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Morning sickness. Those baby blogs I've been scouring every day for weeks now all make it sound like nothing. I thought I had a decent idea of what it would be like. I thought I would wake up in the morning and then sprint to the toilet. In the morning, and maybe when I smell the stench of spoiled food, or when that distinctive metro-smell hits my senses. It will pass, they said. Eat small meals, they said. Always carry some rusks in your bag, they said. Lies, all lies.

I'm sitting in an Air France plane approaching Douala International Airport. I've been fighting back my nausea for the entire six endless hours since take-off in Paris. I've tried everything - attempted to sleep, nibbled on crackers and wheat rusks, I've even stuffed cotton wool in my nostrils in an attempt to drown out the stale smell of aeroplane broccoli and the whiskey breath of the woman in seat 18D. I've held out quite well until now. Since the day of my positive pregnancy test, five weeks ago, I've had to throw up multiple times a day. It hardly bothers me by now and, honestly, I don't even have the energy to brush my teeth after every time anymore. Chewing gum and tissues are my constant companions, and experience has taught me that I don't even always need a toilet. Storm drains, bushes, and bags are perfectly adequate.

Personally, I see it as a great achievement that I've made it this far after only a brief session in the ladies' at Charles de Gaulle Airport. The yellow 'fasten seatbelt' signs light up. "Ladies and Gentlemen we will shortly be beginning our descent to Douala International Airport." My stomach lets out a menacing gurgle. "Please make your way to your seats and fasten your seatbelts." Bile floods my mouth. "Please ensure your seat is in the upright position..." I gag. "... and that your tray-table is folded up." For every metre that the plane descends, the contents of my stomach inches its way up. I push the button to call for the flight attendant. "I'm going to be sick. Ich muss mich übergeben - um, je need, uh, je vet remettre.." I try in French, too. She hurries off and returns shortly with a paper bag. Paper? Is she kidding? Come on, only ten more minutes until we land. You've got this. Come on. Outside, a sea of dark green trees stretches out below us. The plane glides through the twilight over the luscious, ancient jungle, and it looks almost as if we will land directly into it. Every plane I've ever flown in until now has always been greeted by the glow of a city's lights as it lands. But here there's not a house in sight, near or far. For a brief moment, my nausea seems to settle. Adrenaline floods through my veins, instead.

It's ironic to think that I could die right now, in this moment. After all, I've come here to prevent my death. If you believe my mother, that is. She pushed me into taking this journey after she dreamed that I would die in childbirth if I didn't return at once to Cameroon, the country of my birth, to take part in the rituals a woman must complete before the birth of her first child. And then, of course, there was the fact that I had had a dream about a yellow snake and was stupid enough to tell her about it. Our combined dreams were enough for her to show up at two in

the morning outside the flat I share with my boyfriend. She had been hysterical, announcing that she would not sit idly by while a child of his family took her daughter to the grave. My mother had already lost a son, and she assured the future father of my child, tired and overwhelmed as he stood in front of her in a dressing gown, that she would rather beat the foetus out of me with her own hands than bear me, her oldest daughter, to my grave.

At first it seemed that the only option, if I wanted to survive, was to abort the child. So said my mother, anyway, and my father didn't want to be a grandfather, in any case. Eight days and several melodramatic scenes later - including my aunt Frida flying in from the US, as well as another Aunty from Marseille - it was decided that I should, instead, fly to Cameroon to partake in a series of rituals that would cost several thousand euros. The tarot cards Aunt Frida laid for me, all of which foretold my imminent death, only supported my mother's theory, and my other Aunty, whose instincts were usually infallible, insisted that my boyfriend, 'that little blonde man', had ill intentions towards me, and would bring me nothing but trouble and pain in the long run - which unsettled me. All of it confirmed my mother in her supposition that I must go to Cameroon to undergo certain rituals there. 'Rituals' in my family could be anything. From celebrations (big or small), to special, once-in-a-lifetime events, like Bornhouse, which followed the birth of a child and was intended to ward off the evil eye and other spirits. I remember the stories I was told as a child - of bloody rituals with human sacrifices, Cameroon's mythical places and mysterious occurrences. How much of it all is true, I've no idea. Even if I worried that my mother might have orchestrated this whole spectacle in order to have control over me, as she has wanted to do my

entire life - even then, I was also secretly glad at the thought of having a little distance from everything to gain some clarity about how I want to arrange my life, now that a child will be a part of it, too. And it's better to be safe than sorry. So I booked a flight.

