

The Ghosts Are Going Shopping

By Esi Nkyekyer

He glares at Yaw, silencing him from across the dining table. “Stop it! Stop whining,” he growls, leaning in.

The legs of his chair screech backwards against the hardwood floor. Yaw bristles and shoves the words back down his throat with the ease of one swallowing vomit. Eyes wide, he tries to match Kwesi’s stern gaze. He focuses on the crevasse between his eyebrows, a feature he has not noticed before. Yet his eyelids brim. The tears sting before they flow over, trickling down the landscape of his face. Mucus soon drains from his nostrils, less rapidly than the tears though just as relentlessly. Tears and mucus travel together over his quivering lips, down his puckered chin and onto his breakfast. His father’s expression does not soften. “Complaining is not going to bring her back.”

With Yaw’s muffled sobs tailing him, Kwesi rises from the table, his eggs and buttered toast untouched. He grabs the stroller. The loosely hinged front door slams shut behind him. Outside, he can finally breathe. The shock of frosty air relieves the feeling of drowning that engulfed him inside. He pauses at the doorstep. He can barely make out the tops of the Douglas firs silhouetted against the dense wall of gray.

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It was a similarly foggy morning when Abena found out she was pregnant again. Yaw was already seven. They had been trying, but not too hard, to have another child. It was after his third birthday party, when all his friends had gone, and he was sitting quietly on the living room floor amid his new toys, that they knew. They did not want him to grow up alone. Yaw, in turn, became increasingly impatient for a sibling. A brother, to be exact. Over time, as the hope of any sibling seemed to wane, he warmed to the idea of a sister. When the ultrasound showed they were having a girl, Yaw beamed from ear to ear and wrapped his arms tightly around Abena’s expectant abdomen. “I’m going to be the best brother ever,” he whispered into her belly button.

In some ways, Kukuwa spared them the full brunt of loss. She was more considerate of her temporary home in Abena’s body. With Kukuwa, the skin on Abena’s face softened and took on a paradoxical glow. There was no morning sickness. She felt energetic. Pregnancy had however been physically grueling with Yaw. Abena was constantly bone-tired and easily winded. Her nausea came in unpredictable waves that never subsided. Even the foods she craved smelled putrid or tasted like rust. Darkened areas erupted on the skin of her forehead and cheeks, like paint splattered haphazardly on an unsuspecting canvas. As she expanded, her feet became swollen, taking her shoe size from an average nine to a giantly ten. The pain that eventually seared through her being as Yaw’s head emerged, tearing her open, had been worse than the hours of preceding labor. Abena would have gladly endured comparably debilitating symptoms this time around, for the promise of a healthy child.

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Kwesi opens the stroller after walking it down the front steps. The spring morning chill settles onto his ears. He cups them in both hands to temporarily ward off the cold. He has forgotten his ear muffs and gloves but cannot bring himself to go back indoors. He sets off running. Today, he forgoes his usual route and runs wherever his legs decide.

Three months had passed since he began running with the stroller. Kukuwa would have been as old as Yaw when he had started the same with him. As soon as Yaw could hold up his head, Kwesi made him his running companion. He would get up early, feed him, change his diaper, bundle him up in a mishmash of clothes, and strap him into the stroller. He had relished their daily hour alone together. At first Yaw mostly slept. Then he would stare straight ahead. Soon, he started looking up at the trees, or over his shoulder at a dog walking by, or at the cars moving speedily along. He wriggled his feet when something excited him, and chortled at the most random sights. Like that hawk they once saw perched atop an oak tree, eagerly devouring its unfortunate prey.

“I spy with my little eye, something beginning with A,” he thinks to himself while running along, both hands firmly gripping the stroller’s handle. He imagines Kukuwa cooing in response, unable to mouth any discernible words, but attempting to communicate nonetheless.

“Asshole.” He had been such an asshole. Yaw had gone on about not having had enough time with his sister. “Why did you hog her?” he yelled, accusing his mother, aunts, uncles, grandparents, godparents, and most of all, him. “You should have let me hold her for as long as I wanted.” He insisted that he had been gentle enough with Kukuwa. She was his only sister and he loved her. “Why did you let me miss out, Dada?”

