

Yejide Kilanko

This Tangible Thing

Story

Bíbíire Kúkù's gnarled hands shook as she pushed open the heavy wooden shutters. A rush of cool air fanned her face leaving behind a tingling sensation.

In the far distance was the faint outline of Igbó Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀. The enchanted forest gave their small village its name. Typical December morning, a Harmattan haze hovered above Lángbòdó, the lush green mountain at its core.

Bíbíire exhaled. Today, after eleven long years, she would get to hold her only grandchild, Àjọkẹ̀. On the heel of the exhilarating thought came an acute wave of sadness. If only Bàbá Èniafẹ̀ had waited to meet the precious child.

As she mentally pushed against the heavy feeling, Bíbíire reminded herself that her husband was resting. She had to let the man rest.

Latching on to a thread of fresh joy, Bíbíire adjusted her head wrap before hurrying out of the bedroom as fast as her slim octogenarian legs could manage. As she took careful steps down the flight of steep stairs, her housekeeper's melodic singing drifted toward her. Ìmódòye arrived earlier than usual to help her get the house ready.

Ìmódòye stood in front of the gleaming double-burner kerosene stove. Her oval face, adorned with six short tribal marks on each cheek, lit up as soon as she saw Bíbíire. A fist went up in the air. "Màmá Seamstress for village president. This your cloth is fine o."

Bíbíire laughed. Her position as the first seamstress in Igbó Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ had earned her the title. The cotton fabric Ìmọ̀dòye complimented had a pattern of vibrant green leaves topped with bright gold flowers. At the market, Bíbíire could not resist the fabric's alluring call. "I see all your hard work," she said.

Ìmọ̀dòye inclined her head toward the stove. "When the fish stew is ready, I will fetch more water for the bathroom drums. Then everything will be ready."

Bíbíire nodded her appreciation. "Well done. I hope you are not in a hurry to leave? Ẹ̀niafẹ̀ wants to meet the person taking great care of his mother."

Ìmọ̀dòye looked pleased. "I will come back to greet him and Àjọ̀ké. I am sure you have many things to talk about."

Although Ẹ̀niafẹ̀ made regular telephone calls from Canada, it was not the same. Without their eyes meeting, it could not be the same. "I promise not to eat all the good things Ẹ̀niafẹ̀ brings."

"Since you are thinking about it," Ìmọ̀dòye said with a laugh. "I am not going home again."

Bíbíire snorted. "Who said you had an option?"

After Ìmọ̀dòye left, Bíbíire sat in the sitting room. Ẹ̀niafẹ̀ had called from the airport to tell her that their plane had landed safely and he was driving home in a rented car.

Three short horn blasts made Bíbíire jump to her feet. Finally! She gathered the folds of her iró, tied the cloth securely around her waist, and hurried toward the front door.

Ẹ̀niafẹ̀ stepped out of the car and prostrated before her. "*Ẹ̀ káàsàn, Ma,*" he greeted.

"*Káàsán, ọ̀kọ mi.*" Bíbíire gestured at him to stand so she could wrap her arms around his expanding girth.

As she let go, Àjoké came out of the vehicle. Bíbíire exhaled. The child looked like her! Tall and slim, one could easily say Àjoké was thirteen instead of eleven. Bíbíire noticed how Àjoké's dark brown eyes darted around the compound as if she anticipated danger.

Eniafé turned to his daughter and spoke to her in Yorùbá. "Aren't you going to greet your grandmother?"

Bíbíire's understanding was that while Àjoké understood Yorùbá, she only spoke a few phrases.

Àjoké mumbled something indecipherable under her breath as she held on to the sides of her long T-shirt, and curtsied like an English woman.

Bíbíire snorted her amusement. Eniafé should have taught his daughter how Yorùbá girls greet. She took the first step toward her granddaughter. Arms held to her sides, Àjoké's rigid posture said, *Don't touch me*. Bíbíire's heart sank. To mask her disappointment, she turned her face away. "Let us go inside," she said. "You have come a long way."

