Oubliette

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| Cameroon |

Linonge was your best friend. It was he who taught you how to smuggle garri and other contraband necessities into school.

“Tear a side of your pillow,” he said, “take out some of the foam cushion and then refill it with wrappings of Golden Dust.” It was how you called garri at Saint Joseph, your high school: Golden Dust, Mock Opium, like it was some kind of narcotic, like White Powder, emphasizing both its precious- and forbidding-ness.

“And when you’re done stuffing your pillow with it,” he said, “sew the open mouth of the pillow shut, and tie it in your mattress tight, so that not even a witch from Mamfe would think to call you and check.”

The witch from Mamfe was Mr. Ojong, the Junior Discipline Master who hid behind dormitories and student bathrooms and urinary walls at unholy hours, ears clung to rusting window protectors in the dead of the night, hoping to hear something he could use to incriminate students the following day. The efforts seemed too much for the reward. Even though it was rumoured that he was trying to work his way up to Senior Discipline Master. Students wondered if he was really married; if the plain, shy-eyed girl who came to mass on Sundays, clutching a quiet baby and wearing the same style-less satin dress, was really his wife. Where had he found the time to make a baby, when he spent all his time in school, policing them?
On the bathroom and urinary walls, he found obscene caricature drawings of himself

fucking a kitchen staff, or female teacher, or his wife, on another drawing, he held his penis with one hand as he watched young boys shower, his wife pulling his other hand trying to get his attention. At the dormitory window, he heard freshly baked stories about himself. Stories he himself did not know.

He once heard that he hadn't completed the bride price on his wife. That he was still saving up from his meagre salary and that was why he spent most of his nights away from her bed, because she wasn't fully his yet. Another student argued that he wasn't that honourable, it must be that he didn't find her village air attractive; another said no, she didn't find *him* attractive, but then again, who would!

With the geography of his eyes an inexplicable course, they were so far apart on his face, they looked like twins who loathed each other. There was laughter. Someone by the box room said the baby was too cute to be his by the way, his wife had to be sleeping with another member of staff, "or a student," someone else added; it was hard to say exactly who was saying what in the dark, even though you could guess by familiar voices. You all laughed again when someone said "Lino, that pikin get your face o." And Linonge threw a vulgar insult at the person, saying amused, that he had much better taste than Over Z would ever have.

The next day, you all will be punished for this. You will stand in front of the football field, all the high school students in your dorm, machetes in hand, ready to work. When Over Z had barged in that night, acting like all he had heard hadn't fazed him, you all feigned sleep. Even Linonge. But he yelled so hard you felt his throat hurt; he said you all could sleep all you wanted but he knows it wasn't ghosts who were talking, and even if there were ghosts, you all would still go down for it.

When he reported the incident to the principal, he told Father Martins that you all had stayed up talking and talking, saying all sorts of things about every staff member in Saint Joseph. Everyone. Including Father himself. After lights out. In Pidgin English. He added the little phrases dramatically like fuel sips in fire, watching their effect expectantly.

Father squinted at you and then asked him to punish you all thoroughly. He smiled, triumphant, as he led you through the main block's lobby, gas tube in hand, throwing his long legs like he was trying hard to shake them off. You were not one to be involved in punishments, Linonge was, and yet missing classes excited you, even if you were missing them to cut grass. As you walked behind him, you held your laugh tight as Linonge murmured to you, insulting the man's gait and his spider legs, his sense of style or lack thereof, his quirky voice. All the members of staff called him Mr. O.J, all the students called him Overzealous.

Over Z for short.

Your mother used to say it was hard to recognize you without Linonge attached to your shoulder. You would eat breakfast at your home on those weekends he visited, your mother asking Jean Baptiste to fix you Nutella pancakes, the fluffy type that was his favourite.

Jean Baptiste plated his pancakes on long rectangular wooden platters, serving them with fruit toppings and tea, so that breakfast looked picturesque, like something stolen from a lifestyle magazine. You liked that your mother liked him. It pleased you that she enjoyed how much he enjoyed the pancakes, asking Jean Baptiste to fix some more for him, as Linonge licked Nutella off his palms. And when you complained that the pancakes tasted soapy from too much baking soda, or that the chocolate was too much it felt like you were eating just chocolate with crumbs of pancakes, Linonge would wonder how you could find anything wrong with them; wonder if there was anything at all like too much chocolate.

