RIVERS IN THE DESERT

Wandering through this snow globe, I feel warm in the thoughts of Asheitu Ayari Billa, my grandmother. No reverberation of sound is sweet enough to envelop me as her raspy, sassy voice. I feel her as I remember that humid day in November four years ago when I visited her for a couple of months after over fourteen years of separation. I remember this day because she wore a long, floral, figure-hugging maxi dress, and I was enamored by her beauty. As a young woman, I am convinced that her style is overshadowed only by her generosity of spirit. We sat outside as she fanned the flames of a coal pot, roasting plantains. I have always loved plantains and she remembered! With each fanning motion, the coal burned more red with a coat of ash.

As I watched her, a bonfire of ambition was ignited in my chest. I yearned to shower her with pink and yellow flowers, and take her where magnolia trees entice the senses with a joyful fragrance, and colorful butterflies accent the day. A place where the music of the birds greets the dance in her every step. She is a tropical island whose prayers become fruits that nourish the soul, a reminder that day always comes. I write her maiden name, Ayari Billa, to establish the core of who she is before the old man came.

***

Weak men are the source of heaviness in this culture. They take all they can but refuse to give. Their goal is complete depletion. They find a gift of a woman and turn her brittle, sour, and coarse, a rose reduced to its thorns.
The weak men of this culture are poison, the Achilles heel in the household. Their egos are easily bruised and they find power in lies rooted in deep loathing of the feminine. Afflicted with the disease of empty conceit, they stunt growth. They are enemies of progress, the misfortune of the betrothed, and leeches of the spirit; even the Devil is left speechless.

In her late adolescent years, grandmother was considered too old to be unmarried in a culture where child marriage is a cultural norm in her hometown of Zebilla, Ghana. Consequently, her mother and local pastor arranged for her to marry the old man (then young) with nothing but trauma to offer her. This marriage began decades of abuse, grossly layered from the physical to the consecutive attempts of defilement to her spirit. This abuse intensified as she suffered a series of miscarriages in an attempt to conceive a child – almost like interference by the gods of mercy because they saw the legacy of torture and violence lurking in the shadow of their descendants. She was greeted with insults and interrogations of her womanhood by the community, the church, and the old man. The shadow, eager to express itself through havoc and chaos, continues to be satiated.

This evil was unaware of the valor and grace of grandmother Asheitu. Though she, too, was thrown into the fire, she has retained her unconquerable will. She braved sandstorms, earthquakes of heartbreak, and suffocating floods, and I was snuggly wrapped on her back with her orange cloth, and I was her witness. Through my infancy, I didn’t know it then but I was watching her betray herself by giving the world her unrequited life force. She was my grandmother, yet there were always new children of relatives and worse-off neighbors. She agreed to be a bargain for many who only intended to deplete her reservoir of self-esteem. I watched her neglect herself when she needed her attention the most. She was trying to make herself easy for the world because she wanted to relieve it from all the harshness she had experienced.

The flames cackled as she flipped the plantains over with her calloused hands, rough from gruesome years of farming. The fire in my heart rages for her embezzled joy. To only know fear at the touch of a man’s hands. To never fully melt into anyone in trust. To only know marriage as a duty to God. I now watch her unravel the strings that held together that cloth of shame. The shame where the maltreated is subdued into silence. I watch her draw near to God so that the glacier of her heart melts into an ocean of love.

She climbed scores of mountains, befriended many wolves, and surrendered to the omens of many owls, yet she transcended beyond each episode. She still sways gaily when she is overcome with good news, she still
laughs from the depths of her belly, and she is still quick to check a person who comes at her sideways. Amid the storm, she goes deep, stands tall, and dances with the callous winds. Every day, she strives to be the best version of herself. She prides herself in her cooking skills, her unmatched resourcefulness, her always moisturized and perfumed skin, her sense of fashion, and her unshakeable faith. Through my grandmother, I have learned that mediocrity is the enemy of life. To be anything other than the best version of oneself is a slow, painful suicide.

On the phone with her today, I heard her tell stories of the land and its submission to the long hands of God. She talked of the love affair between the elements which guide people to the light within. I strive to immortalize her name, immortalize her face, immortalize her ways. Asheitu is the River in the desert.

***

**SUNDAY BEST**

During my stay of several months at my grandmother’s home in Ashaiman, Lebanon, a town on the outskirts of Accra, Ghana, days easily became repetitive in the bustling town. Each day I would wake up, fetch water from the tap outside in the purple bucket, bathe, wear something of light material, and go sit outside for fresh air. The cement walls of the house hoard the heat from outside, and without a fan, it was unbearable to stay inside. My grandparents, relatives, and I would find a spot of shade outside and sit on a blue plastic chair, gradually chasing shadows with the shifting position of the sun.