Eniafé cleared his throat. "Màámi, I must head back to Lagos today."

Bíbíire frowned. Eniafé had told her they were coming home for a twelve-day visit. "Why?"

He sighed. "The airline placed our luggage on the wrong connecting flight. I need to be at the airport when they arrive. Odún sent some items to her family, and I must deliver them before we return. I came home because I knew you would be worried if you didn't see us today."

"You should eat something before you leave," Bíbíire said after swallowing the suddenly bitter taste in her mouth.

"Yes, Ma."

They walked into the house. "Where is the young woman helping you?" Eniafé asked as he looked around the sitting room.

“Ìmódòye does not live here. She will visit later.”

Eniafé frowned. “I thought we agreed that Ìmódòye would move here?”

She and Eniafé had lengthy conversations before she’d agreed to hire a housekeeper. While she enjoyed the young woman’s company, Bíbíire was determined to hold on to her dwindling independence for as long as she could.

Bíbíire shrugged. “The agreement must have slipped my mind.”

Eniafé shook his head. “*Màámi.*”

“Yes, the son of his mother. I may be old, but I still have the right to live the way I want.”

She turned to Àjoké. “Come, my child. We need to set the table.”

After sending her father a pleading look, Àjoké reluctantly followed Bíbíire into the kitchen. Eniafé came along and helped. Head cocked, Àjoké listened as she and Eniafé ate and discussed light family matters.

Àjoké had barely touched her food. Bíbíire wondered if the pepper in the jollof rice was too much for her. She had asked Ìmódòye to tone down the spice. As she opened her mouth to clarify, Eniafé groaned. “I think I overate.”

Bíbíire clucked her tongue. “Your eyes were always bigger than your stomach.”

“Màámi, Àjoké is here.”

“All the more reason why you should set a good example,” she said.

Eniafé scowled. “You said I had to eat before leaving.”

She sucked her teeth before turning to Àjoké. The child squirmed on her seat. “You want something?”

Àjoké stayed silent.

“Your grandmother asked you a question,” Eniafé said in a soft tone.

“The washroom,” Àjoké whispered.

She didn’t understand the child’s sudden need for cleanliness. “You can wash clothes after you finish your food.”

Eniafé smiled. “Màámi, she needs to use the toilet.” He pushed back his chair and turned to his daughter. “Come, I’ll take you.”

Several minutes later, he came back without Àjoké.

“Is she okay?” Bíbíire asked.

Eniafé sat next to her. “Yes. The toilet is Àjoké’s hiding place. I’ll give her space while we talk.”

A lump formed in her throat as she stared at Eniafé’s sweaty face. “Son, you’re too young to be this grey.”

He ran a hand over his head. “I worry about Àjoké.”

During their telephone conversations, Eniafé had hinted at some concerns. “What exactly is wrong with the child?”

Eniafé sighed. “The doctor diagnosed Àjoké with an anxiety disorder called selective mutism.”

Bíbíire frowned. “What is that?”

“Outside of our home and her best friend’s house, Àjoké barely speaks or responds to questions.”

Bíbíire had never agreed with the saying that children should be seen and not heard. “Why?”

“We don’t know. It is worse at school. Oḍún and I think something is going on there. We have tried, but Àjoké refuses to speak to the professionals who can help or to us.” Eniafé reached

out and placed a hand on her arm. “You told me that as a child, there was a time when you stopped talking?”

Bíbíire went mute after her mother disappeared on a busy market day. But what she experienced afterward was not selective. Grief reached into her throat and took her voice. “I did.”

“Màámi, I brought Àjọkẹ home so you could teach her what helped you.”

An ancient Yorùbá proverb came to Bíbíire’s mind. When a child kills a rat, he eats it alone; when he kills a bird, he eats it alone; but when he is in serious trouble, he drags it home to his father. She had to fill Bàbá Ẹniafẹ’s large shoes.

Ẹniafẹ gave her a shaky smile. “Màámi, I missed you, too.”

