

An Instrument of the Heart

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Nataizya was sure that her mother was outer-planetary; this was due distinctly to the fact that Rania washed her brain every week. When Zya was young, she used to watch her mother while standing on tiptoes at the edge of the sink. If Zya was well-behaved, Rania would lift Zya up and allow her to sit behind the faucet. Rania would then sweep back her long black hair, extend one hand to enable the faucet, and with the other, press her fingers against her own forehead to lift back her cranium, as though she were unlocking a jewelry box. She would gently tilt the prized possession out of her skull. She ran her brain under the cold water, which streamed down every pathway, then aired her brain to dry and placed it neatly back where it belonged, with her cranium closed firmly over it.

When Zya grew into early adulthood, Rania was convinced her daughter kept secrets from her. Zya vigilantly protected her room. Rania was not permitted to clean it or even sift through her daughter's clothes. Rania caught glimpses of some of the garments, strange shimmering pieces that were cut too low or too high. When inquired, Zya always insisted that she wore them with long sleeves or undershirts to suit her mother's conventional preference. This was untrue, but if Zya were to reveal that she dressed in crop tops and pencil skirts, she feared for Rania's distress as ardently as Zya guarded her own right to live as she pleased. The gentlest of three evils was the little lie.

When Zya was alone, having shed all toughened skin the way she frequently snake-shed sweaters to reveal laced crop tops, she would think about her mother's planetary arrival, solitary like herself, but worse, *alone*, with no friends in Rania's new home to demonstrate to her how to operate. Did these unfamiliar languages intimidate her? Rania knew not everything in her new home had always been there. Zya wondered if these new, imported beliefs terrified Rania. Though Zya had been too young to recognize it as unusual, she could remember the first time Rania had washed her brain. It was after Zya had told her mother that Rania was not responsible for encountering the violent end of a fist, routinely, in the home that they had built.

"It's wrong, Ma," Zya said in tears, and Rania looked away from her slowly, as though the thought were occurring to her for the first time. "And it's not your fault," said Zya.

Zya could not remember what else she had said, between tears and trauma that had become like the shadows lacing her bedroom wall with vines. She did remember that Rania washed her brain after these words. In the following years, Rania continued to wash it occasionally, even as Zya finished school. Zya never asked why; it was more of a wonder to her that her mother did not insist she do the same. Typically, Rania was insistent about Zya following in her practices.

Most of those practices, Zya did follow. She prayed, but at demolition sites, the ruin with which her heart was a close companion. There were days Zya contoured personality into her face by keeping silent. She let the unspoken words carve beauty into her jaw. They collected at her cheekbones in a perfect ridge. They ran up the bridge of her nose and joined her brows. But, to Rania's dismay, her daughter's silence was reserved for Rania.

"To where did you run off?" Rania asked once when her daughter returned from a brief trip abroad. "You could have left me the flight numbers; what if the plane had crashed? How would I have known?"

"I'm fine." Zya brushed past her mother dismissively. Because Rania would skirt around the subject and Zya knew too well the value of privacy, Zya could not visit her mother's home planet; she could, however, familiarize herself with this one. Seven continents, supposedly, though she could not understand how Europe, a tiny slice of land, qualified as its own. And the seas—surely there were more than seven of those—she sensed it, the molecular shift between bodies of water that distinguished them from each other. The ocean both soothed her and overwhelmed her. She knew her mother's planet must have been borne from the water and made entirely of it; she felt this is in her blood.

"Why don't we ever visit where you're from?" Zya asked once. She did not imply it was a different planet.

“It’s dangerous right now.”

Rania must have been borne of danger just as her planet was of water, but she was still overprotective of Zya, keeping her daughter from wandering, which Rania deemed “too perilous.” It was why Zya never told her mother where she visited when she traveled to meet faraway friends. Rania was distraught when Zya left, and when Zya returned, Rania would pretend not to notice the small discrepancies in time, between the stable nations where Zya claimed to travel compared to socio-politically tumultuous countries with whose time zones her emails home matched perfectly. *You were in India, weren’t you, not Europe. You were in Nigeria, the Congo, Iran.* Rania could ask to see passport stamps, under the guise of curiosity for what they looked like, to verify, but she didn’t.

Zya was well aware that if she *did* die in a plane crash—or train crash—or anywhere, her concealed whereabouts and carefully expunged tracks would torment her mother. For this reason, she knew, she inconsiderately adhered to faith that she could survive anything just as Rania adhered to the same conviction for herself. Zya did not truly believe her mother was inconsiderate, but Zya was inclined to bitter, if artificial, vengeance. Abuse did horrifying things, after all, to the psyche of the brain. It occurred to Zya that this might be why Rania washed hers. Until Zya finally said *enough*, Rania was a list of apologies for herself, a winding route of wishes for death.