I close my eyes and take deep breaths in and out. Big mistake. The sharp aroma of my neighbour's aftershave pierces the cotton in my nostrils and my stomach convulses in that familiar, painful way. I'm fascinated by how robust this seemingly fragile paper bag really is. My neighbour, on the other hand, seems less impressed by it. He's gone a little pale about the gills but seems to rally quickly. Thank God for that, because I haven't held it together for six hours only for a sweaty man in his sixties to give me grief with the contents of his stomach. When I step out of the air-conditioned aeroplane and into the jet bridge leading to the terminal, it feels like walking into an invisible wall of hot, humid air. Within seconds, I'm bathed in sweat, my loose-waisted linen trousers sticking unpleasantly to my skin, forcing me to slow my pace to avoid chafing. The last time I was in Cameroon was in 1996, when my mother came for the seven days of celebration on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of her father's death. I thought my mother was mad, back then. I still think so now but in different ways. I know her stories so well that I sometimes think I lived them myself. My mother has 81 siblings, as the 72nd child of Chief Fokumla Thompson of the Bokowa-Buea tribe, who was himself the grand-nephew of the famous Chief of Douala, Rudolf Manga Bell. Her father had 32 wives. Polygamy still remains widespread in Cameroon today, though my mother always emphasises that 32 was a shameless number of wives, even at the time. She doesn't find it objectionable, much rather thinks it confirmed his

status as a powerful man. When the first of my father's affairs came to light, I asked my mother why she was not angry, why she didn't leave him. She had laughed, saying that monogamous men were weak: "I'm hardly going to cut my husband's balls off." Madness. If my boyfriend had an affair, I wouldn't just cut his balls off, I'd serve them to him for breakfast the next morning. My grandmother explained to me that Chief Fokumla didn't have his many wives all at once. Many would leave out of jealousy when he brought home a new, younger wife. Most often, though, they would be turned away from their parents' houses upon returning there, as nobody was prepared to repay the dowry. So the wives would either return to his household or hide away with distant relations in the hopes that the dark spots left on their reputation by the whole affair would fade with time. For my grandmother, her husband's promiscuity was always a thorn in her side. She claimed to have once convinced four of his wives to leave him at the same time, but that one of them had betrayed the others to cement her children's place at their father's side, and thereby secure her own financial future. After that, they all went back to him.

A man's first wife was at the heart of the multi-layered constellation of family relations. She enjoyed an elevated position in the family structure and held authority over subsequent wives. Her opinions mattered in important decisions, and it was often she who guided the fate of the family with a wise (or sometimes not-so-wise) hand. Her position derived not just from her pre-eminence in a chronological sense, but also from her role as mother of the first children. My grandmother earned herself a certain degree of respect, even without being the first wife, and could influence decisions, but without the approval of the first wife, nothing went. This, of course, led to a laborious power struggle, a constant push

and pull of negotiations, compromises, and wrangling over positions of power. For my mother, though, her father was infallible. She would talk about him often, beaming as she spoke of the imposing man who would drive her to school every day in his Mercedes or Jaguar, of his affection and tenderness, and of how he never hit his children, even though it was commonplace then, as now, to discipline children that way. She spoke of the small, the lovely, and sometimes of the ugly incidents and customs that connected her to him, some of which she passed on to me and my two siblings, like snacking on honeycomb, or the herbal tea enemas she would give us every few weeks. But when she spoke of the time that followed his death, she became bitter and sad. Their connection had always been a special one, as she and her sister had lived with him without their mother. His death turned their lives upside down from one day to the next.