At night, you'd wait for the rest of the household to go to sleep, before you rushed upstairs to your room to play FIFA and talk about girls. Linonge liked to marvel at your room, every single time as if it was the first time he was sleeping there, he would marvel at the fact that you had your own computer, a laptop for that matter, and Wi-Fi paid for by your parents, he would fondle the AC controller almost pensively, reduce the temperature of the room drastically, and then settle underneath the duvet, to sheath himself from the chill he had created with his own hands, he would have you lock your door in whispers, and then Google

pornographic websites on your computer that would cause you both to gosh, both in disgust and guilty pleasure.

At his house, his mother introduced you proudly to her friends as Linonge's brother. She spoke loudly from her firewood kitchen, yelling at his sisters to bring her the chocolate container that housed salt, or the Danish Butter Cookies container where bush pepper was now kept, and Linonge made jokes about how in their house, one never saw the cookies, only the containers.

His mother opened the living room door every now and then to ask if you were doing fine, to apologize that the fan wasn't working, even though you weren't really hot, she asked Linonge to offer you mangoes you suspected she knew were long finished, opening her eyes, asking in surprise:

"You people finished it?" and his sisters would yell

"Mami, you ate the last one."

You sometimes believed she wouldn't mind you marrying one of them, her daughters; seal the friendship between you and Linonge. It was there, in the way she talked about them with a slight, endearing, dubiousness in her eyes, how well they cooked, how beautiful they were, how their husbands would be the luckiest of men. They would laugh shyly beside her, one fourteen and petite, the other, a dimpled thirteen-year-old who looked bigger than her elder sister; Linonge would ask you to focus on what he was showing you, and you would wonder if he saw it too, if he was embarrassed by his mother's forceful subtleties.

On the days you met her cooking, his mother's eyes were always red from the kitchen smoke, her wrapper loosely tied around her belly as she told you to make sure you don't leave before the food is ready, the flavour from her ekwang or okro soup or njanga rice spreading everywhere like gossip.

Once during the long vacation, after your promotion to Form four, as you sat on a stool at

the Clark's Quarters junction, eating suya from a cement paper, grading girls who walked past on the tarmac on ten, Linonge told you suddenly how shameful it was, that he was treated like royalty in your house, with the uniformed chef serving him on expensive breakable plates, on a dining table with table mats and glasses to drink from, your mother making sure he was comfortable and your father pulling out white wine to share with him, talking about football like they were age mates, while his own mother served you food on a plastic plate, on a stool. There was no fruit juice after you ate, only cold water in a plastic cup, depending on if the refrigerator was working or not. It had shocked you that such a thing would bother him, especially as you hadn't even thought about it. You told him you'd prefer his mother's ekwang on a plastic plate any day to Jean Baptiste's fried rice and chicken. You meant it.

In school, you shared everything: suitcases, food, compartments, keys, pocket allowance, class lockers. His suitcase was reserved for your food, while yours was reserved for detergents and other things. You didn't think of your belongings as mine and his, you thought of them as ours.

In class, Linonge was a crying shame and depended solely on you to pass. And you always came through for him, increasing the size of your handwriting during exams, pushing your paper to the edge so he could copy, whispering answers when the teacher was not looking. He once defined Folding and Faulting in a Geography class as Folding: when you bend something; and Faulting: when you accuse someone of being wrong. The class tore into laughter, and the teacher, Mr. Esendege, a balding pot-bellied man, asked him to get out of his class. What village was he from! How could he be this stupid when he walked everywhere with Chu-Kum! Hadn't brain osmosis occurred?

You looked down, shy from the compliment; and as he walked out, Linonge looked at you pleased, as if his recalcitrance was a deliberate act to make the world appreciate you more. As if he was dimming down his light so that yours could shine brighter, be more visible. In Biology, he defined Osmosis as water in a desert, and when you told him that was Oasis, he laughed and said "see? I tried."

But you were sure he could sacrifice himself for you. He had done so on so many occasions.

Like the time he fought with a senior student for calling your father a *nyongo man,* saying he killed people for money; and you had not realized when Linonge had punched him in the face, and then very soon, they were on the ground, rolling, throwing punches at each other, in the air, smears of blood everywhere, as you tried to pull him away shouting “Lino, Lino.”

Or the time he yelled at the school nurse for giving you stupid yellow tablets that could kill you instead, asking her where the hell she had gotten her nursing certificate from. He had insisted that they send you home for proper treatment, but the nurse had said everyone was looking for an excuse to go home, even as you got sicker by the day, convulsing, your eyes a pure terrifying white.