She missed him more. Ẹniafẹ was supposed to come back home after getting his graduate degree. His plans changed when he met his wife, Ọdún, at the same university. Home for him became a different country. Bíbíire placed her hand on top of her son’s. It was not Ẹniafẹ’s fault that he alone carried the total weight of their love and expectations because no other children came.

“Apart from this problem, you are happy over there?” she asked.

Ẹniafẹ pondered on her question. “On most days,” he finally said.

The response gave her some comfort. Being happy on most days was more than many people could say.

Ẹniafẹ moved away from her and pushed back his chair. “I need to tell Àjọkẹ I’m leaving her behind.”

Bíbíire had assumed Àjọkẹ was going back with her father. “She would agree to stay?”

Eniafé looked uncertain. “I’m sure the process of retrieving our luggage won’t be straightforward. She needs to spend our time here with you.”

Àjoké disagreed. She kept shaking her head and whispering no when her father informed her of his decision. From where she stood, Bíbíire could feel the intense distress bubbling underneath Àjoké’s skin.

“I know this is hard for you,” Eniafé said in a soothing voice. “But sometimes we have to do hard things. Please speak to your grandmother. Remember, she can’t read your mind, and she doesn’t speak shrug. Will you do that for me?”

Tears ran down Àjoké’s cheeks. “Yes.”

Eniafé pulled her close for a hug. “Thank you. I promise. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Long after her father left, Àjoké sat on the verandah and started in the direction of the road.

Seated on a nearby chair, an annoyed Bíbíire fanned her legs. It was dark, but Àjoké had refused to go inside. When a loud screech pierced the air, a startled Àjoké fell off her stool. She hurried to Bíbíire’s side.

Happy that the child came to her, Bíbíire comforted Àjoké with a touch. “It is okay, my child. There is nothing to fear. At night, an owl family perches on the walnut tree outside my bedroom window. They are just talking to each other.”

She rose from her seat. “Come, let us go inside. It is long past this old woman’s bedtime.”

In the kitchen, Àjoké watched as Bíbíire filled a large lantern with kerosene. While they were outside, the almighty Power Holding Company of Nigeria struck again. For as long as Bíbíire could remember, power outages were as sure as the rising sun.

Àjoké held the lantern as they made their way upstairs.

Bibiire led them to her bedroom. Judging by how Àjoké had reacted to her father's departure, she did not think leaving her alone was the right decision.

After brushing her teeth and changing into a borrowed nightgown, Àjoké took timid steps around the large room. In a corner was Bibiire's sewing machine. The antique Singer sat on a wooden table mounted on a cast-iron treadle stand. Àjoké bent and touched the wheel.

"I used to be a seamstress," Bibiire said when Àjoké stood and turned in her direction. "The proud proprietress of Àjoké Sewing Institute."

Bibiire chuckled when Àjoké's right eyebrow shot up. The child probably thought she named the business after her. "The institute was established long before your parents met. Àjoké is my name, too. It was what my father called me. But my mother loved the name Bibiire. and that is what everyone knows. Your father named you Àjoké to honor your great-grandfather and me." Bibiire cocked her head. "Hmm. I wonder why he didn't tell you."

Àjoké's gaze dropped.

There is a story there, Bibiire thought. She covered a loud yawn before patting the bed. "This is my side."

Àjoké sat on the mattress's edge. Then she lay down and curled into a ball, putting as much distance as she could between their bodies. Àjoké soon nodded off. A restless sleeper, Àjoké's arms and legs were everywhere. Bibiire sighed with happiness when Àjoké rolled over to her side. She had missed sleeping with someone next to her.

The days were passing too quickly. Eniafé was still in Lagos. Offering only short responses, Àjoké followed Bibiire around like a shadow, but she could tell Àjoké was listening and

digesting her lengthy monologues. Àjoké's stoic expression slipped when Bibíire told her about the party they threw after Èniafé called to announce Àjoké's arrival.