Ten years ago she returned to Cameroon for six weeks, with me in tow, buying a new Mercedes SUV on her way from Douala to Buea. Accompanied by an entourage of three white men, she drove to the house that she had built for her mother and grandmother some years past. The fact that she had white men working for her, rather than the other way around - that alone made her appear powerful. Within days, the news of her arrival had spread about the country, and it was being reported on the radio that Ayudele Brinkmüller, born Fokumla, had returned to honour her father. Every day a queue of people formed in front of the gates to the house, branches of the family thought long lost came in their droves to profess how ready they had always been to help out. One or the other of her half-brothers, too, who were still alive, came by to remind her how generous they had all been then, how they had bought notebooks and school books for her and her

sister. One of them even went so far as to claim that he had kept her inheritance safe for her for years, had been astonished when she then went off to Germany with that white man, and that it was only after that that burglars managed to break in and steal the money from the chest under his bed. The man's lies aggravated my mother, and to top it off he had made a drunken pass at her at her father's funeral. She impressed on me again and again that I should never trust a man's word without question, no matter how he weeps or promises. She had learned the hard way. But I'd never have believed any of that rubbish, even without her mantra. Four long weeks were spent planning the festivities. These included the construction of a marble-clad mausoleum for my grandfather's grave, and the slaughter of half a herd of cows and at least ten goats. For several days, drinks were delivered multiple times a day in great big vans, and I still remember how there was always one aunt or another who would fall asleep in her chair, wake up the next morning, freshen herself up, and begin loudly demanding cake and beer.

Even President Paul Biya and his ministers came, some of whom were brothers or sons of Chief Fokumla. I shook the hands of so many close and distant relatives, many of whom had come over from Europe, that I decided I would never date a man with ancestral connections to Cameroon, as it was entirely possible that we would be related. Those weeks as a teenager were the first time that I ever experienced my mother's culture, and I enjoyed it to the fullest. These traditions were passed from generation to generation and would naturally be carried on by all future descendants, no matter where in the world they might live. There was a cousin from France who swapped his perfectly tailored suit for a traditional Agbada with ease, an aunt who worked as a lawyer in London and also acted as a priestess,

slaughtering chickens for countless ceremonies. The festivities were a massive success, and my mother left the country a hero to all those who had ever had trouble because of her corrupt half-brothers - and as those half-brothers' new arch-enemy. For the first time, my mother told me a little about her childhood, and I realised that she, too, had suffered, had gone hungry despite her rich father and that some men in her life had put their greed above the wellbeing of others. That my mother had dared rewrite her own story - had refused to accept that she lived in a world which only brought forth stories in which women and girls were victims. But hardly anybody suspected that she would be paying off the credit she had taken on to finance these celebrations for years to come and that doing so would almost break her marriage. It was one giant middle finger to my mother's past, and neither her admirers nor those who envied her would have guessed that her daughter - who, then at the height of puberty, had been forced to wear exclusively white for six weeks to keep away evil spirits and curses - would fly in to Douala Airport ten years later as a pregnant, unmarried woman to take part in lifesaving Voodoo rituals in the ancient jungle.

The arrivals hall is loud, stuffy, and dusty. My welcoming party consists of George, who carves a path through the waiting crowd towards me, reaching me just in time to stop a pickpocket from slitting open my belt bag with a box cutter. He hoists my suitcase calmly onto his head and pulls me by the arm through the crowd towards a battered yellow Toyota Corolla. The car has definitely seen better days and is held together largely by duct tape. Before George steers me into the back seat, he tells me conspiratorially that I mustn't speak until we get into the other car and hugs me, somewhat clumsily. It's uncomfortable because I'm