He also sneaked out of school on the weekends, scaling the school fence, breaking bounds to buy eru or roast fish or spaghetti, for himself, but also because he knew you didn’t like the corn-chaff served on Saturdays. And it was on one of those weekends that he met with Over Z at an eatery in Tole, where everyone was talking about the madness going on in the country, about the gunshots last night that didn’t let them sleep.

He told you how Over Z had called him by his full names as he ordered eru: Linonge Oscar Eseme, and how he had acted like that wasn’t his name, like he had no idea who the man was, frowning in fake confusion and sneaking out of the eatery. He told you how Over Z took a taxi straight to Sasse, how he had heard the man offer to pay the taxi driver extra if he could take him directly to school without stopping to carry anyone else. Only Overzealous could hire a taxi with money he did not have, just so he could reach school, perform random roll calls to prove that a student was out of bounds, and then have them suspended.

But because the smartness Linonge lacked in the classroom, he had on the streets, he always made sure he had the phone numbers of bike riders. He made friends with so many of them. And on days like this, they came in handy, riding with him deep into the paths in the tea plantation, taking roads students had created, roads Over Z would never know, faster than Over Z’s taxi could ever go. It was priceless, the shock on Over Z’s face, when he arrived at school, leaving Linonge in Tole, just to call his name minutes later, Linonge Oscar Eseme, and heard Linonge’s voice answer “Present.” He had not seen a car behind them, and had assumed Linonge was stuck in Tole, unable to find a taxi.

“Where were you young man?” Over Z asked.

“I was in the dormitory Master, before we heard the bell for roll call.”

“It is true Master,” you added, “We were together doing laundry.”

Over Z looked at you, looked at him, and stopped the roll call.

“Show me the clothes you were washing.”

In the dormitory, you showed Over Z a bucket of clothes you were washing. You had decided to help Linonge do his laundry as he was out getting you food. Over Z studied the names on the uniforms. He looked at you both, disbelievingly. You knew he did not buy your story, he knew what he saw, who he saw, but he had no proof. You knew it annoyed the wits out of him that you made a fool of him, that he would stop at nothing to see you both punished, for any reason whatsoever, he would be on your case until you left the school, graduated or dismissed. That he would make it his duty. You had made an enemy of an overzealous school discipline master, and while this frightened you, it seemed to thrill Linonge.

Last holiday, two days before Christmas, Linonge called to tell you he had found girlfriends for you two; could you organize some money for a double date? The girls sat across from you like motion pictures, picking up their forks at the same time, smiling the same smile at the same time, rolling their eyes at the same thing at the same time. Their choreography freaked you out.

Ordinarily, if you only met one, you would have told Linonge that she wasn’t your type, and he would have laughed and asked you what type was yours. But there was something interesting about identical twins, about people who looked like copies of each other in everything, from scars and beauty marks, to mannerisms. Linonge offered them more juice, talked about school parties that were coming up during the long vacation. You texted him

even though you sat on the same table, asking where he had found them, and he sent you a long line of laugh emojis. Later, he told you the girls go to Saker Baptist College, that he had met and chatted with them on Facebook, and even though they looked better in the pictures they posted, how cool was it that you were both dating twin sisters!

As a tradition, you scrutinized each other's New Year resolutions and had the right to add one resolution on the other's list. Your resolution for him was to put more interest in his academics. His resolution for you was to get laid this year; you were sixteen for goodness sake! You told him that was the reason everyone thought your friendship was a terrible idea, and he laughed and said "As if!"

He had told you about his first time. How at eleven, he had no idea what his seventeen-year-old second cousin was doing to him in the darkness of their firewood kitchen. The girl forcing his tiny hands on her breasts, unzipping his pants, it always felt rushed and immoral. And then when he was fourteen, he did it with their next-door neighbour; he hadn't realized it could feel so good, even if it still felt immoral. But when he spoke about his experiences, he spoke about them in a flippant manner that did not blame his second cousin for rape, but blamed her for not being good enough at it for him to enjoy it.

At house parties, you felt useless, boring, playing Truth or Dare, or Never Have I Ever with your peers; there was nothing interesting about traveling to Nairobi or Kigali or Birmingham, seeing pretty girls, if all you were going to do with them was just see them.

