

‘The Tug’

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When the tugging started on her right elbow, as she slept folded in on herself as she used to, before Olivier, when she was alone and cherished her aloneness for its privacy, that image of all of them growing old together had begun to fade. She had begun to forget what each of them looked like. Not because the Event had happened so long ago, but because the shock of their sudden disappearance broke something in her mind, that part that was able to take things in and let them go, that wanted for little more than she had. The violence of the loss was like nothing she had ever experienced before, not like her parents’ departures or the grandmother waving goodbye to her as she climbed into the back of Aunt and Uncle’s four-wheel drive where she sat between two of the cousins, their sweaty thighs touching stickily together in the heat, forming an unexpected bond in place of the tearing away from all that she had then held dear and familiar.

The morning of the Event, her three were there, eating breakfast, fighting over something that would soon be forgotten; they went off to school, hair combed or plaited, looking smart in their school clothes. They came home from school, washed up, changed into play clothes, did their homework, then asked for permission to go to sit down to dinner. She’d said yes, as she usually always did (why had she said yes, why hadn’t she been more strict, as Olivier had started to insist that she be?), and out they went, little arms flailing in that smooth, devil-may-care way that only children have – miniature dancers with hidden, internal choreographers named happiness and simplicity, love. That’s what they were – love in movement, her love, Olivier’s, all of the world’s love wrapped up in their little fists pumping through the air, feet following, drumming the earth for joy.

Then, the tug, in the middle of the dark. She didn’t think it could be any of them returning, at first, even though she did turn to the darkness next to her, inches above the ground and say: *please. Please leave.* Then turned back her head against the thin mattress she had been given in the camp by some act of grace because she’d come there with nothing more than the stitch of clothes on her back, a headdress, some flat-heeled shoes, a ribbon from one of their daughters’ heads. Less, even, than she’d had when she’d left the grandmother and was amazed at all the things that Aunt and Uncle would give her, alongside their own children, as if she belonged

there, even as she felt her unbelonging, even as she became her own true self without knowing who exactly who that might be.

The children came to define her. Not even Olivier had been able to mark her in that way. They taught her who she was and who she wanted to be. Not exactly a mother but something of the divine, an intermediary between heaven and earth, the vessel that brought them from over there to here, who'd made flesh out of spirit. They made her believe in holy things, for a time, until they all disappeared, in a matter of seconds, and the miracles that they were became dust, leaving only her above ground to preach about their passage, a passage she no longer believed in, and for which she refused to testify.

She turned to the heavy presence settled next to the mattress, pawing at her, and said: *I can't see you. Would you please stop? Can't you see I'm tired? There's nothing left for you here. Go back where you came from.* Then her face rough against the fabric of the mattress; Olivier gone as well. No warmth next to her. What had happened to Olivier? That, she didn't know. But the tadpoles, yes, if she allowed herself to think about it, she knew.

They were all beneath the neighbour's house. Had meowed like kittens for her, for anyone, for hours, until they stopped making a sound, and when they moved the slab from above the space that housed them, she knew already that none of them would be breathing, moving like they used to, dancing flowers on supple stems; she knew they had all stopped making noise because the air ran out. You can't take a fish out of its water and expect it to continue living. She knew this from her time living close to water, so she turned away when they brought them out, one by one, those limp bodies not the ones she had birthed, one after the other, two years apart, then three. No, she said, these bodies are not mine, and walked away from the bloodied and broken bones, the glassy, bulging eyes, the tears frozen to the skin by dust. She saw but pretended not to see and let them take the bodies of her three away. They would never dance, or move, or grow long hair down their backs. They would never sway against a sea wave or a lover or the sheer bliss of their own bodies at rest. They would never know her again, or Olivier. Where was he? She turned away from the question in the same way that she turned away from the children's bodies. The bodies that were-no-longer-the-children. Rather she should say: those husks. *Leave me be*, she said, at the source of the tugging. Inside herself she was in a rage. How dare it pretend to be one of them, to tug at her like that, and torture her with a memory she strove to forget?

The rage manifested itself in a refusal to conform to camp life: the lining up for rice delivery (the rice was meted out from fat white burlap-like bags emblazoned with the red, white and blue stripes of the American flag by the plastic cup-full; scrawny children who seemed to belong to no one moved through the sinew of legs with eyes towards the ground, picking up

fallen grains into the palms of their hands); the lining up for water when the big truck with the rounded back came trundling down the broken cement, spilling half its contents along the way and more when it stopped to open the faucets installed at the back before anyone was ready to fill their ramshackle containers (there was a wide array of recipients ranging from small, chipped china cups, to emptied coffee cans, to multicoloured Tupperware to, at the beginning, the large translucent containers designed for hauling water from distant wells that some had had the foresight of totting with them rather than attempt to save photographs and whatever trinkets they held dear that meant nothing at all to anyone else on earth); the lining up to take a piss in the trenches dug out along the extremities of the camp by men who spoke a language no one could understand, even though some looked like them (dark of skin, and gaunt – as if they came from a place where food was also scarce). The lining up. The lining up. And now the pawing at night. Why had the ground opened up and swallowed them whole only to leave her, alone, walking the broken roads?

