, it seemed like he was glaring right back at him with a squint.

This didn’t put Segun at ease.

The hall was properly-illuminated by the midday Sun streaming in from the West, casting beautiful shadows of everyone to the East. The warm floor was nicely decorated with a lovely pattern of the moon and stars, but Segun had a different opinion of it. In fact, he had a different and contrasting opinion of everything and everyone contained within the room. Planted on the walls were regular light switches and old-fashion announcement speakers. His eyes roamed across the hall that swallowed him much like

a black hole, and froze at a small chalkboard next to Mallam Hassan. Silently, he read through Mallam Hassan's dreadful handwriting on the board.

Marriage-Counselling Test

Batch: 2

Duration: 1 Hour

Start: 11:00am

Stop: 12:00pm

Venue: Central Mosque, Eti-Osa

Supervisor: Mallam Hassan Kadiri

May Almighty Allah help those who studied'

Segun found the last phrase particularly offensive—because ‘offended’—that’s how he felt. He glared at his Rolex, it was 11:36am already. His eyes quickly reverted to the exit that lead to the stairs. He left like getting up, marching over to Mallam Hassan, hand in his empty answer sheet, and dash off to anywhere with some little level of sanity. Everybody hunched over, cautiously reading questions and brilliantly shading their answers, except Segun who had one leg strayed along the gangway.

His face was pale, void of any facial expression. His eyes were narrowed, willing to steal answers off other’s sheet. He hunched over, lifted the question paper for the first time, and decided to give it a fair shot. The paper was already filled with superhero sketches. *Now we know what he did with the last half-hour of his time.* He raised the question paper up to his face, blocking Mallam Hassan from getting any further pleasing picture of his terrified face.

Remember, I noted earlier that Segun wasn't a huge fan of Mallam Hassan—well, the feeling was mutual. Mallam Hassan hated Segun's guts. He thought he was a spoilt rich little brat who was nothing without his father's overwhelming identity in the society. Well, Segun didn't think any better of him. 'Was this test born out of a typewriter? Haven't they heard of a computer and printer? Seems like something photocopied from years ago. Cheapos!' he thought within himself as he flipped the question paper over. 'Fifty questions to be answered in an hour. That's seventy two seconds to give the correct answer to a single question. That's so unfair!' he rebelled within.

'Now that I've wasted half the entire time, I just have about thirty seconds for each question. That's not so bad at all. I was excellent at speed work in school. I will probably pass this one too,' he encouraged himself, but then he glanced at the questions again, and was stripped of all hope. 'I probably will fail this one. What am I going to do?' His eyes wandered across the hall and were locked on Mallam Hassan again who gave him a sharp glance of disapproval. He leaned back, and stared at the ceiling fan just above him. 'You are never going to amount to anything. You'll definitely fail this exam and also at life too. You don't take anything seriously, and failure is what you deserve,' he heard his father's voice in his head.

'Get out of my head!'

He shook his father's voice away.

'Don't listen to your father. When I married him, he was completely lost. I set him straight. Maybe

Amina will set you straight too. If you fail this test, don't worry, I will plead with Mallam Hassan to get you married anyway. I believe Amina will set you straight too,' his mother's calming voice replaced his father's.

It was a Saturday morning, and Segun always spent the weekend throwing wild pool parties at home. Last Saturday, he was seated by the pool with Rasheed and his girlfriend, Sade. 'Secondary school has been over for ten years now. I'm done with medical school. Sade is done with her MBA. Everybody at school are done with their university education, and are all working, doing well, and living alone, independent from their parents. Everybody, except you. Yes, your father is loaded and you drive the most fancy car on the Island, but you need to carve out an identity for yourself because right now it seems like you're buried under your father's shadow,' Rasheed advised.

'Look at your siblings, your sister Halima is a registered nurse at *Oman*. Your younger brother is a junior resident doctor at *Lagos University Teaching Hospital*. Your girlfriend in secondary school, *Vivian*, remember her? She is a dental surgeon in California. Everybody has forged a path for themselves, except you, and you were the brightest of us all. I expected greater things for you,' Sade took over. 'Rasheed and I are getting married. You're the first of our friends to know this. He asked me last night.' Sade flaunted her diamond engagement ring before Segun's eyes. In reaction, Segun laughed and urged them to be less serious and get drunk a little.

Later that day, they all drove around the Island, recklessly, with Rasheed and Segun taking turns on the wheel. Rasheed would turn his head around and stare at Sade every five minutes—even after dating for four years, he was clearly still in the love bubble. They all sipped chilled Pepsi, chitchatting with one another and laughing throughout the cruise. An *FC Barcelona* badge hanged from the reverse mirror between Segun and Rasheed. Segun had a signed *Barcelona* jersey of *Lionel Messi* that cost him a mountain. Neither Segun nor Rasheed had a seatbelt on. They stopped at a *Kentucky Fried Chicken* outlet at *Victoria Garden City*. There they sat on a round table, and had chicken, chips, cakes, chocolates, fruit juice, and more Pepsi. They continued their chitchats and laughter, often with others throwing them sharp gazes of disapproval.