Since Àjoké arrived with only her hand luggage, Bibíire decided to make her some simple outfits. She was pleased when Àjoké sat at the dining table and drew pencil sketches of what she wanted. Bibíire knew she was biased, but the child had evident talent.

Èniafé called every day. Bibíire often stood near the toilet door to catch muffled snippets of the animated conversations. Speaking as if she had burning hot food in her mouth, the child couldn't get her words out fast enough.

Bedtime became Bibíire's favorite time with her granddaughter. By the fourth night, Àjoké no longer jerked away when their bodies touched.

On the morning of day five, Bibíire woke up and found herself alone. Panicked, she hurried downstairs. The door to Bàbá Èniafé's study was wide open.

"Àjoké, are you in there?"

"Yes, Grandma."

The response calmed Bibíire's racing pulse. In her nightgown, Àjoké sat on the floor with her grandfather's old maps strewn around her. A guilty expression made her look like a child caught stealing a piece of meat from the pot. "Sorry."

"I am sure the maps are happy that someone is looking at them."

Àjoké gave an audible sigh of relief.

"I have something for you," Bibíire said as she brought the ancient bronze magnifying glass Bàbá Èniafé had kept in the top drawer of his large bureau-style desk. She handed it to Àjoké.

"You will be able to see more of the map symbols with this. I'm sure your grandfather would have wanted you to have it.

A big smile transformed Àjoké's face. "Thank you, Grandma."

Bibiire gave a dismissive wave. "It is nothing. We should go and get ready. I want us to take a walk around the village before it gets too hot for you."

Àjoké began picking at her nails. It was not a good sign. "Child, what is the matter?" Bibiire asked.

"If we're going to see stuff, I need my cell phone."

Àjoké had left the phone behind in the hired car. Eniafé had found it. "Remember, your father will bring it for you."

"But I need my phone to take pictures."

"Pictures?"

Àjoké's earnest words tumbled out. "Yes. For my best friend Panchita. When she and her family went to Chile, Panchita took pictures for me."

Bibiire's cell phone was a basic one. Staring at Àjoké's face, she suddenly remembered the stash of disposable cameras her husband kept. It had been a couple of years, but they may still work, she thought.

As Bibiire searched inside the large filing cabinet, Àjoké stared at the framed family pictures lined up high on the wall. "What was Grandpa like?"

Bibiire turned to look at her husband's picture. For his eightieth birthday, Bàbá Eniafé had reluctantly agreed to professional photographs. Dressed in an elaborate light brown *sányán* outfit decorated with the best gold embroidery she could afford, his tall, stiff cap sat at a rascally angle. A smile curved her lips. It was what he wanted.

“We Yorùbá people use the term *Omólúàbí* to describe a person of good character, a courageous human with integrity. That was your grandfather. He was a small man with a larger-than-life personality. When he entered a room, people paid attention.”

Àjoké cocked her head. “How did you meet Grandpa?”

The vibrant memories warmed her. “The authorities brought your grandfather here to teach at the primary school. One day, he came to the shop where I was learning how to sew.” She chuckled. “The headmaster said your grandfather needed trousers befitting a teacher and husband.”

“So, you fell in love, married, and had Dad?”

“In those days, there was no falling, just choosing, and committing.”

Bibiire’s heart leapt when she came across a stash of metal-cased disposable cameras. They were unused.

Àjoké turned one over in her hand. “How do I check to make sure I like the picture after I take it?” she said.

“You can’t see it. You will have to wait until you develop the pictures.”

Àjoké gave a heavy sigh. “*No filter?* That sucks. I never get perfect pictures the first or second time.”

“It is this or nothing,” she said.

“I’ll take it.”

She patted Àjoké’s shoulder. “It may not be a bad thing to take imperfect pictures.”

The midafternoon sun was high in the sky when they ventured out of the house. As they walked down the stony path that curved along the river Ìyè, Àjoké took several pictures. The water was so clear that one could see the bottom.