“I spy with my little eye, something beginning with B.” Kwesi visualizes Kukuwa kicking her legs through the stroller blanket in response. “Bastard,” he mutters.

When the obstetrician had asked to meet them sooner after her first trimester screening ultrasound, he had thought nothing of it. Years ago, she had been worried about Yaw as well. Yet he turned out better than fine. Kwesi wished she had done more to prepare them. She could have told her assistant to speak with greater urgency while scheduling the appointment. She could have foreseen their anguish and softened the blow of her “not so great news.”

She had said there was too much fluid around the neck of the fetus. And that she was concerned about extra chromosomes. Tri-so-mies. She went on to say that such abnormalities occurred more commonly in older mothers, with older eggs. She said they could wait and see, or choose to terminate. The fetus’s odds of making it to term were low, of surviving birth, lower, and of living for more than a few hours thereafter, even lower still. “How could having more of a good thing be so dire?” he wondered. “Three, instead of two?”

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He turns left instead of his usual right upon leaving home, yet his legs lead him back along his habitual route. There are few passersby. An elderly couple walking toward him pauses to steady their gait as he runs past. They nod at him while peering questioningly into the empty stroller. Kwesi pays them no mind.

Brooding over what to do next made them each feel older than their forty-two years. Should they suffer through immense grief now or delay it until later? Clarity played a cruel game of hide and seek with Abena. She needed more time. Better still, she needed time to stop. Then, she could search every crevice of the internet and stare up at the ceiling late into the night for as many hours as it took. It was hard for her to understand how Kwesi could be so sure. For

him, suspending Kukuwa's life was the most merciful path to take. He was convinced that doing so would lessen the inescapable agony of becoming attached and falling in love, only to lose her. "Think about Yaw," he urged. "Think about how less heartbroken he would be."

With each passing day, Abena hoped she would wake up to find she had just been having an awful nightmare. She wanted to wipe away her tears once and for all, and no longer grapple with Kukuwa's tenuous life and certain demise. Yet subsequent ultrasounds sealed Kukuwa's fate. Trisomy Eighteen. Besides the fluid buildup on her neck, she floated in too much amniotic fluid for her smaller-than-normal form. Then there was the unusual way her index finger folded over her middle finger, and little finger wrapped around her fourth. The good news was that her abdominal wall was intact and she was not turned inside out.

When they eventually told the obstetrician what they had decided, she listened attentively. "We want to let her life unfold naturally," Abena revealed, sighing heavily while reaching for Kwesi's trembling hands. Although the obstetrician had said there was no right or wrong path, the nervous manner with which she cleared her throat and averted her gaze, suggested otherwise. She nodded slowly with her hands firmly clasped beneath her chin, pondering their choice, while trying hard not to wear her heart on her crisply pressed white coat sleeve. "That sounds very reasonable," she replied. "Very."

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On the third day after Kwesi's initial run with the empty stroller, there was but a rare cloud in the sky. It had been an unusual morning for winter, with the sun radiating brilliantly. It was also unusual that he had overslept, even for the weekend.

The night before, he had dreamt of Kukuwa's birth. He encountered the same fear that had overcome him when Abena had gone into labor. He was terrified that the trauma of leaving the womb would extinguish Kukuwa. But her path had been well worn by her brother before. So she was squeezed ever so tightly, enough to aid her exit but not enough to maim or hasten the ending of her life. He remembered how she had not cried much, not even with her first gasp. She coughed and sputtered as the nurses suctioned away the amniotic fluid that had cushioned her in her temporary abode. A throng of physicians and nurses examined her to their satisfaction, then disappeared. "Everything is good for now," they said. "For now."