Each day, meals were like clockwork. The same neighborhood kids would walk through the borderless compound to the annoyance of my grandparents as they discussed one-day building walls to prevent random passers-by. The barbershop directly opposite the house blasted the same songs. The same hawkers would, in succession, stop by to try and sell their new inventory of fabric, shoes, vegetables, tools, and a myriad of other items. Afternoon naps were habitual when the sun had vanquished all the shadows. Because every day was simple, it was easy to feel excited when something different happened during the day.
The only day that interrupted this plain daily pattern was Sunday. As a Pentecostal Christian and a loyal, long-term member of the local Assemblies of God church, my grandmother was influential in ensuring everyone in the house was up early and prepared for church every single Sunday. These mornings were filled with liveliness and sweet expectation. Everyone wore their Sunday best and we walked about half an hour through the urban slum to the church, often passing attendees of other churches in their Sunday-exclusive fashion. With age and physical limitations, the walks had gotten longer for my grandmother, yet she was enthusiastic and pushed herself during these trips. The church was the place for families to connect with all their friends in the area, it was the place to sing and dance, and one of the very few places to wear nice, special, tailored clothes for the majority of attendees.

My greatest delight while attending the church was the opportunity to see people dazzle as they adopted a temporary regal demeanor conjured through the different styles and colors of their clothing. On Sundays, farmers appeared as established entrepreneurs, market women became Madames, and neighborhood youth transformed into heirs of nobility. Adorned in lace, satin, and Ankara designs individualized per the fashionista’s taste, it was not uncommon for folks to inquire about each other’s tailors. The women adorned in their finest jewelry of gold, silver and pearls, and the men decked out in their agbada and leather shoes emitted elegance and poise. On Sundays, poverty could not interfere with sophistication.

***

Grandmother enters the church as if she wears a crown. She has a permanent seat at the front of the church, which is always reserved for her. As soon as she enters, she is met with hugs, greetings, and sisterly acknowledgments from the other elderly women of the church. I manage to attract side-eyes from women who noticed me sitting in another’s reserved seat next to my grandmother in the front, per her insistence. This is resolved each week when grandmother tells the other women matter of factly that it is her decision, and they accept it.

During the offertory collection, the church becomes a dynamic concert as music permeates the unpainted, gray, cement building. The bass is so deep that I can feel each beat rippling from a knot in my chest and spreading through the rest of my body. In the conglomerate of sound, I imagine our bodies absorbing and morphing to patterns of the beats like in cymatics, the study of visual effects of sound frequencies. In the sea of church women singing, dancing, and fainting from catching the holy spirit,
grandmother gyrates to the drums, piano, and cymbal blasting through the loudspeakers. She becomes a volcano with each pop of her chest and back, in and out like sputtering lava. At this moment, she is sweating, shouting, and praying. She is possessed. With each pop, she releases the heat in every slap, the knot in every kick, and the ache in every kiss of her husband, the old man’s fist.

She plays the tambourine with a gusty passion. She plays as if she is shaking the anger out of her. Each flick of her wrist and bang of her palm sends the shriek of the zills through the air and she shakes out the insults, every single untrue word planted deep in the valleys of her self-belief. With each shake, she plucks from the roots of hateful eyes that have made their way into her reflection. She shakes the tambourine as if she is reassembling the remnants of her soul, shattered into hundreds of zills. Grandmother finds grounding as she releases steam when she speaks in tongues. The boiling red river flowing through her veins pacifies. Her rage cools and she transforms from lava into land. This ritual has occurred faithfully on every single Sunday ever since I was a little girl.

I sway from side to side and clap my hands to the rhythm of the music. I do not join the people gathered close to the stage of the church, dancing in a circle. The children are also galvanized by the energy in the church and they join the dancing crowd. Though I absorb the electricity of the space buoyantly through me, I feel hyper visible and out of place as I continue to examine the depths of my complicated relationship with the church. I began battling with it as an adolescent when I questioned the God who condoned the exploitation of the poor and the actions of malicious people who committed heinous acts just moments before and immediately after the service.

My anger towards God could never be total, as I learned the art of faith through trust and surrender from my grandmother. This skill has consistently liberated me. As a little girl, I always looked forward to church with my grandmother on Sundays, because I got to dress in my best clothes and get snacks after the service from vendors outside the church. During the sermon, I was sent with the other children to Sunday school to be out of the adult’s hair. During the offertory collection, we were sent back to our guardians so we could join in the praise and thanksgiving. Grandmother would give me a crumbled bill from the roll of cloth around her waist to drop into the basket. I used to dance in the church back then. I would watch in awe as grandmother and the other women danced and yielded control to the holy spirit, and I mimicked their movements. I always found myself pleasantly exhilarated during those moments.
As an adult watching grandmother pray and praise in church, I realize how pivotal this place has been to her survival ever since moving to Ashaiman. It is the place where she can breathe. The church is where she can roar. After the service, grandmother exudes a luscious quality as she flutters to her friends to share greetings and laughter. Her voice is hoarse from the confrontation with God, and her tone is breathy and soft like butterfly wings. She is plump and saturated in light again, enough to overcome the old man until next week.