A woman wearing a wide-brimmed raffia hat and two small children drifted by in a bright blue canoe. Àjòkẹ returned their waves. She stared until the canoe came to a bend in the river and disappeared.

“Where does the river come from?” Àjòkẹ asked.

“The headwater is inside Mount Lángbòdó, which is at the center of the Igbó Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ forest.”

Àjòkẹ sighed. “It’s beautiful.”

“There is something you can tell your friend when you show her the pictures,” Bibíire said.

“Children with ancestral ties to this village cannot drown in the river.”

“For real?”

Bibíire took a moment to consider what Àjòkẹ was asking. “Are you asking if I’m telling the truth?”

Àjòkẹ nodded.

“In that case, yes.”

Àjòkẹ narrowed her eyes. “Even if they can’t swim?”

“The river carries them back to shore. I have seen it with my eyes.”

“Hmm. How does the river know who belongs here?”

“It just does.”

Àjòkẹ had a thoughtful expression. “Maybe the river keeps a database.”

“What is that?” Bibíire asked.

“Em, it’s a collection of information, like names, addresses, or phone numbers.”

The thought of river spirits keeping a database was laughable. “Perhaps we should visit the kábíyèsí to ask him about this database?”

“Who is the kábíyèsí?” Àjòkẹ̀ asked.

“Ọba Aládégbayì, the king of our village.”

“Does the king have a computer?”

Bibíire shrugged. “I don’t know what the king has.”

Àjòkẹ̀ glanced at the river. “If I were wearing my swimsuit, I would jump into the river to see what happens.”

Bibíire clucked her tongue. “You can do so after your father arrives.”

“Maybe during our next visit to Nigeria, Dad will take me to the forest for a visit.”

She doubted Ẹnìafẹ̀ would take his daughter into a forest teeming with ghommids, gnoms, and spirits. “We shall see.”

Àjòkẹ̀ looked disappointed. “That means no.”

“That is not what I said.”

Àjòkẹ̀ pursed her lips. “Well, when Dad says those words, we never see.”

Bibíire let out a loud laugh.

During the walk back home, Àjòkẹ̀ continued to talk without any prompting. Something had shifted for the child. Bibíire thanked the ancestors for the gift.

That evening Àjòkẹ̀ insisted on helping Bibíire refill the lantern. She poured the kerosene and carefully adjusted the wick before striking the match.

“You have done a good job,” Bibíire said.

“Thank you, Grandma.”

Àjòkẹ̀ held the lantern as she led the way to the sitting room. “We will sit for some time before we go upstairs,” Bibíire said.

The lantern's flickering flame left huge shadows on the wall. Àjòkẹ stared at them. "It's almost like we're camping in the woods."

She liked the luxury of house walls. "Your parents take you?"

Àjòkẹ snorted. "No. I go with Panchita and her family."

"Panchita is a good best friend?"

"Oh, yes." Àjòkẹ smiled. "Panchita snorts when she laughs. And she laughs a lot."

"Laughter is good."

"That's what Panchita's mom says."

"She sounds like a wise woman."

"I like her a lot." Àjòkẹ glanced at the lantern. "The greenhouse at school uses solar panels. You should ask Dad to get you some for your roof."

"What do these things do?" Bibíire asked.

"They use sunlight to make electricity. During wintertime, Dad always talks about missing the constant sunshine here."

She would ask Ẹniafé about these panels. "You are an intelligent child."

Àjòkẹ shrugged. "Everybody knows."

"I did not."

"Now you do. And when you come and visit us in Mapleville, you'll see what I mean."

The fear of being suspended in the air kept her at home. "If I come, will you take me to meet your teacher?"

Àjòkẹ's expression soured. "You don't want to come to my school. They're real mean kids there."

“Mean?”

“They’re not nice.”

“What do they do?”

Àjoké sang the words in a bitter tone. “Fie, fih, foh, fum, we smell the stench of the crazy mute.” She threw up her hands. “Grandma, I take a shower every single day. You can ask Dad. He says I use up all the hot water.”

