Rémy Ngamije

Crunchy Green Apples

(Or Omo)

Look how the city becomes littered with little location pins marking the places you used to go with her. The crowded park with its broken swings and sunburned see-saws. The swimming pool with the deep end she warned you against. The cinema where she used to sneak in her own snacks because she said she had paid for the ticket and that was that. The long walking routes where she pointed out ugly houses and criticised people with too much money but no style. You tread through town carefully, trying your best not to stumble across a geocache of memories. You shy away from the nursery where she adopted flora to fawn over until it died when the drought came. You steer clear of all the textile shops. No imported Javan wax prints and emotional triggers formed against you shall prosper. You sanitise your life of her presence and for a while it seems to work.

The memories do not respect your borders. They steal across your lines in the early morning when you pour your cereal into the bowl. They sneak through your fences in the afternoon when you spread the thick layer of peanut butter on your slice of honey and oats bread. They scale your walls in the dead of night when you gargle and floss. You rush to bed quickly, turning off the lights, cocooning yourself in the duvet. You listen to the memories running around your apartment unseen, like mice in a ceiling. They dreaded things ambush you. Like when you do your laundry and recall that soapy smell she had on her hands back when she scrubbed the collars of your school shirts.

"OMO! Itakupatia what you are looking for!"

For some inexplicable reason she liked that commercial from way back in Nairobi. She always muttered the pay-off line under her breath when she poured the powder into the basin, frothing it with a whisking motion of her hand. She would say it again when she pegged the clothes to the washing line.

Even the mere sight of golden apples sets you off. She detested them. She said they cheated her of the crunch they were supposed to make when they were bitten. On the sixth page of your third-grade English textbook it stated so quite clearly. The boy with freckles had a speech bubble which corralled his binding edict: "Yum! This apple is crunchy. I love crunchy, green apples."

It became a by-law in the house that apples which did not crunch were a crime against the dictates of grammar and spelling books. Whenever the crisp Granny Smith apples that shone when they were shined were unavailable in shops orchards in South Africa were considered to be agents of dissent. When you were younger, still young enough to be entertained by your mother's repetitive jokes, she would come into the house after doing her shopping and shout out that she had bought some apples. You and your brother, the avatars of helpfulness and kindness, would run out of your rooms to the kitchen to help her unpack her bags. As one, you would reach for the apples and say, "Yum! These apples are crunchy. We love crunchy, green apples!" And then you would become entangled in giggles. The simplest things amused you back then.

Back then.

Later, when the two of you grew older, when your shoulders broadened and a fuzz of hair blurred your upper lips, when you became members of a tribe called cool, you did not play along when she announced triumphantly that she had bought apples. "It isn't that funny, Mamma," you said as you walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge, scrounging for something to eat. We don't like that joke."

"Nonsense," she replied. "You always liked it when you were young."

"Maybe." You shrugged and sipped juice straight from the carton, a habit she had tried to discourage for years. "But we aren't young anymore."

"You will always be young to me." She beamed at you. She seemed determined to draw some sort of affection from you.

You made your way to the television room. "We find different things funny now."

Those tiny scratches you made against her soul when you were starting to flex your claws started popping into your head whenever you thought of her. How many times did you hurt her with your merciless metaphors, your savage similes, your devilish double entendres?

The tally scared you.

What if, you thought one night as you lay in bed, what if all the bad things we say to people subtract a second or a minute from their total lifespan? What if your tempestuous teenage years put a dent in her health-meter like a fifteen hit combo in Mortal Kombat?

—"If I wanted your opinion I would have looked in the annals of antiquity!"

—"Are you done? Really, now, are you quite done? We're running out of Amazon Forest and you're busy shouting at me like that."

—"What did you expect, bro? She's old, man. Old people are...excess capacity."

—"Mamma, Margaret Thatcher wants her jacket back."

You were flawless victories and fatalities when your words came out to play. The possibility that there was a causal connection between your casual cruelty and her weakening heart muscle, eroded with every unkindness you lobbed at her, scared you.

What if cruelty kills people?

Nah!

What if—?

NO!

What if...

Maybe.

What if you killed your mother?

You avoided the fruit section in shops, skirting them like a restaurant you used to visit with an ex. When you really had to buy some fresh produce you looked over the apples like they did not exist, like you and them did not go all the way back.

Now here you are in this shop, wheeling a trolley, collecting sustenance and sundries for your place. You do not make enough from teaching to fill your fridge so without think-

Rémy Ngamije

Crunchy Green Apples

(Or Omo)

ing you slip into a familiar aisle. You tell yourself it is just a matter of time before you sit down and write the Greatest Shit Ever Written. It is all a matter of time before you ascend to bookshelves and Man Booker immortality.

