

## SEVENTH WINDOW

*I am tired of this place. There is little room to move around. I've grown too big and I miss the light. My elders told me it would not be long before I see the light again, but that it will never be as bright as the glow I left. They also told me where I come from will become a furthering echo until the time for me to return.*

*Ayotunde in vitro*

Boluwaife sighs under the intense breeze caressing her puffy face and bulging body. The Kente cloth curtains flutter and fall with increasing force, signaling an impending spring storm. She adjusts her position on the small couch to accommodate the discomfort of the wave rolling across her rounded belly, then reaches down to pat her anxious baby. The light drumming of her fingers is in sync with the beat of her husband, Oyeleke, singing a song from back home about loving a beautiful African Queen. When the movement in her womb stops, a tiny footprint protrudes out of her right side.

“So, you love me just the way I am, Oye? Swollen belly, feet, and face? Beauty has gone and left me,” she says to her husband who is cooking dinner.

“Would you rather I stop singing and say like the Americans, “Bolu, I love you like a fat kid loves cake”?”

“Na man, not nice to say. Our daughter might be fat.”

“Look at you and look at me. This daughter is not going to be fat. She’s going to be lean and lovely, just like her beautiful mama, and cool like her poppa,” says Oye while continuing to sing and dance inside the tight u-shaped space between the stove, refrigerator, and small oval table for two.

This apartment wasn’t their first choice. It was merely their only option. The shabby neighborhood was cheap and close to Johns Hopkins Hospital, where Oye was a first-year resident. His salary wasn’t great, but when he became a full-fledged doctor their choices would be different, everything would be different. Until then, they would save as much as they could for their dream home and dream life.

Bolu looks out of the window into the darkening sky with thoughts of their first night in the apartment, a year ago. After having dinner with friends from the hospital, who had helped them move in, they walked the short distance from the restaurant to their new home. The noisy streets were more alive that night than they had been in the daytime. Bolu slowed her pace as they approached a makeshift snow cone stand in front of a rowhouse. She marveled at the enterprising spirit of the T-shirted men handing out colorful cups of ice. Women in fluffy bedroom slippers were laughing and talking, while boisterous children splashed in a small wading pool of dirty water. The communal scene was a welcome reminder of her village. She

started to ask the man with an eye patch how much for a cone, but Oye pulled her close to him and whispered to her. "No love, this sweet ice isn't sanitary." He then quickened their pace. Bolu sensed suspicious stares scaling her back as they walked away.

Within minutes they were standing in front of their massive apartment building. Together they looked up to the top floor windows and counted over until they got to the seventh window.

"Seven rhythms with heaven," said Oye.

"I don't know about this place being heaven," said Bolu.

"It is our heaven, for now, my love. Where ever we are together, it is heaven."

When they walked into the apartment, Oye wrapped Bolu inside his arms. They left the lights off and went to the bedroom. A full moon bathed the tiny room in soft gold light. They made love that night that felt like dreaming.

Bolu wishes, with all her might, she'd gotten pregnant inside that dream instead of during the nightmare that followed. She shifts her body on the couch trying to find a comfortable spot and a comforting thought. Her mind begins to journey into the dark reality of her present condition, despite the comforting smells from the bowls of food Oye is setting on the table that cause the baby to stir again. She closes her eyes and rubs her stomach while softly crooning to her daughter.

"Dear one, stay quiet, now  
And always  
I will carry the burden of our secret  
But you must keep it away from your mouth,  
away from your heart,  
So, your Daddy will lift you to the sky with pride  
And cherish you always,  
My precious little one."

"You praying over there? No worries. God's going to keep blessing us. He has blessed me with my own African Queen and soon a princess. Go wash up and let's eat."

Belly first, Bolu tries to rise from the indented sofa cushions but plops back down. Oye rushes over to help her. He kisses her forehead before leaving her at the bathroom door. The baby is due anytime and she is ready for relief to flood her back and her cramped bladder. She longs for good sleep and spicy food, as she carefully lowers herself onto the padded toilet seat. A Nigerian magazine, on top of a staked pile on the floor, draws her attention as pee trickles out.

The cover photo is of the forest near her home in Sambisa. She picks it up and runs her swollen fingers across the picture. A smile parts her lips, when she thinks about how she and Oye, as children, were careful not to bend to the temptation of entering the Sambisa forest, where the brush was so thick it would peel your skin. It was the tall trees of the forest that sent whispers through the wind that soon blood would flow, bones would be broken, and children would be taken. So, both her family and Oye's moved to Lagos to escape the prophetic airstream that grew louder every day, but Lagos was not far enough for protection from escalating

madness. So, twelve-year old Oye and ten-year old Bolu were sent to live with relatives in England to avoid the whispering trees that had begun to wail.