The game-shop wasn't left out of the many stops. They played arcade video games and bought *FIFA 17*, *Far Cry*, *Medal of Honor*, *God of War*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Need for Speed*, and *Assassin's Creed* for PlayStation. Segun also purchased an *Xbox1* console for himself and Rasheed. They stopped at *Shoprite*, where Sade tried out new dresses, and Segun yanked out tee-shirts and jean trousers from the rail. Again, he paid with his father's *Discovery* credit card, and they all walked out with at least three plastic bags in their hands, in chitter chatter and laughter.

Later that night, they had a final stop at a Karaoke bar, where they had beer, champagne, and several shots of expensive liquor. They bounced all night long, stamping their feet and nodding their heads to the dancehall mix booming from the Dee-

jay's speakers. Eyes clamped shut, fists raised high in the air, singing along to Tinie Tempah's *Mamacita* hit, under the influence of liquor—they all danced till their feet hurt.

♪ *'Oh, mamacita*

Come, let's get more familiar

I like your style

I like your style

Oh, mamacita

Come, let's stay 'til mañana

I like your style

I like your style

We grew up learning things the hard way, close ties

You only make it if you grow free, don't die

Remember startin' up my own wave, won't lie

I used to bus it, baby, no train, no sky...' ♪

'Thanks for tonight. Though silly, I really enjoyed myself,' Rasheed whispered into Segun's ears with a tight, squeezing hug. They literally crawled out of the bar early in the morning, completely unaware of how last night was spent. This time, Sade took the wheels.

She was the only one sober enough to drive.

Again, Segun's Range Rover hugged the road, breezing through the morning Sun, with Segun's waist through the window, hands wide apart, eyes clinched shut, feeling the wind as they brushed his face in relief. Segun tried paying for roasted corn by the roadside with his father's card. It came as a surprise to him that the uneducated woman didn't accept it. 'You don't accept cards?' Segun asked. 'Money, give me money. Three hundred naira. Take this thing away

and give me my money,' she replied with a frown. Segun had no cash on him, so Rasheed had to pay this time. On the way home, he pulled out his *Leica* and took several photographs of Sade and Rasheed, which he pinned to his wallboard later in the day. They breezed through the blue atmosphere until Segun was home. Sade and Rasheed took a taxi home, while Segun flung his backpack on the couch, marched off his sneakers, slipped under his duvet, and slept the alcohol off.

Well, back to the test.

Segun's eyes wandered across every female face in the hall, guessing which Amina was. 'Amina!' he called out, to be certain for sure. Unfortunately, everyone in the room, man and woman, including Mallam Hassan, had their eyes locked on him. The final bell rang.

'Time up!' Mallam Hassan called out.

'Okay everyone, pencils down. Stop shading. Make sure your name and your exam number are shaded correctly. Come on! Come on! Submit your answer sheet.' He stood up and paced through the gangway, towards the examinees. Inaudible noises diffused throughout the room as the examinees whispered across the gangway to each other. Segun was the first to get up and hand over his answer sheet. 'Stay behind, Segun. I will like to have a word with you when everyone is gone,' Mallam Hassan held Segun's wrist firmly, stopping him dead in his tracks, and Segun was startled, losing his breath.

Few minutes after, the room was empty, and the pile of backpacks and handbags were gone as well. Segun stood tall before Mallam Hassan who was

seated at his desk glaring at Segun's empty answer sheet in shock. He was in his famous *Scooby Doo* tee-shirt, with an inscription '*Shaggy and Scooby. Best Friends Forever*' and he wore that shirt like forever.

'What?! You didn't study for the test, Segun?'

'Where is my wife to be? Shouldn't she be here like everyone else, writing the test too? Or were you paid to let someone else write it for her?'

'The first test was conducted from nine to ten, so she was here earlier, and she is done with hers. Such a brilliant young lady. I knew you couldn't make it for the first batch, so I fixed you in the second batch.

Look at you, I'm sure you woke up late and didn't have time to shower, because this was the same shirt and jean you wore yesterday. I saw you at the store yesterday in this same outfit. My question is, if you slept late last night, what did you do throughout the night if you didn't study for the test?'

'Are you keeping Amina away from me or what? Why do we have to write our tests separately? Couldn't she write hers in the second batch with me?'

'That's the custom, Segun. If you read the text your father gave you, you'll already know this. This shows you didn't open the book at all. You two, the husband and wife to be, are to first meet at the wedding.'