sweating, and because my breath could probably set half Douala on fire if you held a lit match to it. As we roll through the crowded streets at a walking pace, I can't take my eyes off the colourful fluorescent neon lights and tubes illuminating the bars and clubs. Warm light fills the night. It reminds me of exploring the Highlife scene with my mother on my last visit to Cameroon. How proud I felt then, to be sitting in a bar sipping my lemonade. I was still a teenager back then, but I felt like an adult as I roved around between the lively street cafes and colourfully lit bars, carefree and naive. A world apart from now, with all my nausea-, family-, and relationship problems in tow and a child in my belly. The pavement is full of women selling fried fish and plantain, and poff poff. The smell of fried dough instantly triggers my hunger. I need to get some Suya, right now. I want to ask George to stop when the next stand comes into view, but then I remember his instruction not to speak. As if in slow motion, I watch the stand as we roll past, and the aroma of delicious skewers of meat in spicy peanut sauce drifts in through the open window and lingers in the car. My belly rumbles. We roll to a halt a few metres on, and the driver joins in the concert of furious honking from the other drivers. A boy steps toward the window, hawking Suya skewers from the basket balanced atop his head. At once, tears begin streaming down my face. Wretched hormones! Although I'm almost used to it by now, the way everything makes me cry. Right now I want nothing more than to eat Suya, and I don't know why I've been forbidden to speak.

"Ashia, Sista. Don't cry," my uncle says, turning to me in a panic. "Hey, Issa, why are you crying? Stop it. I beg. What's wrong?"

Should I just speak normally? Ignore his instructions? Should I rather whisper into his ear and thereby risk knocking him out with my terrible breath? In the end, I opt for sobbing: "I'm hungry. I want Suya."

"Eh eh," George exclaims and jumps out of the car.

"Boi, boi... come here. Give me that Suya, oh."

The taxi driver steps on the break, which makes absolutely no difference as we're already stationary. He curses and asks if George has gone mad, jumping out of the car like that.

My uncle gets back in the car in the middle of this tirade and hands me three types of Suya with different sauces and a Sprite.

"She's pregnant," he explains to the driver, who immediately ceases his diatribe. "Chop, sister. Chop."

I had forgotten that pregnant women are usually treated like queens here because you can never be sure that the unborn child isn't a reincarnation of an ancestor. Thus any wishes and cravings of pregnant women, which come from the fetus, of course, but which might also be the wishes and cravings of an ancestor, are fulfilled. A pregnant woman's wishes become mandates. And responding to orders from your elders is something each one of us has drummed into us from birth. Any child raised by African parents, even in the second or third generation, knows that a good child recognises the wishes or commands of parents and grandparents best through telepathy before the adults even express them. If it ever reaches the point where an aunt has to ask for a glass of water, your only option is

to not only bring her a glass of water (one still, one carbonated, one with and one without ice), but also to bring her a tea with plenty of sugar, and a cola.

I sink my teeth into the crispy beef. Even just the first bite sets my tastebuds alight. The meat melts like butter in my mouth, the spices familiar and soothing. I want every bite to last a lifetime. I feel myself grow happier with every passing second, savouring the tingling sensation of the mild spiciness on my tongue. We've left the city centre by now, and the taxi driver drops us off in a car park outside Douala, where we switch cars, getting into a silver VW Passat station wagon. It's a new model. Uncle George takes the wheel, and I soon notice, to my relief, that our new transportation comes with air conditioning, which cools the car to a bearable temperature within a few minutes.

How complicated can you possibly make it to pick someone up from the airport? But George is convinced that it's better to hide our luck behind a light touch of rust and a layer of duct tape and to sweat, rather than show up at the airport with a new car, exposing our supposed wealth to the evil eyes of thieves and crooks. If someone asks how you're doing, you show them your car repair bills. If they still ask, you show them the dents.

For the first time since my departure from Frankfurt Airport this morning, I allow myself to relax a little. George is warming to me slowly and asks me about my journey, though not without first asking after the well-being of every single relative in Germany he has ever heard of, even in passing.

“How is everyone at home?”

