

Light – Lesley Nneka Arimah

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When Enebeli Okwara sent his girl out in the world, he did not know what the world did to daughters. He did not know how quickly it would wick the dew off her, how she would be returned to him hollowed out, relieved of her better parts. Before this, they are living in Port Harcourt in a bungalow in the old Ogbonda Layout. Her mother is in America reading for a Masters in Business Administration. She has been there for almost three years in which her eleven-year-old bud of a girl has bloomed. Enebeli and the girl have survived much in her absence, including a disturbance at the market which saw him and the girl separated for hours while people stampeded, trying to get away from a commotion that turned out to be two warring market women who'd had just about enough of each other's tomatoes. They survived a sex talk, birthed by a careless joke an uncle had made at a wedding, about the bride taking a cup of palm wine to her husband and leaving with a cup of, well, and the girl had questions he might as well answer before she asked someone who might take it as an invitation to demonstrate. They survived the crime scene of the girl's first period, as heavy a bleeder as she was a sleeper, the red seeping all the way through to the other side of the mattress. They survived the girl discovering this would happen every month.

Three long years have passed and the girl is fourteen and there is a boy and he is why Enebeli is currently entrenched in what passes for the lobby to the headmaster's office, a narrow hall painted a blaring glossy white meant to discourage the trailing of dirty child fingers but let's be serious. He's seated on the narrow bench meant for children and his adult buttocks find awkward purchase. The girl is in trouble for sending the boy a note and it is not the first time. Enebeli has seen the boy and, even after putting himself in the shoes of a fourteen-year-old girl, doesn't see the appeal. The boy is a little on the short side. The boy has one ear that is significantly larger than the other. It's noticeable. One can see the difference. Whoever cuts the boy's hair often misses a spot so that it sticks up in uneven tufts. The only thing that saves the boy from Enebeli is that he seems as confused about the girl's attention as everyone else.

The headmaster calls Enebeli in and hands him the note. This one reads 'Buki, I love you. I will give you many sons,' and it takes everything

Enebeli has not to guffaw. Where does the girl get all this? Not from her mother, whose personality and humour are of the quieter sort, and not from him, who would be perfectly content sitting by a river, watching the water swirl by. He promises to chastise the girl and assures the headmaster that it will not happen again. It happens two more times before the girl learns to pass notes better. And he should chastise the girl, he knows that, but she is his brightest ember and he would not have her dimmed.

Her mother attempts to correct the girl herself, but much is lost in transmission over the wires and a long absence has diluted much of the influence a mother should have. It is one of the things Enebeli and his wife disagree on, this training up of the girl, and it has widened the schism between them.

The first month wife and mother had gone to the States, the family called and spoke to each other several times a day. The mother and girl would have their time, full of tears and I miss yous, and the husband and wife would have their time, full of tears and I miss yous as well, but full of other things too, like my body misses you and all I need is 30 minutes max and when are you coming home.

She'd returned the first long holiday, Christmas. The girl barely left her side the whole trip and Enebeli would often find himself staring at his wife. He memorized her scent and the feel of her hair. They slept very little, making up for lost time. When her return to the States was fraught with delays and visa issues, they made their first big mistake, deciding that she should not travel back to Nigeria for the duration of her studies. There was some noise made about how the girl should come, too, but Enebeli vetoed it and his wife relented. They knew that of the both of them, she might be able to soldier on without her daughter, but Enebeli would shrivel like a parched plant.

So the girl stayed with him and they learned to survive without the mother, but for one relationship to thrive another must not and Enebeli saw this dwindling in the conversations the girl would have with her mother via Skype. They were friendly conversations, filled with the exchanging of news and the updating of situations, but there was a whiff of distance, as though the girl was talking to her favourite aunt, whom she loved very much, but would not, say, tell her about a boy.

The girl, at fourteen, is almost a woman, but still a girl and her mother is trying to prepare her for the world. Stop laughing so loud, dear. How is it that I can hear you chewing all the way here in America? What do you

mean Daddy made you breakfast, you are old enough to be cooking. Distance between mother and daughter widens till the girl doesn't enjoy talking to her mother any more, begins to see it as a chore.