“That is what these children call you?”

Àjoké nodded. “They also said I’m a joke. A crazy joke.”

“Did you do something to them?” she asked.

“No! It’s because of my horrible names.”

Bibiire frowned. “Horrible names?”

“Yeah. Think about it. Àjoké *is* a joke.”

She shook her head. “No, my child. Àjoké is the name one gives to a daughter cherished by the entire family. I am a much-cherished child. You, too.”

Àjoké did not look convinced. “And my last name, Kúkù, sounds like ‘cuckoo.’”

“The bird?”

“Yeah. That’s what people at school call crazy people.” Àjoké’s mouth tightened into a little ball. “I thought that if I stopped talking and stayed really quiet, I would blend into the background.”

“God did not create you to blend into any background, my child.”

“I wish he did.”

A question nagged at her. “Why didn’t you tell your parents about these children?”

Àjoké shook her head. “Because they’re both extra.”

Bibiire frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Their love is too much. I know they will come to school to cause a lot of trouble. It will only make things worse.”

“My child, you are all that they have.”

Àjoké sighed. “Grandma, I just want to know why those kids at school won’t leave me alone.”

Bibiire had always thought certain people, including children, feel important only when they’re able to grind another in the dust.

“We only have one public high school in Mapleville. I’ll never be able to escape them.”

It was clear that Àjoké needed to know who she was. “Listen. I am going to tell you the story of your ancestor. The first Kúkù.”

Àjoké sat up with an expectant look.

“Many, many moons ago, a child was born to an Ìjèbú family. The boy was his mother’s seventh child. The six before him never drew a breath. Something terrible happened shortly after his birth. His mother died.”

“That is sad,” Àjoké said.

Bibiire nodded her agreement. “Stricken with grief, the maternal grandmother ordered that the newborn child be taken to the forest and left there.”

Àjoké’s mouth opened. “How could they have left a baby in a forest?”

“Pain can make people do terrible things. Days later, a group of hunters found the baby. Astonished that he survived, they brought him back to the village. His contrite grandmother gave him the name, Ọmọwékúkù—‘the child who did not die, lives.’ As time went by, they shortened the name to Kúkù. He was a survivor.”

Àjoké cocked her head. “So, you’re saying I’m a cherished survivor.”

Bibiire was pleased by Àjoké’s quick understanding. “Yes, my child.”

“I guess it’s better than being a crazy joke.”

“Promise me that you will stop calling yourself those words. We must use our mouths to speak kind things to ourselves.”

Àjoké stayed silent for a while. “Grandma.”

“Yes.”

“How do you say ‘I love you’ in Yorùbá?” Àjoké asked.

“Mo ní fẹ ẹ.”

Àjoké’s brow furrowed. “‘I have your love’?”

It was the literal translation. “Yes. We believe that love is tangible. That no matter where we go, no matter how long we are apart, the love we carry stays with us.”

A soft smile tugged at Àjoké’s lips. “I like that.”

Two days later, Ẹniafẹ called to let them know the suitcases were finally in Lagos. No one could explain their detour to Mozambique. He was coming to Igbó Irúnmolè the next day.

Tired out by another village excursion, Àjoké and Bibiire both decided on an early night. Her chin propped in her hand, Àjoké laid next to Bibiire and stared at her face.

“Grandma, the lines on your face, they look like the creases in Grandpa’s maps.”

Bibiire smiled. “These lines tell plenty of stories.”

“What kind of stories?”

It was hard to sum up a lifetime in a few words. “Stories about love, courage, deep secrets, sorrow, wisdom, joy, much joy.”

“Which line is your favorite?” Àjoké asked.

She reached out for Àjoké’s hand, brought it close, and traced Àjoké’s index finger along the deep laugh line at the left corner of her mouth. “This one. When your father called to tell me you were born, I could not stop laughing.”

Àjoké’s expression sobered. “Grandma.”

“Yes, my child.”