She had crossed over. That's what it was – crossed into an in-between world in which the ghosts could see her but she could not see or touch their shimmering contours. In the heat of late afternoon, when everything and everyone was burdened from accumulated weariness and humidity, she thought she could see their shapes bump into the living, push their way through crowds, linger over the dead as if recognizing themselves only to continue on to some unknown destination where they seemed to dematerialise. Only these shapes – huge tear-shaped globes – moved her temporarily out of her state of lethargy and despondency: she followed them blind to the cries of the other camp dwellers all around her (some fighting over the right to a piece of dirt where another had already pitched a tent and installed his woman; the *madanm saras* already devising ways to set up stalls to sell god-knows... what was there left to sell? But soon they would be making food from the rations being handed out by NGOs (Not God's Own, she thought – who were they really?); some less fortunate would revert to making the mud cookies that outsiders argued never existed so that their charges would seem less desolate; some yelled after her: *ou la, ou pra'l alle?* (you, you there, where are you going?) Some just shook their heads in recognition of madness when they saw it: *li te gayen twa pitit...* (three little ones, she had, all gone). Sometimes the mention of the children made her lose concentration and she retreated back to her tent, a dirty grey tarp the colour of hurricane clouds. On it is written: «A gift from the American people» and «in association with the Republic of Ireland». What America has to do with Ireland, she doesn't know, except for the fact that the largest portable phone company in the country is owned by the Irish; she doesn't know why. Olivier had wanted to buy a franchise, get out of accounting for others. Work for the Irish. Better than working for the Americans? *A ma che*, Olivier would say, sucking his

teeth, *tout blan se blan*. What did it matter? He'd say, those foreigners are all the same. She wishes they'd had other things in mind like escape routes and exit strategies. They'd set their eyes on nothing but a future in which everything would go according to a fabricated plan they believed in more than in reality itself - or that amplified it - making them trust that everything was possible and that they would not succumb to the ill fate that others had because they hadn't planned enough. What was real was the sound of the tiny patterings of the footsteps of the children running through the house, pretending that they were invisible, giggling: it was in the warmth of their bodies piled together under the covers of the too-small, big-enough bed: it was in the every day rhythm of things, its steadfastness.

She had seen the babies' bodies. But where was Olivier's?

She could only close her eyes against the madness all around her, the long lines, the perseverance of everyone pretending that life was going on. Let them believe that this was living. She would remain in the shadows, trying to follow the orbs into that place to which they went as they dissipated into thin air at the end of a trail that usually brought her footsteps to stop at the base of the wall of a tent behind which she knew could only lay one thing - a body laying in rest, the face an impenetrable mask of features contorted to reflect the pain or peace of the last moments before breath stopped. Before the day was out, the vultures would come, take out the body, throw it away like a sack of coal; the lucky ones were enveloped in a bed sheet, or bagged - the others were taken out in the very clothes they had expired, without washing of the body, scrubbing of feet, without the women's hair being tied back and wrapped, the men without a last shave and oiling of their faces (all the things she hadn't done for her three; all the customs she wished she hadn't known only she could realize; but when all was said and done, they were gone; she was no longer a mother with the responsibility of a mother: what good would have come of the gestures? What good?). Then would come the picking over of the belongings, then the tent, then the space itself. There would be fighting, biting, kicking. Then the camp manager (if there was one) would appear and decide, if the volley of slaps and punches had not been enough to settle the matter of the dispersal of goods.

Inevitably, there was a pecking order so it was better to learn to fight. She didn't know how she'd gotten the space she had, what hands brought her there, erected the tent with the American/Irish logo, put a mattress inside, a plastic jar for water and a torn piece of paper in the bottom of a bowl with a wooden spoon weighing it down. It took her days to see the piece of the paper and the words scribbled in pencil on it: *Nou se wozo*. She took the piece of paper, folded it, put it in her bra as if it was a currency she needed to protect. *Wozo*. Reed. Olivier used to call her that. You bend but you don't break. You bend. Don't break. Feeds on water, multiplies. She'd never seen any die. But maybe this is why they stood in marshes, lived

between worlds, feeding on water, stuck in mud. Like her now, resigned to living on air, stuck on the mattress with her thoughts, and the tugging in the pitch dark of night. Why couldn't it leave her alone, with its little fingers and insistent pulling? She had enough of that tugging for a lifetime, thought she would never have a full night of sleep again after the third one came, so small and puny Olivier thought she would die within a week. But she didn't. *Wozo*, like you, Olivier said. But under certain conditions, even *wozo* dry out, perish.