“No.” Zya turned to stone one day. “I will not speak to him anymore.”

And so Zya did not truly blame her mother for staying in a violent marriage out of the faith that she would survive, an adherence to faith inconsiderate of her children. Zya did not blame her mother for endangering her daughter’s life. But Zya did tiptoe away without informing anyone of her whereabouts on the same faith—that she would survive. Zya was more like her mother than Rania knew.

Every morning, Zya woke up in the same world, in the same dimension, in the same body, and she thought to herself, “But I could have sworn that I dreamed myself real.” If she focused hard enough, she could imagine that even the bright thirsty grass and clear Kabwe sky were illusions, that sealed behind the sky was a truth that fragmented her heart into particles of light. Perhaps her body could be beamed into space.

But that never happened, so she attempted to navigate her body through a planet that felt alien to it. Everyone, from writing professors to music instructors, had the same advice for Zya: Get out of your head. “You’re a thinker, aren’t you?” Zya’s voice instructor would say to her. “I need you to *feel*.” Zya found this exceptionally bewildering, because she’d always believed she felt too much. When she was younger, everything would transport her to the brink of tears: the sunlight speckled perfectly across her hand, a twig she had stepped on and broken, emerging from sleep in

the afternoon with the sensation of loss, a wild animal racing to a rural road, a hairbrush dropped behind the vanity and forgotten, rain, a calendar flipped to a future year, the ear of a kitten moving reflexively to register the lilt of Zya's quiet voice. She felt these with a quaking transparent heart, in an internal dimension of her body she did not know existed. It was unsafe, in fact, to feel so much.

When she was a child, Zya leaned out the window at dangerous angles and imagined that the highways running in bridges across the air were vast seas filled with sirens and serpents, and the mountains in the distance were home to crowned giants that ruled reckless lands. Her hair blew like black fire in the strange wind of gemmed July, but she didn't think about the tangles to comb out later or the drudgery of work, and for a few moments the trails of clouds were whirlpools in the sky and dragons, furious and wise, circled around them like red and gold guardians, and somewhere there was a witch casting a spell and a king being taken away and women charging into the unknown, and happy endings are written and destined. But soon, the highway and the taxis and the airplanes returned, and so Zya would fix her eyes on a snail moving slowly across the windowsill, placing it onto the palm of her hand and admiring its lovely fragility with the full concentrated look of wonder she'd had for the world she'd created. She stood there, at her bedroom window, her hair still strewn by the wind, staring down at the tiny snail feeling its way across her hand.

She was always a girl locked in a tower.

A mysterious lady said, "I'll grant you three wishes."

"No, thank you." Zya smiled.

To avoid confrontation between her daughter and her disastrous marriage, after Zya had declared herself to have had enough, Rania complied with Zya's request to deliver meals upstairs in their home. Zya was aware this was an exhausting task, but she found any encounter with the stampeding monster downstairs that her mother had unwittingly married unbearable. She'd flee the house, and it was Rania who always chased after her to bring her home. After losing her job (her paychecks were confiscated anyway), Rania performed nearly all of the housework while Zya worked at the studio, and in return Zya could only keep secrets. She thought of this mournfully.

It was after a tearful fight with her mother that Zya decided to invite her friends over for dinner. She had been in the middle of running off again—not abroad, just less than an hour away, toward Liteta—and Rania had wanted to accompany her to the car. In a panic that Rania would discover that it was a male driver and not her friend who'd come to pick her up, Zya had urgently refused.

"I need to leave, we're late, and I have no time for introductions!" she lied.

The driver was a stranger to Rania because Zya had not wanted to bother her friend Aaleyah with the task, and Rania could not know this. Zya had only met Aaleyah, who seemed to need no one. This was untrue, but Zya had built false universes: imaginary worlds—she mused—in which she told herself her mother was outer-planetary, or she believed that she needed to be as independent as her friends to attract them to her life.

Rania peered over her daughter's head to the dusty city. It had not rained. "Where's your friend? Let me see the girl," she asked brightly. "I won't take too much time—"

"She's parked a ways off! I have to run to her car! There's no time at all!" Zya barricaded the space between herself and Rania with half the door. Rania's face twisted with agony behind a veil of complacency. She watched her daughter sprint down the street toward a car she could not see.

Twenty minutes later, Zya answered her phone. She had tossed her red coat onto Aaleyah's floor, revealing the black dress that wrapped around her curves. Rania spoke, attempting at first to conceal her tears. "Did you arrive safely?"

"Yes. I'm with Aaleyah." It was the truth, dressed as a lie. *Like the inversion of me*, Zya thought numbly.

"I don't know..." Rania's voice broke. "I don't know what you're doing, where you're going. You're not letting me see with whom you're leaving, or what you're hiding from me, and I don't know who you are."

