

Same Language

Oxi Mancer

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The earbud was the size of a cough sweet and my mother would not hold still for it.

“It goes in your ear, Mama. It doesn’t bite.”

“Everything in this country bites,” she said in Yoruba, and turned her head away from my hand to watch the doors of Arrivals, where the cold came in each time they slid open. She was seventy-four. She wore two wrappers under the coat I had posted to Ibadan in October, the coat buttoned one hole wrong all the way down, and a headtie the colour of a traffic cone. She had not seen me in nine years and she had not yet said so.

I got the bud in on the third try. A small amber light woke on it, then settled. On my phone the Hearth app showed two profiles side by side. ADUNNI OLADIPO. Hears: Yorùbá. Register: Natural. And under it, TUNDE ADEYEMI. Hears: English. Register: Warm.

I had set his in the car park, with the engine running and my thumb hovering over the slider for a long time. The description under Warm read: *Adapts idiom and register for the listener. Softens culturally specific bluntness. Recommended for first meetings.* I had read it perhaps forty times.

Tunde stood behind me with his hands in his hoodie, fifteen, taller than me since the summer, his own bud already in. He had spent the drive telling me this was cringe. He had also, I'd noticed, washed his hair.

My mother saw him and stopped walking.

She looked at him from his trainers to his eyebrows, the way she used to look at a bolt of cloth somebody was trying to sell her at Dugbe market, and she said, in Yoruba, "So this is the one who does not pick up the telephone. Look at his trousers. Is there no belt in Canada? Is he sick? He's as thin as a broom."

On my phone the transcript scrolled up under Tunde's name, half a second later, in neat grey letters:

Look at you. I have waited so long to see you. You're so tall. Are you eating enough?

Tunde's face did something I had not seen it do since he was nine. He took one hand out of his pocket. Then, embarrassingly, beautifully, he bent down and hugged her, and my mother, who did not hug, stood inside it with her arms held out like a woman carrying wet laundry, and over his shoulder she looked at me.

I should say what I knew, and when.

I knew my mother. I had grown up inside her voice: at the stall in Dugbe, where she sold aso oke and adire to women who haggled for sport, and at home, where she spoke to me in exactly the register she used on them. You will not wear that. Who taught you to sit like that. Ninety-one in mathematics, so where did the other nine go. She was not cruel. I want to be clear about that, because later it mattered to me to be clear. She fed me. She paid school fees in cash she counted twice. She sat up with me through two bouts of malaria with a wet cloth and the radio on low. She simply did not have a soft word in her, and I had spent my twenties on another continent learning that most people do, and wondering what was wrong with me that I did not miss them.

I knew Hearth, too. Half the hospital pharmacy wore them. Marisol in dispensing used one with her in-laws from Cebu and said it had saved her marriage. The adverts were all grandmothers: *For families who love each other in different languages*. The register setting was the part the reviews fought about. Literal gave you the words. Natural gave you the sense. Warm gave you, the company said, “the meaning behind the meaning”, which in practice meant that if your mother-in-law said your soup tasted like a wet goat, you heard that she would love the recipe.

There was a fourth line further down the settings, greyed out until you tapped it. *Same-language mode (beta). For difficult conversations. Both parties must consent*. I remember laughing at it at the bus stop. Who needs a translator for their own language?

And I knew Tunde, or I knew the outline of him. He had been a quiet boy and had become a closed one. His father lived in Calgary and sent birthday money on the right day. Tunde had perhaps twenty words of Yoruba, all of them food or insults, and my mother had about the same in English. Twice a year I made him speak to her on video, and the two of them stared at each other across the lag like strangers on opposite platforms, waiting for different trains.

So I put him on Warm, and I did not tell him. I told myself it was the same as choosing which photograph to send. A true one. Just the good one.

It worked. That is the first thing to say about it. It worked so well that by the end of the first week I was jealous of my own son.

Mama woke at five and sat in the kitchen in her coat, because the house was never warm enough for her. Tunde, who had never in his life been awake before eleven on a Saturday, started coming down at seven to sit with her. She showed him how to peel a plantain with one cut down the spine and a thumb under the skin. He showed her the snow on the deck, which she regarded with deep suspicion, and hockey on the television, which she decided was a kind of fighting with brooms. I would come down and find them at the table with their phones lying flat between

them, and hear the conversation in two halves: my mother's rough Yoruba, the one I knew, and then my son laughing at something she had not quite said.

"She says I remind her of her brother," he told me one evening, delighted. "The one who drove trucks?"

What she had said was: "This one sits like my brother Kunle. Like a sack of yams somebody dropped."