You are right about one thing.

Everything is all a matter of time. The present runs past and becomes the past and loops all the way around and then comes back as the future.

But before this wisdom sinks in thou shalt have plenty of follies. 'Tis the way of things. Everything is a matter of time.

You scan the middle and bottom shelves for things that have been marked down because your money cannot reach all the way up. You spy a can of baked beans and—WHOOSH!—that whirlwind of memories blows down the tin shack of your refuge.

It takes you back to the times she would take you shopping with her, using her rectangle of notebook and her neat, sloping script to beat and bend budgets to her will. She could squeeze mileage out of inches and made a twenty stretch to a hundred. Her grocery list appears, Hamlet-like, and leads you through the aisles of memory which stick with you because you have not given it its last rites:

PASTA
Spaghetti, macaroni, elbows, and screws. Everything else, which was classified as fancy, was called pasta. That is how it went in households like yours; things were generic until there was enough money to be specific. Only at university—and by accident—did you look at the names on the Fattis and Monis packets and realise that tagliatelle and penne were subspecies of the starches you used to heap on your plate. You paused, embarrassed, wondering what other things you did not know about. (Everything that was not Aromat was called spice. Later, your girlfriend schooled you on the uses of cilantro leaves, marjoram, fennel, juniper berries, caraway seeds, cumin, and saffron.)

RICE
When the living became better she bought a rice cooker and upgraded from plain rice to jasmine and basmati rice, the kind of rice that looked special and delicious on the cooking shows she liked so much. Soft, fluffy, flavourful, not the white mush that was occasionally burned in her steel pot. The rice cooker also brought the envy of the other wives, a currency she tried not to trade in, an inevitable one given the fact everyone was trying to distance themselves from their struggle roots. All the other mothers had the same model within a month.

MAIZE MEAL
She treated pap like it was the plague and kept it out of the house as much as possible. She missed ugali and its textures of home. She mourned the loss of her cassava connect who had to leave the country due to paperwork issues. She said people think stricter immigration laws make the borders safer, protect the labour pool, and keep criminals out but, actually, they just make Jollof rice weaker.

WHITE BREAD
She looked for loaves with arched, dark brown crusts which stuck out of the toaster, bought from the neighbourhood bakery. She liked the first and last slice. She let them dry and harden and then crunched them with her tea. When she bought brown bread nobody complained about anything because when it meant money was running low. Brown bread brought a black mood to the house and everyone knew it was best to leave her alone. Everyone, even your father, knew it was time to let her watch as many cooking shows as she wanted even if Champions League football was on.

BAKED BEANS IN TOMATO SAUCE
Beans reminded her of the village. It was all they ate with dry potatoes. She had to fight to fist a handful from the pot she shared with her older brothers. She developed strong hands. "Anyone with weak wrists went to bed hungry," she told you whenever you complained about the monotony of the suppers she prepared. She really, really hated beans, though, and tried to avoid buying them as much as possible. But there were times when the money Houdinied out of your lives and she would have to scoop up the cans in their dozens, putting them in her trolley with poorly disguised shame.

TINNED FRUIT JAM
It dyed slices of bread a gory red when it was mixed fruit. You always hated the gory bits of strawberry that looked like scabs on bread. You did not mind the peach and apricot so much. You are quite sure the jam would glow in the dark from all the colourants and preservatives in it. She longed for the days when jam came in jars. She said reaching for the top shelf was the next family milestone.

SALT
Cerebos, always. You called it the X-Men salt and she never understood the joke. When you think of it now, that was the precise moment your mother fell from your constant praise and favour. It occurred to you there was another world, a world of mutants and magic that she could not access or understand. Hers was the realm of motherhood, a maternal middle ground you had to traverse to get to the other side and emerge cool, independent, and free of her. Free of her criticising your baggy pants, the paisley bandanas you imported from gangster rap; free of her prohibitions of all things rock; free, most of all, of the five-second delay before she laughed at something you said after eternity slipped itself between your quips. "Mamma," you replied, "if you were any slower you would get the joke at your funeral."

(Fucking hell, kid. In die trappe van vergelyking you were the fucking worst. Maybe you did kill her!)

CORN FLAKES
She bought ProNutro once. But a small serving of the stuff swallowed half a carton of milk so she never bought it again. You all went back to the corn flakes. If the milk ran out you could always use hot water with sugar.