"I'm sorry. I had to leave. We were late. I *am* with Aaleyah." Aaleyah had always been the destination.

"I don't know."

This wasn't the only breaking point. Once, when Zya had failed to memorize a set of religious verses fast enough—provoking Rania's suspicion of how her daughter spent her time—Zya grew frustrated with her mother's lectures and locked herself behind her bedroom door. She refused to open it despite Rania's incessant requests from the other side, after which Rania retrieved the spare key and furiously welcomed herself into her daughter's room. "When you have your own house, you can lock yourself in your room," she had snapped.

Zya glanced at her coolly. She knew she should not have said what she was about to say, but she was too enraged at her mother's disregard for her need of space. "I believe I'm renting this room."

Rania's face changed. But where Rania's anger had dissipated, Zya's was emergent. "I'd like my key."

"What?" Rania asked.

“You were intrusive. I’d like it back.”

“What if you lock yourself out; the whole point—”

“I’ll deal. I’m moving away, anyway.”

Rania drifted off in tears. “Stay here. I won’t take your money,” she said to her daughter a few days later, still red-eyed. “I didn’t tell you, but I was planning on returning the finances to you—after you—one day when—when you’re on your own and—I’ll leave you alone...”

Zya had suspected this, but she would not have taken it. “Look,” she said gently. “I needed some time alone and you did not respect it. You wanted to have a fight, and I didn’t. Don’t you understand? Keep the key... you can have it. My issue was the way you used it.”

Rania nodded slowly. Her eyes brimmed with tears. “You won’t move away?”

She’s left out of my life, Zya had realized suddenly, just as she was left out of the planet.

Of her friends, Zya invited six. Zya’s closest friends lived overseas, and out of the realization that she had deprived herself of the pleasure of friends who lived near her, she had only just made local ones. It was funny to Zya, the power of the newly opened heart to swallow oceanic volumes of that of which it had formerly been starved: Once Zya befriended Aaleyah, the rest orbited into place.

Zya was nervous they would not come. But all six arrived, and she greeted each awkwardly as they entered through the living room.

“Every morning, I wake up and reassemble my body parts,” Nura sighed to Rania after they had exchanged salaams and sat around the dinner table. “Your face is so radiant. Like the moon. Like nur.” She beamed as if to demonstrate.

“Thank you,” replied Rania sheepishly. Somehow, she felt sad among these promising women, like an imported thing.

“Don’t look sad. We are imported,” said Aaleyah suddenly. For a moment, Rania thought she glimpsed antennae, but it must have been her imagination.

“Not I.” Mwiza smiled.

“Not Mwiza,” supplied Nura. She seated herself between Nasante and Towela, neither of whom were imported.

“Most of us at the table are indigenous,” Butemwe provided. “My tribe is Kaonde. What is your tribe?”

“I have no tribe.” Zya did not bother to hide the pain in her face.

“Is there a radio?” asked Aaleyah.

“I—,” began Rania, attempting to answer each of them. Zya could see her mother was unsure if Nura meant she was imported, foreign, the way Rania was imported, outer-planetary.

“There are eight of us at the table, like the legs of a spider,” Butemwe continued, “Nasante and Towela are twins; we are still eight. We are eight and some of us are made to feel imported, even though we are indigenous.”

Remembering long-gone homes where she'd felt imported, Rania smiled at Nasante and Towela in acknowledgement. One of Towela's eyes was violet; the other, brown. This mismatched trait was replicated in the opposite eyes of Nasante.

“We don't have a radio,” Zya answered Aaleyah in an apologetic tone. Zya glanced around. Clean houses made her nervous. She could not keep secrets in them. Raina had made rice, thinly shredded potatoes, and a delicious tomato paste with parsley, garlic, and spices.

Aaleyah pushed her right antenna forward inquisitively. “No radio,” she confirmed. Rania blinked. She could not make out the color of Aaleyah's eyes. Or the ante—what was it? It was gone. Her imagination. “It is said that ancient astronomers believed the planets made music as they moved through space,” said Aaleyah, trance-like. “This was supposedly disproven. But space does not carry sound. There is music most people can't hear, but like all of us gathered here, that's not to say it doesn't exist.”

Towela and Nasante each closed the violet eye. “What planet are you from?” Towela asked politely.

“N—” Rania began.

“Neptune?”

“No.” Rania laughed, bewildered. Perhaps her daughter's friends were as eccentric as her daughter.

“No,” Aaleyah echoed.

Towela nodded, opening both eyes. “I understand. Zya says you don't like music.”

“Not that she doesn't like it,” clarified Zya, “she is cautious of it. She loves it, in fact. But she won't allow herself to listen.” Zya smiled at her mother.