Two days after you crossed "Getting Laid This Year" off your list, you were double checking your uniforms and beddings, preparing for the resumption of schools the next day, even though there were rumours about a strike. Linonge barged into your room, seized you by the arm, and asked you if you knew that the girl you got deflowered by was *his* twin. You looked at him frozen, it was not his biceps that frightened you, not the beards that had started shooting up this holidays (for weeks now, he had been mixing weed to his hair oil, applying it religiously to his cheeks, to force his beards to grow, and seeing them grow, you had always wondered if the weed did work, or the hair grew naturally, because he was a young man, growing to maturity.) What frightened you was what you thought you had done, what would become of your friendship. You tried to talk but the words came out in stutters,

like something in you had shredded them. There was nothing to say, New Year, and you had become that guy, the one who broke friendships by sleeping with his best friend's girl. But a minute later, Linonge laughed and said you looked like a constipated ghost. What was important was that you had fulfilled his resolution for you, and so early in the year; besides, couldn't you see that the girl, with her giraffe height and small breasts, was never really his type!

Mr. Ojong's wife had started selling scotch eggs in school. She brought them in a transparent plastic bucket, dropping it at the library so students who were tired of reading could distract themselves. Linonge started a rumour that she was working up the remaining part of her bride price. And even though he bought her scotch eggs every day, even though students bought all of it within an hour, even though he Linonge thought they were delicious, he made it his duty to write on every wall Over Z could read: *Mrs. Over Z's scotch egg is the worst thing that happened to Saint Joseph students since Sore Backs*.

Every day, he was either cutting grass, digging yam holes, or pits, or tree stumps, punishment given to him by Over Z, because Over Z had made it his duty to watch thoroughly, and with Linonge, if one watched just a little, one would always find him, basking in trouble. The commonest troubles he found himself in was speaking Pidgin English, staying in the dormitory during mass, or class, or whenever he was not supposed to be there.

He once overslept during siesta and by the time he woke up, everyone was leaving the dormitory for preps. Over Z met him in the shower scrubbing, and flogged his naked soapy body with a gas tube so hard the lines remained. In class, your classmates asked him seriously "But weti you do that man? What did you ever do to him?"

The next week, Linonge walked from class to class, gathering chalk and nursing his sores. He ignored you when you asked him if he wanted to sell them, or was it that they helped with the whip marks. One evening, he gave you cake and juice to give Over Z. You looked at him confused.

“Just tell him it’s your birthday and he is a good DM.”

You obeyed, having no idea what was happening. That night, as Over Z ran into the bathroom from the diarrhoea the cake had caused, Linonge threw a white bedspread around his body, painted his skin with the ground chalk and stood by the toilet door. Soon, there was a scream, Overzealous yelling

“Devil, devil, ghost, ghost” stumbling and re-stumbling on the shit-stained floor, his trousers on his knees such that part of his buttocks was exposed, falling and leaping until students started to gather, and Linonge sneaked behind the toilet, washed the chalk off his face and joined the congregating students who stood watching the disturbed man. That night, Over Z was taken to the hospital.

The day the boys came, you and Linonge were digging a pit of your height each, and for once, you thanked God that you were shorter. Over Z had caught Linonge with a phone in school, and after confiscating it, punished you two: him for bringing a phone to school, and you for being an accomplice and not reporting it as the Dormitory captain. When you heard the explosion, Over Z turned to look at Linonge, accusingly, asking if he had planted knockouts on campus.

But it was no knockout. The boys marched in and yelled everyone out of the dorms, soon, they started to pour petrol around the Saint Aquinas dormitory, and then the Saint Paul. There was chaos, students screaming as they ran out holding their lives, barely, in their hands. The boys wore black, looked wild, and had tied red cloths around their arms. They spoke broken English, Pidgin English if they had to. You all were shaking, the digger you were carrying had dropped long ago, and yet your hands felt heavier than ever. They spoke, eyes red, about how the country was a mess, how schools were supposed to be on strike; had you people not heard? Were they the ones supposed to fight for the country while you blacklegs went about your lives normally? There was silence. The terror was worse than any you had ever seen, worse than all the school handovers put together.

The one who looked like the leader yelled that he needed an answer. But he did not give time for answers, he asked everyone to vacate the campus, to melt if they had to, he said anyone who was still there in five minutes, would be taken away in their truck. Saint Joseph became the definition of helter-skelter; about eight hundred students running to escape through a single gate. As you ran for your dear life, you watched the dormitories glow, fire all around them, black smoke soaring, all around the things that once belonged to you. It reminded you of a passage in the Bible, the one about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But in this case, who was God?