DISHWASHING LIQUID
Sunlight or Ajax—she was never specific. She diluted the green ooze in the bottle to make it last longer. She had the hallmarks of an excellent drug dealer. She knew how to cut the green, leaving just enough kick to deal with the grease. Even to this day you can make the last centimetre of liquid last a whole week if you have to.

Rémy Ngamije

Crunchy Green Apples

(Or Omo)

BLACK TEA
"Rooibos," she said, "is not even tea." Its taste, its aroma, everything was off for her. Five Roses, that thing everyone in your house still calls "normal tea" was the status quo. 100s, tagged, each bag was used twice. Lipton was strictly for guests. (Later, there will be a girl who will try to stunt on you at a restaurant by asking for "Lippiton tee" like it is Louboutin but that is a story for another time.)

MILO
For winter only, made with hot water and an Atacama Desert splash of milk.

OROS
Another one of her great shames. As soon as her tax bracket changed she bought Hall's granadilla and orange concentrate. Her goal: a fridge full of fresh fruit juices, pulp en alles, unspoiled by the hand of man.

WILSON'S TOFFEES
Just watching your mother look for new places to hide packets of these treats taught you all you needed to know about the tense relationships prison guards have with prisoners. The guard has to worry about many things: the prisoners' food, their health, and the ever-present spectre of violence. The guard has to watch all the prisoners. But the prisoners worry about one thing. All they think about every second of every day is the guard. And they all watch him. They know him better than he knows them. They know the length of his strides and the beat of his walk. They know when he arrives with five o'clock shadow he has been hitting the bottle and his wife. Your mother, bless her, did her best to keep the sweets out of your reach. But those ten-cent delights put holes in your teeth and kept dentists drilling.

ROMANY CREAMS
These were strictly for Friday tea. Everyone was given two biscuits. They were savoured and eaten slowly. Fridays were the best days unless guests came over because then a whole packet had to be sacrificed to the hospitality gods. To this day, it is hard for you not to purchase Romany Creams without worrying that you might have to share it with someone.

ZAM-BUK
The one, the only, The Real Makoya!

PETROLEUM JELLY
Blue Seal, a small tub in her handbag, whipped out with alacrity when she saw an ashy elbow or forehead in need of greasing at church.

DRUM MAGAZINE
She loved Credo Mutwa's tales and, embarrassingly, all the stories of tokoloshes impregnating women in townships in South Africa.

TOMATOES, ONIONS, AND CARROTS
From the roadside—she made sure to buy each one from a separate woman. She never haggled over the price. She paid whatever they asked. You asked her about this once and she said, "When you see prices in the shops do you go to the manager and negotiate over the price? No, you do not. You just accept the price of an avocado even when you know it is too expensive. But when people see a poor person selling fruit by the side of the road the first thing they want to do is see how low they can drive the price. It is embarrassing to negotiate with poor people."

WASHING POWDER
She bought the hand wash variant, soaking laundry overnight before wringing and twisting it in the bathtub until it yielded to her efforts. When she bought a washing machine she was shocked to find out how long a Saturday could be without having to spend it beating the dirt out of clothes.

Sometimes, instead of Mamma you called her Omo. The nickname stuck in a way that would never wash off. You and your brother thought it was funny. To call her by her labour, to laugh at her efforts. You called her OMO because she washed your laundry when you were young but you never called her Kindness when she put plasters on your knees. You did not call her Patience when she put up with you and your anarchical teenage-hood. You did not call her Love when she was around, the only female presence that never wavered. Always there when she was needed, always around even when you said she was not. You never called her all the nice things she was to you.

No, she was OMO to you. Labour, and unacknowledged sacrifice, Mamma. Her passing was like ripping North from the compass face. The needle of your life spun around recklessly looking for its own purpose, its own anchor, its own driving force that was not her and what she did for you.

Burying her felt like the most vicious betrayal of biology. How were you supposed to deal with the death of the person who gave life to you?

You have been pushing your trolley around absentmindedly, lost in your recollection. And then there she is.

OMO!

On the shelves, hand wash, twin tub, top loader, now with new micro beads. But still the same trustworthy OMO you know from your childhood. The one that made your brown shirts crisp and white again.

Your eyes moisten. Your chest is crushed by the constriction of your reminiscence. You brush off the incident quickly, embarrassed. You walk away from her and make a dash for the till.

You need to escape this shop.

You must escape.

You escape.

Sit in the car.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Just a trick of memory. Just your eyes catching the sweats. Nothing major. This kind of thing happens all the time to the weaker species. Give the Super Negro genes time to kick in. They will harden the exterior, put up the Trojan walls, and relegate this moment of weakness to the past.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

All better, right?

Right.

OMO! Itakupatia what you are looking for.

Your ass needs to get searching.