“Is it a religious reservation?” asked Butemwe.

“No,” responded Nura and Zya.

“Well...” began Rania. Nura raised an eyebrow, interested. Rania wondered if she should slip away quickly and return once she'd run her brain under the sink. “It reminds me too much of a foreign home.” Severed from anyone who could help her, Rania was not allowed to communicate with her foreign home, lest she provoke the wrath of the monster Zya avoided.

Foreign-home. Zya marveled at the contradiction.

“Never mind,” Nura said gently, noting Rania's discomfort. “Your home is very beautiful.”

She touched Rania's hand in gratefulness. When Nura moved her hand away, Rania noticed her own skin glowed where Nura's fingers had grazed.

"How is your heart?" asked Mwiza.

"What?" Rania asked, startled.

"It looks broken."

"Broken," echoed Aaleyah, the right antenna moving in a slow, graceful circle. Part of Rania did a double take.

"You can see my heart?"

"Yes," said Mwiza. "You have been washing your brain. But your heart is still broken."

Zya had never told Mwiza of Rania's habit of washing her brain every week. Zya had never even discussed it with Rania. To Mwiza, it was clear, but Zya had known it would be.

The six watched for Rania's response. Zya gazed far away. There was a long silence until Rania said finally, "I'm sorry—how... Are you—?" She could not form the question. Whatever it was, it seemed rude. Too close to *What are you?*

"The brain is an instrument of the heart. This is the proper dynamic," said Mwiza. "When the dynamic is toppled, the direction of one's life is off-course."

"May I?" asked Nura. She reached out and placed her fingers on Rania's sternum, tapping lightly. Rania felt her heart change. It felt relaxed, secure, as though it were coated in a warm lubricant. Reassembled. "Every morning," said Nura, "I wake up and reassemble my body parts."

"They fit together every morning?" asked Zya.

Nura's smile faltered. "Not always as they had before."

"How long have you lived at a demolition site?" Mwiza asked Rania.

"*Mwiza!*" Butemwe scolded gently.

"What's happening?" Rania asked. At Mwiza's words something inside of Rania had broken up and stirred, like sunlight on glass, but she could not tell what.

"I apologize," said Mwiza. "I forget that I can see."

"You can see?"

"Yes."

"Broken hearts and... demolition sites in the place of houses?"

"This house used to be a place of worship, but it was later demolished," Butemwe explained quickly. "The invaders destroyed it."

"When was my house built here?" asked Rania.

There was a silence again. Nura radiated like the moon. Towela and Nasante glanced at each

other's violet eyes. Mwiza closed her own eyes. In the shadows, Rania made out Aaleyah's antennae. *I'm not imagining it*, thought Rania. She looked at her own daughter. A gossamer veil was over Zya's face, but through the veil, Rania could see a pained expression.

"Ma, there was never a house built here."

Rania followed Butemwe's upward gaze, which was directed at a quiet night sky dotted with stars where there was once a ceiling. A cold breeze passed around them at the marble dinner table, situated in the midst of fallen columns and debris.

"No," said Rania quietly. "I don't want to see."

"Don't be ashamed," whispered Nasante. "We, displaced, have all tried to make homes of hostile environments."

"Please put the house back," implored Rania. She looked at her daughter. The veil on Zya's face lifted like a flag in the wind. Alarm sprung through Rania's heart. Here, in an alien and familiar form, Nataizya was more like her mother than Rania wanted. "You—" Rania began, "but you've paid rent... in a *house*—"

"The money was fine," said Nataizya. "But Ma, the sorrow was taxing."

A zephyr settled around the table. Nataizya had turned to stone one day. "So many things come in waves," she said, "light, sound, my hair."

"How shall we place the house back?" asked Butemwe. "Do you want to see the illusion again, or do you want us to build the house?"

"I've already built a home," said Rania. She began to cry. Towela reached out to comfort her, stroking her fingers through Rania's hair.

"Washing one's brain feels clean, but the debris is still there. To build a house, we first must clear the site."

"I can't do that."

"You can. Let go of the wreckage, the fragments, the broken pillars. You have the power." Nasante closed her eyes. She opened them, and they were both violet. "Let's visit foreign-homes. When we return, we'll build a house here."

"The Earth has come around the Sun again," said Nura, "and I have come around, and around, and around Faith, because like celestial spheres we Love in circles. If it pleases the God/dess, those of us in pieces this past year will find ourselves whole again, because even the universe, in pieces once, became whole planets, and stars, and if you are still—a rogue planet, know that this orbit isn't nonexistent, but merely wider than you can decipher, and like clouds of lithium, deuterium, helium, we are shifting still, like stellar fusion, into the sparkling Heavens."

“How will we travel?” asked Nataizya.

“Music,” said Aaleyah, “by waves—water and sound.”