***

**AMPESI AND PALAVA SAUCE**

The sizzling sliced onions caramelize in hot olive oil and join in the rumble of the range hood above the stove. As I stand in my kitchen on this mild spring day, I am transported to calm early childhood evenings in Ghana, when the loudest sounds are the orchestra of birds chirping and the hearty laughter of children playing in the neighborhood. This acoustic experience is augmented by my grandmother’s clanking pans as she prepares dinner on the coal pot outside. Fortunately for me, she is cooking one of her staples, palava sauce, a leafy green stew, packed with a savory depth with ampesi, boiled cassava and plantains. The air is fragrant with the umami flavor of dawa dawa, fermented locust beans, fried with an onion base. The last time I added dawa dawa to my own recipe of palava sauce, I spent days airing out my apartment to the displeasure of my roommate, expressed through her subtle side-eye.

Without much familiarity nor preference for a blender, Grandmother asks me to help her crush dry fish and shrimp to season the stew before the tomatoes, onions, peppers, and Maggi cubes in a black asanka bowl, an earthenware bowl with a wooden grinder which is fun to use at first but always leaves my wrists sore. I don’t mind it though, because there is a distinct folksy taste that emanates from the clay pot. I occasionally look up to see grandmother peel the tuber of cassava and the hand of plantains to be cooked in a separate pot. When she finishes, she soaks the cassava root in water and begins to remove the stems from the cassava leaves which are used for the stew. Years of practice have made her dexterous with the large sharp knife as she slices through the thick skin of the cassava. Despite the commonality of this staple local dish, grandmother manages to add her own
accent flavor to the meal, which I have yet to distinguish from anywhere else. For grandmother, cooking delicious food is one of the ways she expresses her excellence, so she takes pride in the compliments she receives either through words or the soft moans of every lip-smacking bite. I laugh as I watch her relish in the family’s reaction to her cooking. With clean hands, I immerse myself in the fullness of the meal. I feel the warmth emanating from the steam as I break a piece of tender cassava, dipping it to scoop the moist leafy sauce into my mouth in just the right measure. The intimacy in this dining ritual supersedes the eating itself; it is a conversation between I and the ancient sanguine nature of the food. What adds to the delight is the lingering scent on my fingers after I wash them, almost as if I’m savoring the meal all over again, even after I have finished. The echo of the flavors on my fingers is a gratifying reminder that I have indulged in a truly satisfying feast.

The palava sauce is layered with a homely, nutty flavor of the palm oil, a subtle sweetness from the onions and tomatoes, zest from the peppers, an intricate aromatic cadence from the different spices, and a slight bitterness from the greens. The meal is complete with the earthy flavor of the boiled cassava tuber and unripe plantain. This sumptuous feast is thick with a grainy, sometimes chewy, texture. It is a substantial meal that leaves no room for dessert. It is the type of meal that makes me want to sit on the floor so I can truly experience each dimension of flavor cloaked within every bite. This meal is only second to her signature recipe for tuo zaffi and ayoyo soup, with a draw as slippery as the Kusaal tongue.

I have spent years memorizing and refining my own recipe for ampesi and palava sauce. It continues to be a staple dish for me, and instead of cassava leaves, which I do not have access to here, I use spinach and kale. I achieve the umami flavor with a generous amount of crayfish powder and the recipe still feels complete. Instead of cassava root, I eat this sauce with rice, potatoes, pasta, and when I am lucky, plantains. Upon preparation, I serve myself and eat with a cold silver fork instead of my hand. As I cook my version of the palava sauce in my kitchen, I am sure that the stew would taste better with a palm oil base, but when I try to order it online, I always end up reading about the environmental impacts of the oil production and it briefly snuffs out my appetite for the unique flavor. I crave palava sauce because it is the closest I can meet with my grandmother. The depth of this flavor is rich enough to curtail the distance I feel between us, and piquant enough to connect us across the Atlantic Ocean.

Standing in the kitchen in my Lebanon, New Hampshire apartment, I smirk at the coincidence of living in the same name-sake as my grandmother, who is in the town of Lebanon in Ashaiman, Ghana. We are so
far from each other, in age and in place, yet our lives continue to beautifully parallel with each other. I yearn for the ground, for the blossoms of spring so that I may feel the Earth beneath my naked feet. Ampesi and palava sauce ground me in the understanding that the food closest to the Earth tastes the best. It is closest to home, and in my kitchen, with the blender, microwave and electric stove, I attempt to summon the taste of my untainted soul.