London had been rainy and cold. The kind of cold that required long warm showers or even longer baths. Inside the marrow of their shivering bones, they pined for the vibrant and verdant warmth of home, the rainbow of brown bodies that shaped the pride in their own skin tones, and the smells of pepper soup, ogbono stew, and fried dodo streaming up their nostrils. Despite their loving and giving extended family, Oye and Bolu grew up, fell in love, and made plans for a life together inside of a shared loneliness that was only quelled when they held each other. Neither of them missed London. When Oye received his acceptance to John Hopkins, they dissolved their fears of going to another new place into their desire to make their families proud and to show them their sacrifice hadn't been in vain. Now, with a child growing inside of her, she understood the weight of losing a child no matter the circumstances.

Bolu flushes the toilet, then tries to get up to wash her hands. As she struggles to lift herself, a dark spot in the tub catches her eye and sends her reeling. Her shudders become violent jerks when she recognizes it is blood. Her breathing escalates to an unsustainable rapid pace threatening to pitch her forward. She is near fainting when she remembers that Oye cut himself while he was cooking and realizes he must have reached for a towel from the rack on the wall above the tub, but the remembering does nothing to slow the onslaught of hot and cold flashes gripping her body nor the image of her own blood filling the tub the day the child inside of her was created.

She'd been so buoyant that day. The burdensome August heatwave gripping the city was finally beginning to let up and she was grateful for the reprieve after buying too many groceries at the store instead of only what was on her checklist. Arriving home, she stopped to get the mail from the box in the apartment building lobby. The letter she was waiting for had arrived. She put her overfull grocery bag on the floor and opened it. Her graduate school application to John Hopkins University for Social Work had been accepted. At 24 years of age and Oye at 26, they were well on their way to making their hopes of having a good life come true.

Bolu picked up her bag and went to the elevator. It was so slow, she decided to take the steps. It was healthier and a good way to keep her figure intact, she thought. She practically bounced up the stairs, she was so excited to tell Oye the good news, when he called that evening from his training trip to Oslo, Norway. On her ascent to their apartment, she thought about the foods she would prepare for their reuniting and their celebration of her acceptance in two weeks, when he returned.

The lights in their corridor were out. Bolu clucked her teeth in frustration as she stood at her apartment door struggling to find her keys in her purse, while juggling the grocery bag. She didn't hear the door open behind her nor the creeping feet coming towards her. She was grabbed from behind, leaving the key, she had finally found, dangling from the door. A strong hand tightened over her mouth, then a quiet menacing male voice commanded her to open the door. She did what he said. The stranger pushed her short slender body into the apartment, pinned her up against a wall with such force that she dropped her pocketbook and the groceries, sending palm fruit, plantains, and bell peppers rolling across the floor.

He told her not to yell or he would kill her, before releasing her mouth and turning her around. Bolu's scream struggled up her throat, then stopped when the terror in her eyes was

matched by the vile determination in her attacker's eyes. Eyes so empty, she was afraid she would fall in and never return. He thrust his knee up into her lower stomach to further immobilize her. The pain made her slump over. He pushed her further down until she was on the ecru carpeted floor that reminded her of the dusty ground of home, and now would forever remind her of this day. He parted her legs wide, wide enough for her to hear her pelvis softly crack. He whispered in her ear before he tore her underwear. "If you say anything to anyone, especially your husband, I will shoot him in the street and no one will know who did it," the words rushed out of his mouth like a train unable to break in time. He pulled a gun from his pocket and laid it on the floor a slight distance from them. Bolu felt a heaving inside of her. "I'm going to be sick," she said.

The ripping of her flesh stanching the vomit and trapping her breath. With each thrust, blackness descended until she came to on the floor with blurry eyes trying to focus. When she tried to get up, her legs wobbled like rubber bands. Pain seemed to be radiating from everywhere in her body. She looked around the apartment, while listening for movement. No one was there. The front door was closed, the gun was gone and the attacker she would only know by voice and hollow eyes. Slowly, she crawled through the sprawling contents of her spilled groceries and her blood, to the foot of the sofa where Oye's sweater hung down. She pulled it closer to her, letting his smell fill her nostrils, and then, the tears came with the realization that what her parents had tried to save her from had found her.

Bolu stayed there for hours, oscillating between crying and sleeping, until the loud, steady tick of the wall clock, that Oye used to make sure he was on time for work, motivated her to get up, then limp to the bathroom.

In the tub, pinkish swirls surrounded her as the tepid water pushed in and out of her open legs. The soreness in her shoulders, the bruises on her thighs, and the bite marks on her arm latched onto the balmy, watery, elixir. Bolu laid back and closed her eyes, leaving her tears to fall in streams down her cheeks like the seasonal flow of water from the Gwoza hills to the Ngadda River. The telephone rang. She knew it was Oye calling to see how she was and to tell her of all the fascinating things he was learning. The ringing finally ended. A few seconds later she heard a beep letting her know he'd left a message. Bolu covered her face and whispered, "I can't tell Oye".