The second time the tugging happened, reminding her more and more of that she wished to forget, she knew it was there for her: it was not an accident. Was it one of the orbs that she followed through the camp in the late afternoons when she found the energy to raise herself from the mattress in the tent? What was it? What was she? Others had begun to ask her as her clothes turned to rags and her skin scaly from lack of washing. Some time had elapsed or maybe no time had elapsed. No, yes, some time. Long enough that she had had to cut off some of her long hair because she could not keep it as she had, oiled and braided. She contemplated cutting it down to the scalp, like a mourner. She had seen some rural people do this, when her grandmother died, for instance, and she was brought back for a day of burial: all the old women had shaved their heads. They looked like old men, she thought. She stared. Stop staring, Aunt had said. They look like old men, she had said in turn. Aunt had shrugged: at their age, what does it matter? She thought that today, now, after the Event, maybe it didn't matter that she was still a young woman. She felt old: the flesh of her body hung on her bones like a coat hung on a peg in the wall. She was an old woman: she could shave her head. But she wanted to wait a while longer, in case Olivier returned. In case he was still alive. The only way he could recognize her would be by her hair: it was her last distinguishing feature now that her flesh had become flaccid, her cheeks hollowed, her eyes smileless. At some point, the hands that had gotten her into the tent came back and shook her gently from sleep one morning to give her a washing down near the place where the women beat the clothes of dirt when water was scarce. They took the dress that had begun to stick to her skin off of her (they had to cut her out of it) and gave her something new to wear (Olivier would never recognize her now). She panicked when they took the brassiere off and the piece of paper fell out. She screamed until the hands gave her back the piece of paper after she had been dried off and returned to the calm shade of her tent. She held the scrap of paper close to her until she fell asleep that day. She slept through the heat of the day in broad light.

Did spirits prefer cleanliness? Had she known this? Avoided washing and taking care in case her three tried to find their way back to her. She didn't want them back, not the way they were now: bloodied and broken, empty, lifeless. She didn't want them back. (She wanted everything back. Olivier. Where was he? Everything.)

The third time the thing came to tug at her at night, it did something that only she could recognize: it tickled at her feet. It was something the second had started doing, when the girl was about three or four, because the girl had learned the relationship between her mother's sensitive feet and bringing her out of dormancy, out of bed, and into the kitchen to fix breakfast. She startled when she felt the tickling. Said: *Is that you, chérie? Is that you, dear?* Wide awake now, looking around in the darkness.

She wondered how she could be sure that it wasn't one of the orbs playing a trick on her. What if they were trying to get her to follow them into a world darker than this one, a world in which Olivier could never find her (of course, she didn't know if Olivier was in the world from before, her world in-between, or the world somewhere beyond belonging to the orbs) She needed a way to be sure. She stayed awake all night, wondering what she could do to test the spirit all the while talking to it in whispers, in case it was the third child come back to find her, seeking comfort. She apologized for leaving their bodies like that, without ceremony. She felt a wave of heat flow over her from the side of the mattress. She imagined forgiveness because she couldn't imagine what a child's wrath might feel like; and hadn't she tickled her? No angry child would do that.

In the morning, she decided to go look for bowls, water, salt (didn't they say that spirits of the damned clung to earth because they had ingested salt?), a candle. *Going to wash, finally?* - someone sitting on a hand-made bench (were there any other kind?) in front of their tent said to her, matter-of-factly (taking her quest for salt as a replacement for soap: salt cleansed, purged, disinfected), not looking up to see the determined look on her face. She was going to catch some ghosts, or find her daughters - one or the other. She collected six small plastic bowls (the kind she might have used to feed cereal to the three in the morning, while they watched on, amused at their earnestness while they ate), one for each of them, and for the grandmother, whom she thought might be watching over them (her, and the family), and a catch of water. It took all day.