A few days later, you accompanied Linonge to the school campus to get his phone. Everything seemed to have calmed and Linonge kept saying he was never going to let Over Z use this opportunity to own his property. But as you approached, you saw a group of soldiers standing before Over Z's house. His wife was frying scotch eggs perhaps for the Tole denizens, her baby quiet on the cot a safe space from her. You wanted to go but Linonge asked you to hold on a bit, if you left now, they might see you, besides, they were just asking her questions and may leave soon.

Soon, you heard one of the soldiers yelling in French, he was saying he heard the boys are around that neighbourhood and the woman had to tell them where. You kept telling Linonge how obvious it was that the lady didn't understand French, until she yelled, frustrated that they should ask someone else. It was then that Over Z appeared. A soldier slapped her and she fell from her stool. You held your mouth, the baby began to cry, and Linonge was fidgeting beside you.

"CK, what is happening?" he asked as if he wasn't seeing; as if you were watching while he was on the phone with you. The soldiers tore the wrapper off Mrs. Ojong and in front of you and her husband, two of them mounted her, taking rounds. He charged but the others held him at gun point.

When they were done, they took the wailing baby and dropped it in the hot oil. You felt your heart stop. Linonge's mouth was open but nothing was coming out. Not even air. Over Z squeezed out of the grip of the soldiers, marched forward with all the zeal you had never imagined he had, and attacked the soldier who had fried his baby; it was then that the

soldiers shot him dead, shot his wife dead, and packed the bodies in their truck.

Your father told you not to pack anything, just your laptop maybe, and your Ordinary Level certificate; you could always buy clothes in Ghana. You called Linonge to inform him of your travel plans, but then you realized his phone had been with Over Z before he got shot. You called his mother. Your father had said no one leaves the house until it was the day of your flight.

In Ghana, you tried to follow the news on what was happening in the country. You called Linonge's mother to check up on them, but soon, even her number stopped going through. You couldn't get to Linonge either because there had been internet cuts in the South West and North West regions for months. After your Advanced Level, you returned home against your parents' wish. The plan was to know what is happening, before going to the UK finally, for your degree.

In Linonge's home, there was no laughter. His mother welcomed you with a formal politeness that shocked and saddened you. It had been two years. In his room, Linonge bit his lip when you asked him to fill you in on what has been going on.

"They raped his wife in front of him, they killed his new born baby by frying. He tried to stop them, and they shot him. You know we never saw his corpse? His cousin said they asked for a ransom of three hundred thousand each before the bodies could be given to them, also, the family had to sign an undertaking, declaring that their brother, Mr. Ojong, was one of The Boys."

Linonge didn't look at you as he spoke. He told you the things you already knew, so that he would not have to tell you the things you didn't. Things you had gathered from hearsay. Like the day the soldiers came to their house and asked their mother to strip in front of her children, how they touched his sisters in front of him, how he could do nothing about it, lest his entire family was killed the way Over Z's had been; how they slept on the bare cemented floor every day, hiding from bullets. For weeks, he avoided you; for weeks, you felt guilty for

leaving.

The day his mother called you to talk to him, you almost ran to their house bare feet.

“He wants to join the boys” his mother told you.

You couldn’t believe it. Just outside their yard, his mother seated in a corner looking small, you gave Linonge a long speech. You told him you understood that the country was a mess, but he shouldn’t get involved like this, that he had a bright future, that he should pity his poor mother and sisters. You told him all this violence wasn’t worth it. And as you spoke you felt his eyes on you, they carried what they had never carried for you before, disdain. You felt there were things he wanted to say, you could hear them from his eyes, calling you a privileged brat who could afford to book the next flight as soon as there was a problem. Where had you been for two years? What did you know about anything? Wasn’t everyone in your family safe? Including the chef? You wanted him to say these things so you could apologize. It wasn’t your fault that your family could provide you security, and yet you felt guilty. When he finally spoke, the only words that came out, before he stormed out, were:

“CK, Fuckoff!”

It is Monday and everyone in the neighbourhood is running, people are in panic mode, screaming that the boys are here. They are on their way to burn down a government car and then there will be a shootout. Everyone is rushing home, children, adults, looking for their safe havens beneath beds. On your way home, you see Linonge with the boys, marching down towards the government truck; he is holding the gallon of fuel. Your eyes meet and he calls your name:

“CK.”

“Lino” you say. The woman behind you is perplexed, asking if you know him.

“Yes,” you say, “Linonge was my best friend.”