'The text I read yesterday said that I have to get married on my own free will. This doesn't feel like free will to me. I can't marry a complete stranger.

Arranged marriages are not the way of Allah. People should get married because they are in love with each other. You should be ashamed of yourself...' Segun stopped himself from venting any further but it was already too late. He'd delivered the final lecture, and

Mallam Hassan was more than provoked. 'Out of here, you miscreant! I will speak to your father about this. I pray that Almighty Allah forgives your ignorance.' Segun marched out from the hall without an afterthought, and was gone in a blink.

3



Breakfast Is Ready

It was dawn already, with glass buildings standing tall and birds soaring high. Trees swayed, vehicles honked, planes flew, ships sailed, pedestrians yelled, cocks crowed, dogs barked, babies cried, children laughed, bells rang, lights flashed, businesses ran, music played, as the yellow Sun rose and set.

It was the start of a perfect Sunday, and Segun was expectant of what the day would bring. Lagos—the city of skyscrapers, satellite televisions, fancy cars, extravagant yacht parties, tall *iroko* trees, and high-spirited immigrants—stretched endlessly until one could see mountains beyond the clouds.

Segun was unusually awake, laying on his bed, belly flat, before his MacBook. He browsed through old photos on his laptop, wearing an unpretentious smile and a grateful heart. 'Is that Rasheed?' his mother called out.

'Mom, why don't you ever knock before coming in? That's why there's a door. You have to knock! What if I'm naked, or I'm with someone? Would you just barged in like that?'

'You're my son. Why should I knock?' She sat on the bed and embraced him affectionately with a superb smile.

'What do you want from me this time, mom? Whenever you come around like this, you always want something, so what is it that you want from me?'

'I came to see you. My handsomest son. Can't I come to see you anymore? So much time since we've had a mother-to-son talk, and I've missed our earlier morning conversations a lot. We rarely see and we live in the same house.' She tightened her arms around him. 'Mom, stop all these. I'm not a child anymore. I'm all grown up now. I'm no longer eighteen. You need to start treating me as a grown man that I am.' He broke the embrace, and her smile instantly faded away.

'Before I forget, how was your test yesterday?'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'Why is that? Was it okay?'

'It was okay, mom!'

'I hope you did your best. If I haven't told you this before, I'm so proud of you. You'll soon be getting married, moving out of here, and starting your own happy. Someday you'll have your own children and

see my world through your own eyes. I'm so happy for you.' She clamped her eyes shut to keep the tears from flowing.

Segun didn't respond.

His eyes were locked on his laptop's screen.

'You are no longer a baby. You're all grown up as you said, so you should learn to tidy up your room and organize your clothes.' She rose up and began to tidy up his room. 'Why do you continue ordering these Domino's Pizza every night? Our chefs cook amazing meals round the clock. You should learn to eat good food. Look at how skinny you are, because you choose to have pizza and stone-cold ice-cream all day.'

Segun still didn't respond.

He gave his laptop all his concentration.

'And you should stop playing video games late at night with Rasheed. The sound effects are so loud that it keeps your father and I awake too. You need to start getting some quality sleep. Look, you're already developing eye bags due to inadequate sleep. Sleep makes people smarter and refreshed, ready for a new day. That's why Almighty Allah gave it to us.' She gripped a remote control on his bed, and turned off the television.

'You have too many clothes. You need to send some to the orphanage. Lawal, the mailman can help you do it. Look how huge your closet is, yet it can't contain all your clothes and shoes.' She gathered some clothes from the bed and forced them into the outpouring closet.

'You have outgrown most of these clothes and they don't fit you anymore. Give them out to the

motherless or the less privilege. They need it. They'll appreciate it and pray for you. You are no longer a boy, you know. You're a grown man now, so act like it. Start acting your age. You should start putting on suits and not these hoodies. You'll look more handsome.'

'Mom, I always look handsome, even in rags. Just go away and stop bothering me. Can't you see I'm busy here?' Segun yelled. 'Stop going through my things. I've told you this several times but you won't listen.' He rose to his feet and snatched his towel from her hands. 'I'm so sorry, son.' She felt downcast as she inched slowly towards the exit.

'Mom, hold on. I'm the one who's sorry. I'm the one to apologize. I shouldn't have yelled at you that way. It was mean and I'm sorry.' He ran after her as an afterthought. 'Here, you can fold my towel. What's mine is yours,' he handed the green towel to her. 'I don't want you to feel bad,' he continued.

'Breakfast is ready. Your father wants you to eat with us. Mallam Hassan called him last night. I think he wants to talk to you about something.' She smiled, handing the folded towel to him. 'I made breakfast myself. Are you going to eat with us?' she continued. 'Yes, mom,' Segun responded in a low-spirit, warming up for what was about to come next.