I didn't correct him. Kunle had driven trucks. She had loved him. It was not, I told myself, untrue.

I kept the transcript open on my phone the way you keep a hand near a pot on the stove. I read it at work, between prescriptions, in the toilet cubicle. *Your grandmother is so happy you're here.* (Why is this boy wearing socks in the house like an oyinbo.) *I'm proud of you.* (Did you wash? You smell like a wet dog.) *Your mother was a very determined little girl.* (Your mother bit me once, here, on the arm. Look, you can still see it.)

That one I nearly answered. I was at the sink with my hands in the water. I could see the mark on her forearm from where I stood: a pale crescent, faint as a fingernail moon. I had been four. I did not remember it. She remembered it well enough to show it to a boy she had met nine days before. I shut my mouth and rinsed the pot.

On the eleventh night I woke at 02:47 to a noise downstairs and found my mother in the hall in her coat and headtie, looking for her shoes.

"Where are you going?"

"Bread," she said. "I can't sleep. My body thinks it is morning in Ibadan, and your bread is like eating a cloud."

"It's minus nineteen, Mama."

"Then bring a coat."

There was a Portuguese bakery on Dundas, ten minutes' walk, that opened at three to supply the restaurants. I had driven past it a thousand times and never gone in. We walked down the middle of the side street because the pavements were glass, her arm through mine for balance, not affection, she made sure I understood. Our breath went up ahead of us in the orange light. Neither of us wore an earbud. We did not need them. That was the strangest thing about that whole winter: the only two people in the house who shared a language were the only two who were not talking.

The baker was a big man named Rui with flour to the elbows, who looked at my mother's headtie and said "Bom dia" as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world to see a Yoruba market woman in his shop at five past three in Mississauga, and perhaps for him it was. She bought six rolls, counted her change twice, and on the way home she said, without looking at me:

"You put the boy's on the sweet one."

I stopped walking. She didn't, so I had to start again.

"How do you..."

"I told him his trousers were falling down and he hugged me." She snorted, a small white cloud. "I am old, Folake, I am not stupid. Yesterday I told him he eats like a goat. He said, 'Thank you, Grandma, I love you too.'" She copied his accent precisely, and with some pleasure. "So I made him show me the machine on his telephone. He didn't know what he was showing me. There is a button that turns it back into Yoruba. I can read."

I waited for the rest. I realised I had been waiting for it for about thirty years: the sentence after the first sentence, the one that finished the job.

"Leave it," she said.

"What?"

“Leave it on the sweet one.” She shifted the bag of rolls against her chest. “He likes me.”

That was all. We walked home. She ate two rolls standing at the counter in her coat and went back to bed, and I sat in the kitchen until the window went grey, holding a roll I did not eat, trying to work out why I wanted to cry, and for whom.

Tunde found out on a Wednesday, because fifteen-year-olds go into settings.

I don’t know exactly when he moved the slider. I know that at dinner my mother said what she had said most nights, “Eat, eat. You eat like a goat and you’re still thin, where does it all go?”, and piled more rice on his plate, and that Tunde put his fork down.

“Like a goat?” he said.

My mother looked at me. I looked at the phone in my lap. His profile said *Register: Literal*.

“Is that what you’ve been saying?” He was talking to her, but he was looking at me. “The whole time? Is that what she actually...” He pulled his phone out and scrolled up, and of course there was nothing to find; the transcript only keeps the version you heard. He didn’t know what he had missed. He only knew there was a missing.

“Tunde.”

“Did you do this?”

“I set it up,” I said. “Before the airport. I wanted you to...”

“You made her up.”

“I didn’t make her up. Every word was hers. The machine just...”

“Picked different ones.” He stood. His chair scraped. My mother said something sharp in Yoruba, *Sit down, you’ll knock the stew over*, and he heard it now exactly as she said it, and I watched it land on his face like

a slap. He went upstairs. His door did not slam. It closed very quietly, which was worse.

My mother ate the rest of her dinner in silence. Then she said, "You should have put him on the true one from the start."

"You told me to leave it!"

"After," she said. "After you had already chosen." She wiped her plate clean with the last of Rui's rolls. "The beginning is the only thing you really choose. After that you are only choosing whether to keep going."

For two days he avoided her. He ate in his room and left for school before she came down, and she sat in the kitchen in her coat at five, at six, at seven, peeling plantain for nobody.

On the third morning I came down and he was at the table with her again, a knife in his hand, both of their earbuds in, his still on Literal. She was telling him he held the knife like a man trying to kill a snake. He said, "That's rude." She said, "Yes." And he laughed, startled, the way you laugh when you miss a stair in the dark and your foot finds the floor anyway.