Àjoké gave her a cautious look. “Dad said you also stopped talking to people.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

A familiar choking feeling welled up in her chest. “When I was seven, my mother went missing.”

Àjoké’s eyes grew big. “Oh.”

Bibiire exhaled. “Màmá used to say I talked too much. Now I know she meant no harm. I told myself that was why she left us and that if I stopped talking, someone would tell Màmá so she would come home.”

“Did your mom come back home?”

“No.”

Àjoké looked as if she was about to cry. “I’m sorry.”

Grateful, Bibiire reached out and stroked Àjoké’s face. Inside her eighty-five-year-old body was a seven-year-old who still wanted her mother.

“How did you start talking again?” Àjoké asked.

It had been a journey of many months. “My father helped. He told me this folktale I am about to tell you and said my voice is a good gift. My child, when something is good for us, we must find a way to tolerate any discomfort. Now it is time for our folktale.”

To Bibiire’s relief, Àjoké sat up with a brighter face. The child loved hearing folktales just as much as her father did.

Bibiire began the story the way their people have always done it. “*Àlò o!*”

“*Àlò!*” Àjoké shouted back.

“One day, many, many, years ago, when most animals still walked upright, Alángbá Adánrípón, the agama lizard, looked out of his window, saw that it was a sunny day, and decided to go on a leisure walk.”

Àjoké gave her a skeptical look. “That really happened?”

Bibiire kept a straight face. “Child, one also does not say an elder is lying.”

Àjoké drawled the word. “Right.”

Bibiire pursed her lips. “Should I continue the story or not?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“The agama’s stroll took him by his friend, Àkàlàràgbò’s home. Alángbá Adánrípón remembered the hunting whistle he lent the friendly hornbill. He decided to collect it.

“Àkàlàràgbò opened his door and invited him in. The hornbill was about to eat his evening meal. The aroma of the spicy pottage set on the raffia mat made Alángbá Adánrípón’s mouth water.

“While his friend went to get the hunting whistle, Alángbá Adánrípón quickly dipped his fingers into the bowl of pottage and took a generous amount. His attempt to swallow the scalding-hot food without being caught sent the pottage down the wrong way.”

Àjoké's eyes widened. "Oho."

"Alágbá Adánrípón was in serious trouble. Àkàlàmbò returned and found the agama hopping from one foot to the other. Mystified by his friend's strange behavior, Àkàlàmbò asked for an explanation. Unwilling to say what he did, Alágbá Adánrípón stayed silent.

"As Alágbá Adánrípón's head glowed in a flaming-red color, a concerned Àkàlàmbò threw him inside a bucket of cold water. It was too late. The intense heat had destroyed Alágbá Adánrípón's vocal cords. That is why until this very day, all the agama lizard can do in response to any question is to nod its head sadly."

"Grandma, I didn't steal anyone's food," Àjoké said.

"No, you did not, my child. Our folktales carry different lessons for different people in different seasons."

"What is the lesson for me?"

"I want you, Àjoké Kúkù, always to remember that when we stay silent when we should not, we may lose our voices forever. Do you understand what I mean?"

Àjoké nodded. "Like the agama lizard did."

"Yes. Like the lizard did."

"Grandma, talking when you're scared can be difficult."

"It can. And we also have to learn the wisdom of knowing when not to speak."

Àjoké gave her a thoughtful look. "How do I know that?"

"It is something you will continue to learn for the rest of your life." She gave Àjoké a soft smile. "You will speak to your parents and accept their help?"

Àjoké took her time to think about the request. "I will."

Bibíire pulled her close for a hug. "Thank you."

Àjoké heard the honking sound before Bibíire did. Eyes wide with excitement, Àjoké ran out of the house.

A tired-looking Ẹniafé stepped out of the car. Bibíire watched with gratitude as a laughing Àjoké knelt on the sand to greet him before throwing herself at him. Mouth wide open, Ẹniafé held on to his daughter and swung her around.

After he and Àjoké unpacked their suitcases, Ẹniafé brought a handful of gifts to her bedroom. He placed them down and sat beside her. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to spend much time with you,” he said.