When she was ready, she set the bowls, half filled with water, around the circumference of the mattress. In three, she placed a half-teaspoon of salt. The malevolent ghosts would play with the salt water; the others (her daughters? And what of the others? Were they all, gone, all, together?) would seek the fresh water (she'd found rain water three tents over; an old man was collecting it in an oil drum he'd lidded with planks of wood shorn into a circle; of course, he'd said, not asking questions of need; he wasn't going to be alive long enough to care, he thought to himself, why collect other people's stories; all he needed was his *tabac*, rain - no *blan* water for him or standing in line either; he wished this one well, had watched her since he'd found his space in the din of the vast camp climbing above the congested city, overlooking it; she reminded him of a daughter he'd once had, so long ago he couldn't be sure this girl wasn't her; *of course*,

he'd said, *take all that you need*, and smiled, even though she didn't smile back; he knew it would do her some good to see an old man smile at her, bereft as she was, as they all were, some more than most; clearly she was one of the more). The candle was for protection, and for hope, whatever happened, whatever revealed itself in the dark, trying to tickle her feet or tug at her arm, whatever or whoever it was.

Why she'd thought of water, and salt, she wasn't sure, but if she thought about it, the tugging had started after the washing, sometime after that. There had to be some kind of connection. It took her all day to prepare: to set the bowls in a half circle around the edges of the bed; to salt three of the six bowls. She repeated to herself the reasoning that malevolent ghosts would gravitate to salt and that others (her daughters?) would seek fresh. She didn't know.

When she thought it was dark enough, she lit the candle, then lay herself down on the mattress and feigned sleep (could they know if she was awake or not?). She wanted to see what would come. Her mind raced, then quieted, then, listening to the ambient noises all around her (the camp buzzed like a market at high noon: she heard the slap of dominoes against a plank some men had set across their knees for a table; animal grunts; the flap of fowl wings; babies crying; mothers cooing; smelled the stink of rotting flesh - fruit, animal or human - she couldn't distinguish anymore; wondered when the nightmare would end), she fell asleep. Then the tug at her arm came, then the tickling at her feet. She woke, opened her eyes slowly. Saw her, the little girl, her little girl: she smiled for the first time since this purgatory had begun.

The girl was dipping her hands in and out of the water bowls. Both the salt, and the fresh. What did this mean? She shrugged to herself: maybe nothing mattered now, the old sayings couldn't mean anything since that the world had broken in two - a before Event, an after Event. She saw a shape moving, not really the whole girl. *Is that you?* She asked. *Is it really you?* There were giggles in answer. Then small, translucent hands dipping into the bowls. She looked twice. There was not one but two, two pair of hands, going in and out of the water, upsetting the bowls, spilling the water (there would be salt marks in the morning, in the dirt, staining the mattress about the edges: proof). Two: the girls? Their two (where was Olivier?). The grandmother was not there (where was she?). Had not seen or heard her for so many years; had not thought of her or laid a glass of fresh water before her picture frame in the house at altar. Two pair: of different sizes, shades of brown. Hands she knew like her own. The two, come back to her. If there was another, she refused to see him, even though she could feel him, for the first time since he had disappeared. She felt her heart pulse, surge. She apologized to them. *Be quiet*, a man said to her from another tent: *there are ghosts everywhere: what makes you think yours have sought you out?* *Leave her alone*, another voice said (it was the old

man with the rain water; everyone should be allowed to keep their piece of solace, he thought, even if hers was madness).

She saw only glimpses of what they used to be: their lithe, thin limbs; shadows of smiles; the tapered fingers she thought suggested artists rather than functionaries; mostly, she heard their giggles. She told them how sorry she was that she had left their bodies like that, in the dust and dirt and ran away. She didn't even know where she was, really; she just knew that she was far from their home. Did they know where their father was? Did they know? They giggled in response.

She tried to get close to them, to see them. Brought the candle as close to the shapes as she could (without burning them? *Could ghosts - were they ghosts? or spirits? - burn?* Nothing more could happen that had not already happened). Smiled in the darkness: they seemed to smile back at her.

They were crouching close to the back of the tent as if they had somewhere else to go (where were they going, to Olivier?), backing away from her, smiles on their faces (were they smiles, or masks, she couldn't tell). Could she follow them? How would she find her way back? She tried to ask them but all they did was giggle, then, suddenly, they disappeared, and she found her new dress soaked in the water they'd spilled from the bowls.

The bowls were in disarray all around her, the light from the candle distorting their roundness into oblong shapes that cast strange shadows. She lifted the candle higher, turned around, did not see the lit wick catch one of the string fasteners that was meant to keep intruders out (a lock it was not). She watched as the tent caught afire, transfixed by the blaze eating through the logo: «a gift from the American people». Fire-proofing might have been nice, she thought, absent-mindedly, taking the folded piece of paper out from her brazier, the paper on which someone had hand-written in pencil, 'wozo' - the word reminded her of something Olivier used to call her, a word whose meaning she had forgotten. Something about bending, not breaking... She added the paper to the blaze working its way up to the ceiling of the tent, not knowing what she should do next now that the children had all gone, to find Olivier, she thought, bring him back to her.

All of them, back to her.