The lonely quiet of the hospital birthing suite enveloped him. Abena held Kukuwa and together they watched her diminutive chest rise and fall with rapid, shallow, yet intentional breaths. Abena began counting them as they came and went, each inhale and exhale. Kwesi joined her. It was not long before they lost count because she kept on breathing. For a while, Kukuwa did not open her eyes. She looked like she was dreaming. Perhaps of the warm muffled comfort she had just left behind, savoring it a little longer before fully facing her new world. When she finally did, it was to look up at Kwesi as he held her swaddled frame and rocked her gently back and forth in the nursing chair. It was then that Kwesi had woken up.

It had begun to drizzle as he ran along the lake path. The drizzle turned into a downpour with the sun beaming all the while. He tried to find shelter and happened upon a willow tree, entirely naked of its leaves. Surprisingly little rain reached him as he stood underneath, so he looked up. A swoop of swifts had settled on the highest branches of the tree, forming an avian canopy. A few darted playfully back and forth, enjoying the sunlight as it filtered through the rain drops. With the rain's gradual decrescendo, the swifts took off in murmuring unison. A breeze blew tenderly as they ascended, causing tiny bumps to ripple across his skin. Sun rays

settled on his bare arms and legs, warming him. He closed his eyes and noticed a stirring in his chest that moved him to place both hands over his heart.

At that moment, he felt Kukuwa's presence. Her essence startled, delighted and saddened him. He stood in quiet disbelief until the remaining clouds had been wrung dry, hoping to prolong the transcendent calm that shrouded him. In this world, her life had been suspended, perhaps to be continued elsewhere. Whenever it rained while the sun was still shining, his grandmother would say the ghosts were going shopping. He had never quite understood the shopping part. Now he had questions about the ghosts.

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Kwesi looks down at his watch. Almost two hours have gone by since he started running. The fog seems heavier and closer to the ground and he can only see a few feet in front of him. He is thirsty and can feel the cold seeping into his muscles and bones.

He had not felt as close to Kukuwa since the sunshower, under the willow tree, shielded by the canopy of swifts. The closest he had come was during his dreams, especially the one that had replayed every night for the past few weeks. In it, he sees himself walking through the quiet of a Sunday morning, sixteen weeks after Kukuwa's birth. Abena is snoring softly, exhausted. Yaw is slowly rousing, fighting to stay asleep. He hovers over Kukuwa's crib and watches her eyes dart back and forth behind her eyelids. He gently traces his finger along her earlobes, each with a depression just beyond the arch that makes them look like butterfly wings. "Tomorrow is starting to feel like a sure thing for you, my sweet," he whispers.

He lifts her gently out of the crib and kisses her lightly on her forehead and cheeks. She stirs, momentarily opening her eyes. He settles into the nursing chair, cradling her. Closing his eyes, he basks in the warmth of the morning sun streaming in through the window. He wonders how much milk Kukuwa will devour today, hoping she does better than the day before. He opens his eyes and looks down at her. She is very still, with no more breaths to give. His hands begin to quiver and he gasps as tiny bumps undulate over his skin. She is gone.

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Kwesi runs for so long that his thigh and calf muscles start to cramp up. He hobbles over to a bench by the boat launch and hails a ride with his phone. The driver is fifteen minutes away. His ears and fingers are numb by the time the driver finally approaches. Kwesi eagerly attempts to open the back seat door. But it is locked. The driver rolls down his window and starts explaining that he does not have the right kind of car seat to safely transport a child. He offers to help him find a driver who is better equipped. Kwesi gawks at him, confused. The driver points to the stroller beside him.

"Oh!" Kwesi remarks, realizing the driver can only see the back of it. "It's empty."

The driver nods knowingly and says, "Great way to build resistance."

"Oh?"

"You know, running with a stroller."

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The fog is starting to lift when Kwesi arrives back at home. He gently closes the door behind him. The house is eerily quiet. His breakfast is still on the dining table. He tiptoes upstairs. Abena is curled up with Yaw on his twin bed. She has her arms wrapped around him. They are

both sound asleep. Kwesi notices the salty sheen of dried up tears on Yaw's face. He sits down on the carpeted bedroom floor next to the bed, leans his head against it, closes his eyes and waits for them to wake up.

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