I stood in the doorway and listened to them learn each other again, at full price.

It was slower. He sulked when she criticised his hair, and she criticised his hair every day. But something happened that I had not expected, and that I don't think the machine could ever have given him: he started watching her hands. When she said he ate like a goat, she was giving him more food. When she said his hair was a bush that birds would nest in, she reached up and pressed it flat with her palm, and her palm stayed there a second longer than it needed to. He began to translate her himself, out loud, with a fifteen-year-old's relish for being right. "She means she loves me," he would announce, after she had called him lazy, and my mother, hearing that in Yoruba in her own ear, would say, "I mean you are lazy," and he would say, "Yeah, and she loves me," and the

two of them would grin at each other across my kitchen table like a pair of thieves.

He started saying words back. *Jeun*, eat. *Ole*, lazy, which he used on her when she dozed off in front of the hockey. *Ewure*, goat, which he called her as often as she called him, until it stopped being an insult in either direction and became something more like a name.

One night, loading the dishwasher, he asked me why she didn't just say it.

"She doesn't know how," I said.

"Do you?"

I had no answer. He nodded as if I had given one.

In her last week she asked me for the beta.

She had found it on her own; she had been through every screen of Tunde's phone by then, with his permission or without it. She came into the living room where I was folding towels and held his phone out to me, the greyed line now a live blue one. *Same-language mode (beta). For difficult conversations. Both parties must consent.*

"This," she said. "For you and me."

"Mama. We speak the same language."

"We speak the same words," she said. "It is not the same thing. You know it isn't. You have known since you were four." She pushed up her sleeve, not much, just enough.

"What would it even do?"

"Make me sound like that." She tipped her head at the ceiling, where Tunde's music came faintly through. "Like the sweet one. I read what it said to him. Every night in your guest bed I pressed the button and read what I had meant." She said it flatly, the way she used to say prices. "My

mouth was made in the market, Folake. It only knows how to argue. I'm seventy-four. I'm not going to grow a new mouth."

"So you want a machine to lie for you."

"I want it to say what I can't." She held the phone further out. "Both parties, it says. So you choose."

I said yes. I want to be honest about how fast, because it would be easy to tell this as if I hesitated, and I did not. I pressed it, and put my own bud in my ear for the first time since the airport, and my mother sat down on the sofa among the folded towels and said something to me in Yoruba, and the machine said it to me again half a second later, in Yoruba, in her voice, softer.

I won't write down what it was. I have the transcript. I have read it more times than I ever read the description of Warm. It isn't the words. It is that I had been listening for that sentence in her voice my whole life, and when it came it came through a speaker the size of a cough sweet, half a second late, and I took it anyway, with both hands.

For six days we talked like that. Mostly about nothing: the price of diesel in Ibadan, my cousin's wedding, whether Rui's rolls would survive the flight. Sometimes about my father. Once, for most of an hour, about the year I left, and I heard my mother say, in Yoruba, in my ear, that she had stood at the gate at Murtala Muhammed until the plane was gone, and then sat in the car park until dark, because she could not drive home with her eyes like that.

I asked her then whether she had really said it. Underneath, I meant. Without the machine.

She looked at me for a long time. "Would it be better if I hadn't?"

I said I didn't know. That was true. It is still true.

At Pearson, at Departures this time, the doors still letting the cold in, she stood in her wrong-buttoned coat holding a bag of rolls she would not be allowed to take through security, and held Tunde's face in both

her hands. He had taken his earbud out. He'd told me that morning he didn't need it to say goodbye. He said *o dabo*, badly, and *jeun*, and *ewure*, mostly to annoy her, and she laughed so loudly that the security man looked over.

Then she turned to me. My bud was in. Hers was in. Two small amber lights.

She put her palm flat on my hair, the way she did with his, and said something, and half a second later I heard it again in my ear, softer.

Tunde was standing right beside us. He had nothing in his ears. He heard what she actually said, in her own rough market Yoruba, the Yoruba he had spent all winter learning straight from the source, the slow way, by watching her hands.

On the drive home we were both quiet, and the snow came down through the headlights as if something were being sifted.

I have never asked him what she said.

He would tell me. That is the kind of boy he has become. He would tell me word for word, and then he would tell me what she meant, the way she taught him, and I believe he would be right.

I keep the soft version instead. Both parties consented; I read it on nights I can't sleep, in her voice, half a second late, and most nights that is enough. On the other nights I go down to the kitchen at some bad hour, and sometimes Tunde is there already, eating cold rice from the pot like a goat, and I sit across from him, and I nearly ask.

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