And speaking of chores, father and daughter share them, each somewhat inept, each too intimidated by their sullen housegirl to order her around; she spends most of the day watching *Africa Magic*, mopping the same patch of tile till it gleams. When she isn't pretending to clean, the housegirl talks to the girl in whispers and Enebeli isn't concerned because they are in the house and how much trouble could they get into. Talk is just talk. This is what he tells his wife when she is horrified and worried that the girl is learning all the wrong ways to be in the world and she badgers and badgers till Enebeli sends the housegirl back to her village. The girl becomes sullen with her mother after this and waits with arms crossed for the Skype calls to end and the mother becomes more nitpicky, troubled that her daughter cannot see she is trying to ease her passage. What is this the girl is wearing? The girl should be sitting with her legs crossed at the ankle. Why is the girl's hair scattered like that, when was the last time she had a relaxer?

Enebeli shrugs to the hair questions and his wife sighs then says she's calling her sister. Enebeli balks at this. His wife's sister is a terrifyingly competent woman with three polished, obedient sons and the wherewithal to take on another child. She's been trying to get her hands on the girl for years. In a fit of spite and panic, Enebeli buys a box and does the girl's hair himself, massaging the cream into her scalp like lotion, and the smell of it makes both their eyes water. When they wash it out, half the girl's hair comes out with it, feathery clumps that swirl into the drain like fuzzy fish.

His wife's sister doesn't say a word about the over-processed mess, or about the scab forming on the girl's forehead, but when she brings the girl back, her hair is shorn, cut close to her scalp, and she turns her head this way and that, preening, and they all, even her mother, agree that her skull has quite the lovely shape and, yes, she looks beautiful. But then her mother ruins it by adding that she can't wait till it grows out so she can look like a proper girl again. This starts another argument between husband and wife, mild at first, but then it peppers and there is this thing that distance does where it subtracts warmth and context and history and each finds that they're arguing with a stranger.

The girl stops talking to her mother after that, and for a week his wife pleads with him to soften her and he agrees, but doesn't because he

enjoys having the girl like this, as angry with her mother as he is. But the girl holds a grudge as well as she holds water in her fist and she is soon chattering away, but the space between mother and daughter has widened to hold something cautious, an elephant of mistrust and awkwardness. The girl feels it, doesn't want it, and in a bid to close the distance, confesses to her mother about the boy. She strings his virtues out like Christmas lights – he's shorter than her so he has to obey her, he's finally learning how to kiss well – and her mother silences her by saying, sadly, that she didn't think she'd raised that kind of girl. Her mother's disappointment is the first time the girl becomes aware that the world requires something different than she is. It dampens her for a few days that worry Enebeli, and then she returns, but there is a little less light to her.

And when his wife says that she has been offered a job in the States, management at a small investment firm, Enebeli says nothing. They had promised each other at the beginning of all this that when she got her degree, she would come back and find a snazzy job as a returnee where she would be over-compensated for her foreign papers.

And later, even knowing what it will do to him, she will request that he send the girl to her in America, where her mothering hand will be steadier and he will fight her. He will use vicious words he didn't know he had in him, as though a part of him knows that she will never be this girl again.

But before all this, before the elders are called in, before even his father sides with his wife and his only unexpected ally is his wife's sister. Before he bows to the pressure of three generations on his back. Before he sobs publicly in the Murtala Muhammed International Airport, cries that shake his body and draw concern and offers of water from passersby. Before he spends his evenings in the girl's room, sitting with the other things she left behind, counting down the time difference till they could Skype. Before the girl returns from school and appears on his screen more subdued than he'd ever seen her. Before he tries to animate her with stories of the lovelorn boy who keeps asking after her. Before she looks off-screen as though for coaching and responds, please, daddy, don't talk to me like that. Before she grows cautious under the mothering of a woman who loves, but cannot comprehend her. Before she quietens in a country that rewards her brand of boldness, in her black of body, with an incredulous fascination that makes her put it away. Before all that, she is eleven and Enebeli and the girl sit on the steps to the house watching people walk by their ramshackle gate. They

are playing azigo and whenever the girl makes a good move she crows in a very unladylike way and yells In your face! and he laughs every time. He does not yet wonder where she gets this, this streak of fire. He only knows that it keeps the wolves of the world at bay and he must never let it die out.