The undivided time with Àjoké had been priceless. “Then you have to come back soon.”

“I will. How were your days with your granddaughter?”

“The best. Thank you for leaving Àjoké with me.”

Ẹniafé exhaled. “Her mother and I were worried that she would wear you out with her fretting.”

“Àjoké just needed time to know that she was safe with me.”

“I’m still stunned by the change. I returned to meet a different child.”

“Son, Àjoké and I talked. There is trouble at her school. Some children there call her horrible names.”

“But why didn’t she tell us?”

“Àjoké said she didn’t because you and her mother are both extra.”

Ẹniafé gaped at her. “For real?”

Bibíire nodded. “For real.”

Ẹniafé laughed. “I see Àjoké has taught you her lingo.”

“Please, do not be angry with the child over her silence. Àjoké said it as she sees it. Yes, we love our children, but we must give them room to breathe.”

“But Màámi, you did not give me the room to breathe.”

Eniafé spoke the truth. “My son, one is never too old to learn.”

“I have heard. We will make the necessary changes.”

“Thank you. You and Odún are raising Àjoké well. You should be proud.”

Eniafé bent his head. “Thank you, Ma. *Èé pé fún wa.*”

The length of her days was in Olódùmarè’s hands. “As the owner of life wishes.”

Eniafé stood. “Àjoké and I need to talk.”

She nodded her agreement. “After you do, please send my child to me.”

“I will.”

A while later, Àjoké entered the room. “Dad said you wanted me?”

“Yes, my child. Sit. I have a gift for you.”

Àjoké watched as Bibíire dragged out the trunk under her bed. Opening it, she took out a piece of a folded fabric and placed it in Àjoké’s lap. “This piece of sányán belonged to my mother. It is one of the few things they kept for me. I want you to have it.”

Àjoké held the fabric to her chest as she knelt on the linoleum tiles. “Thank you, Grandma.”

Bibíire smiled. “There is no need to thank one’s self.”

Àjoké ran her fingers along the length of the wrap. “It’s so smooth.”

“Sányán is made with beige silk threads spun from the cocoons of the Anaphe moth.”

Àjoké whispered the words. “Grandma, I have your love.”

She stared at her granddaughter’s face, determined to stamp its features on her mind for the long nights ahead. “My child, I have your love, too.”

As much as Bíbíire wished she could stop time, the day of their return arrived. Before Ẹniafé left for Lagos, he gave her Ọdún’s list of items to buy. Bíbíire bought them all and more. Concerned the extra food items would lead to overweight luggage fees, Ẹniafé weighed their suitcases for the umpteenth time.

Bíbíire watched as Ẹniafé placed the suitcases in the car boot. “If you have to leave anything at the airport, make sure it is not your wife’s requested items.”

Ẹniafé dusted his hands. “Mrs. Bíbíire Kúkù, champion of women.”

“A proud one.”

“I won’t leave Ọdún’s things behind.”

Bíbíire exhaled. *It is satisfying when a child you raise to adulthood continues to raise themselves to a higher standard.* “I know you’re a good husband.”

Ẹniafé prostrated before her. “Màámi, thank you for everything.”

She held out her arms. Ẹniafé stood for her tight hug. “Son, I know our eyes will meet again.” The words were a heartfelt plea to Olódùmarè.

Ẹniafé turned to Àjoké. “Before we leave, I should take a picture of you and your Grandma.”

Àjoké’s face brightened. “Yes, please.”

Ẹniafé looked surprised when Àjoké pulled out a disposable camera from her backpack and held it out to him.

Bíbíire smiled. Àjoké was leaving with the rest of her grandfather’s cameras.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to use your cell phone?” Ẹniafé asked with a raised eyebrow.

Àjoké moved close and wrapped her arm around B́bíire’s body. “Yes. Grandma said these cameras are the best.”

To hide her tears, B́bíire closed her eyes just as Ẹniaf́ took the picture.