She let the dirty water drain from the tub and then refilled it, then grabbed a washcloth and a bar of soap to scrub herself. With each raking, Bolu repeated the same phrase, "I can't tell Oye. I cannot bring shame to him or my family". Finally, able to feel the workings of her body, she stepped from the tub, dried off and went to lay down on the bed, where she prayed for healing before Oye returned. Her fervent prayers devolved into restless sleep that night and many more before she was safely in Oye's arms.

Her sickness two months later was relentless. Oye was worried and made her go to the doctor. Bolu's only happiness, when she got the results, was that she hadn't contracted any diseases from her assailant. She used that piece of contentment to nullify the terror of the doctor's pronouncement that she was pregnant and to appease her decision not to tell Oye her secret. His joy and concern were overwhelming. He worried about her moodiness, inability to hold anything down and her bouts of extreme quiet that left them both lost in unknown territory. They always talked. They always touched. They always shared everything. When she awoke in tears and muffled gasping, he no longer asked her why she wept. He knew she would just say it

was a nightmare and turn away from him. Oye called his mother and asked her what to do. She'd said, "Be patient. Carrying a child is not an easy thing."

Bolu's second trimester moved her mind away from her attack to the child moving within her. How was she to love this child? How was she to bear the sight of Oye kissing and hugging the baby without bursting into tears? How long could she look in her husband's eyes without the lie leaking from her lips and destroying them both? Her questioning turned to talking, not to Oye, but to her daughter. In her dreams and in the quiet moments of the day, when she was alone, she could hear her child speak to her and the connection created a calm that enabled her to lay in Oye's arms without her sorrow blocking his warmth.

Bolu eyes spring open to see Oye on his knees beside her on the bathroom floor. "Oye?" She says in a panic.

"I'm here. It is time, my love. You must have passed out from the pain. You should have told me you were in labor. All will be well"

Bolu tries to sit up. She wants to tell him it wasn't the labor, it was the blood in the bathtub, it was the secret she was holding, but Oye puts his hands on her shoulders to ease her back down. He hears knocking on the door and rushes to open it. Faces of strangers in uniforms begin lifting her onto a gurney, as Oye gently croons to her in their native language, words of encouragement and love. Minutes later, under a thundering sky, they put her in the ambulance with Oye by her side. Large drops of rain begin to fall across her sheet covered belly, when she hears her daughter singing,

*Mama, I can see light. It is dim, but it is there. I am following it. I am coming Mama.  
Ayotunde in the canal*

The first thing Oye shouts at Ayotunde's arrival, after ten hours of labor, is, "Fanga Alafia. Hello. Welcome." Bolu sees the tears in his eyes as they wrap the baby and place her in his arms. When he gives her to Bolu, she looks first at the child's face and coloring before exhaling a breath of relief. Her daughter has her nose, her grandmother's eyes, her father's chin and a burgeoning color that is a mix of her and Oye. Bolu whispers a prayer of gratitude.

In the cocoon of their assigned room, the next day, Oye holds the sleeping child close to his chest. Bolu begins to doze off as Oye asks if he can turn the television on, if he keeps the volume low. Bolu nods, yes. In seconds, she begins to dream. It is a violent dream that wakes her with a jolt, fifteen minutes later. As her eyes adjust, she looks up at the television screen. A banner is running across the television screen below a hectic scene of people screaming and shouting, "Over 250 Chibok Girls Kidnapped by Boko Haram Militants, Who Have Raped Hundreds of Female Captives in Nigeria."

"Oh, my God, Bolu," says Oye, being careful not to awaken the sleeping child.

Bolu turns away from the television, to look out of the hospital window. She remembers the mountains lessening height as they'd trekked to escape what the hushed call of the trees foretold. They had made it before the heavy rains came, before whispers became truth, before fertile dreams were dashed upon rocks like dirty clothes being washed. She thinks about the panic of her first plane ride and the well of sadness that churned in her stomach as her family

disappeared beneath the clouds. A sadness as deep and as lasting as the secret she must keep from Oye.

“I think our daughter is ready for feeding,” he says in a voice so satiated with happiness it causes tears to spring to Bolu’s eyes.

She takes her daughter to her breast and as she does Ayotunde opens her eyes and never takes them off her mother’s streaked face. Tiny lips surround the dark, dimpled areola of her left breast when Bolu hears a strong cluck from Oye, standing in front of the television.

“This atrocity, on this day, April 14, 2014, the day of our daughter’s birth. Fourteen years since our departure from our homeland, now we see the truth of the trees and the foresight of our parents. We are blessed Bolu. So truly blessed. We have named our daughter well, Ayotunde, joy has come back.”

*Thank you for being my vessel through darkness to the light. As you look in my eyes know that I am grateful. Soon, I will forget all that was taught to me to make this journey, but I will never forget your sacrifice. Ashe! Ashe! Mamma.  
Ayotunde in the world*