"They're all doing really well."

"Ah, that's wonderful. And how's your mother?"

"She's doing well."

"And Uncle Jürgen? How's he?"

"My father is also well."

"And the twins, Dante and Nala? How are they?"

"They're doing well too."

"Ah, lovely, that's good to hear. And how's your German grandmother?"

"She's also doing well."

"Does she still have that little dog?"

"Yes, she does."

"Ah, that's wonderful. And how's the dog?"

It goes on like this for almost half an hour until I've also given a report on the family of an uncle who married into my family. As I'm telling him all this, I remember that my cousin from the US isn't doing "okay" at all, he was arrested six months ago and is still in custody because no one can afford his bail. But I refrain from getting lost in such details. I also refrain from telling him that I've moved away from home and am living in sin with my boyfriend.

We pass through Limbe and Mutengene, and I'm surprised at how familiar the winding, uphill drive feels. I accidentally tell George that I don't know my boyfriend's mother because she passed away when he was 15. As he launches into a brief prayer for the happiness of her immortal soul, my grandmother's house is already coming into view before us. The gate to the property is so wide that even a truck could pass through it without problem. My grandmother lives quite lavishly

even by German standards. Her house, like all houses in Buea, is built on a slope and consists of three lush floors and two self-contained flats, which she rents out to students (against my mother's wishes). The entire enormous concrete structure is painted a striking shade of turquoise, and the massive front door of heavy Bubinga wood is flanked by two ostentatious columns, each adorned with a life-sized terracotta figure of a lion. My mother built the house on the same plot of land where my grandmothers' small wooden hut had once stood, where she and her sister had lived. She bought two of the neighbouring plots, too, tore down the small wooden structure with its corrugated iron roof, and replaced it with a large house complete with garden, gravel paths, and tacky stone statues, including garden gnomes in dirndls and lederhosen.

It's late enough now that only my grandmother Namondo, the stricter of the two, is awaiting us. The friendlier one is actually my great-grandmother, whom I call Mbambah. Mbambah means 'grandmother', and Marijoh takes care not only of her own grandchildren and great-grandchildren but also of anyone who needs a grandmother, which is why everyone calls her Mbambah. She seems to be sleeping through the arrival of her returned daughter. Technically, I'm her great-granddaughter, but she refers to all her female descendants as daughters. My stricter grandmother is a small woman, reaching barely up to my chin. She is a proud, resolute figure, and her deep-set eyes reflect decades of wisdom. She attends church every Sunday and makes sure no one chews with their mouth open during meals, and that everyone washes thoroughly behind their ears. "Respect your elders. Pray before a meal. Work hard. Wash before sleeping. Don't scratch your backside." She lives by clear rules and expects her family to respect and follow

them. Discipline and order are of the utmost importance to her, and I sometimes get the impression that she's only truly content when everyone around her is working away. She conveys all this without shouting or raising her voice; her regal calmness is authority enough. It seems she was already in bed as well, because she's standing at the door without her wig on, wearing only her hairnet and a Kaba. She must have heard the car from afar as it's usually dead silent at this hour. Pulled into her firm embrace, I feel instantly safe. The fine wrinkles around her eyes are like a map tracing out the labyrinth of her life. Her Kaba smells of the lavender of her moth powder, and her hair of coconut oil. I inhale deeply, breathing in her scent, and want briefly to close my eyes, but she ushers me quickly into the house, sighing, and relieves me of the invisible evil eyes that I've collected on my way from the airport to her with frantic hand gestures.

The walls of the hallway are lined with pictures of her children and grandchildren. My two-year-old self beams at me from a gold-framed photograph on the wall, cheeks greasy, sitting on Mbambah's lap holding a half-eaten corn cob. Other photographs show my grandmothers on happy occasions, like after the completion of the house. They stand between my mother and my father, who always looks oddly out of place as the only white person on the wall. The whole family is displayed here, even though many of them live all over the world. My favourite photo is one of Mbambah, George, and me. We stand pressed close together, radiant with happiness, our shared spirit of adventure shining out from the frame. The memory of those carefree days brings a smile to my face and warms my heart. It wasn't all so complicated, back then.

The floor is tiled in kaleidoscopic patterns of pink, yellow, and green. All the doors are open, as if waiting to receive us. The dining table is set lavishly, as if they were expecting an entire family, and a delicious smell wafts out from the kitchen. In my mind's eye, I see the image of the dense, deep green fields where we used to harvest Eru. A wave of serene warmth and security washes over me at the sight of the familiar scene before me. I've always felt at home in this place, and I hope that I can leave my worries behind for just a moment here. I allow myself to linger in the feeling that I don't have to be constantly thinking about my boyfriend, the father of my child, nor about my mother and her wishes, and that I also don't have to fear that, in the end, I'll be left standing here with a child and bringing even greater shame upon this family than I already have.

I can smell Eru, Quakoko, and Bangasoup. It makes my mouth water, but before I fully realise what's happening, I'm already retching, and the Suya and Sprite spill out onto the floor. My grandmother clicks her tongue indignantly and calls for Epossi as she steers me towards the bathroom. Epossi is one of the many cousins who, I think, aren't actually cousins; an annoying girl with whom I've been in constant competition since my earliest childhood, though I've never quite known why. My grandma helps me out of my clothes and hands me soap and a toothbrush. I brush my teeth, grateful, and wash with steaming water from the bucket that a sleepy Epossi pushes through the door. I slip into the Kaba prepared for me and rummage through my bag for a fresh pair of underwear. Returning to the living room, I feel shame wash over me as I notice that someone has already cleaned up my mess. The table is laden with steaming bowls of my favourite dish, and I'm glad of the food, but the Eru is so spicy that it sets my ears ringing, and

I'm tempted to end the meal before it even begins, but my grandmother growls, "Chop, I'm not joking." It would be unwise to contradict her.

Despite her strictness, my grandmother is one of the most loving, nurturing women I know. She lavished care and attention on all her grandchildren and rushed to their sides after each of her various daughters' six births to dote on and spoil the new-borns until their first birthday. Firm skin-to-skin contact as they drifted off to sleep was a matter of course for her grandchildren, as much as hearing her come up with little lullabies at any hour of the day. She would carry them around on her back until they could walk, and some even far beyond that. She learned to speak English after the birth of my cousin Zoe in the US, and even learned German after the birth of my siblings so that she could sing "Hänschen klein" to them perfectly. And to impress my father. I'm the exception to all this. My mother gave birth to me only three months before the birth of my uncle George, so my grandmothers raised George and me together in our earliest years while my mother continued her studies in Nigeria. Grandmother even alternated breastfeeding us, which all means that I don't really have the status of a granddaughter so much as a daughter to her - a daughter with the added benefit of being the baby of the family, which in this case means she at least doesn't beat me. So I'm the only grandchild who really knows what my grandmother is like when she's angry and is allowed to do simple tasks around her. The typical refrains of Black motherhood come to me exclusively from her: "Why are you crying? If you don't stop, I'll give you a reason to cry." Or: "No, you're not getting ice cream, we have ice cream at home." Or: "You'll look at me when I'm talking to you." Or the slipper that would fly past my head after I made a cheeky comment. I'm pretty sure by now that she always missed on

purpose because right now she has no problem hitting George squarely in the head with her yellow flip-flop. His chuckling at my attempts to struggle and slurp my way through the Quakoko in palm oil sauce ceases immediately. I force down one bite after another and order my body not to throw up until this meal is completely metabolised.

The air conditioner in my room hums away. I'm on the verge of strangling myself with the mosquito net by the time I finally find the gap in it that lets me into the four-poster bed. Exhausted and stuffed to bursting point, I collapse into the countless pillows. My body feels like a sack full of heavy concrete, and my tongue is still on fire. As I close my eyes, I think about my baby.