The Possibility of Her Parents' Dismay Was the Cost of Privacy

By Kunle Abodunde

But Julia said her parents weren't surprised at all when she explained to them that we'd moved in together. Once told, they invited us, as a couple, to meet them in Great Neck. Julia assured me that the invitation had been made with the best of intentions, that spirits were high, and retribution was the furthest thing from anyone's mind. Besides, she said, if there was any anger, it would be aimed at her alone. All this said, I was nervous now that we were on the other side of the news. It had happened.

Julia and I met at Penn Station, luggage in hand, at the end of a workday, a Friday. It was already past the rush hour as we entered the train on platform sixteen. Our ride was comfortable and quiet. Two weeks had passed since we'd moved in together; and there was a heavy precision through which we each negotiated how to live with the other; how to tolerate the other; how to talk and not talk to the other; how to breathe and to laugh and to think with the other. For me, words got in the way.

Julia was the greater talker among the two of us, and in the days since we'd moved in and had woken up in the same bed together, she began to hear her silences, and the hear herself in my silences. Even in such a short time, she began to learn to make less effort. But the silence was hard for Julia. It was difficult for her to gently subsist in the ether of uncertainty, and of unspoken love.

That morning, before I'd left for work, knowing that we'd be meeting later to catch the train, and that I wouldn't have time to get changed again, I asked her what I should wear. I'd never done anything like this before, I said.

I should wear whatever I wanted, she'd told me. It wouldn't make any difference. I should simply be myself.

So I slipped on black trousers and a dress shirt, as I normally did; and then, stretching my arms deep into the closet, grabbed an old tweed blazer I hadn't worn for so long it was slightly crumpled. I put it on and asked for her opinion.

Perfect, she'd said. Respectful.

On gaining approval for the blazer, I reached back into the closet, this time bringing out a solid crimson tie, and once again sought her approval.

No need, she said. Much too formal.

As we sat in the train she looked across at me and mentioned that a day's worth of wearing had eased the crinkles off my blazer. She was glad above all, that I felt myself, and appeared comfortable. Her mother was going to like me, she said, convinced of this.

I glanced out of the window as thick, wooly clouds drifted very slowly by, set against a darkening blue sky. Julia's head tilted as she followed my eyes up into the sky. I imagined for an instant that it wasn't the clouds that moved, but the very earth itself. The sun was still out as we stepped off the train at Great Neck.

Having left the city, there was a different feeling. The almost silent rumble that pounded from the base of the city, its collective and unceasing heartbeat, was suddenly absent. It was as the ever-constant din of a machine that's only recognized after it comes to an abrupt end. In its place, there was the rustle of trees in the wind as we walked up the stairway from the platform to the station-front. Her mother's name was Gail. She told me this sometime ago, but now she reminded me, as if bestowing upon me the right to use it. As we reached the top of the stairs, Julia's cell phone rang. It was Gail calling to tell her she was at the station waiting patiently but excitedly in a car parked outside. My heart was like a castle drawbridge closing at the approach of a foreign army whose banners were as yet unrecognized

‘‘Gail. I'm Gail," she said, insistently. "I'm happy to meet you." Her arms fell open to invite a warm and oddly familiar embrace. She'd come out of her car.

‘‘Likewise," I muttered.

I was set very much at ease by Gail's manner and ease. To my surprise, she seemed glad to be hosting us.

‘‘It didn't take us long. A nice train ride, too," I said.

Julia didn't make an introduction. I think this was deliberate. Her mother and I went on with familiar chatter.

‘‘You look so much alike," I said. "Or, I should say, she looks very much like you." They both laughed.

‘‘Julia hasn't said very much about you. She's kept you all to herself, so it's good to finally meet you," Gail said as she led us down the sidewalk to her car. "I'm too nosey for my own good," she continued, ‘‘but Julia says that there's plenty about you she doesn't know. That you're a bit of a mystery to her."

I laughed. The thought of his being a mystery was funny to me. For someone to call me a mystery was flattering, because it meant that I was the subject of unsatisfied curiosity. But me as an incomplete subject in the eyes of another? As an empty shell? Or a ghost? Or a harbinger of multitudes?

Gail drove an old brown 1984 BMW that, like her, seemed to have aged quite gracefully. Julia offered me the front seat, as she assured me that her sitting in the back wouldn't prevent conversation between her and her mother. Gail drove carefully, slowly, even though there wasn't much traffic. I saw from the car that Great Neck was much as Julia had described it to me. The house was only a few minutes away, and upon getting there, upon seeing the house in which she grew up, it occurred to me that I hadn't thought very much about it. She'd never described it to me in great detail.

The entrance to the grounds of the house was on a sharp turn. All around were tall trees swaying slightly in the wind. Gail held open the front door, and smiled as she ushered the two of us in. The front of the building was narrow, making it appear deceptively small; and in sight were only two windows. The entrance was near the corner, at a right-angle to the windows facing the front, and to the steps that led onto the wooden porch. It was a wide porch; and with its overhang buttressed by pillars on the open side, formed a corridor stretching some distance, with another window visible at the end. Along the porch, on the side of the railing that faced towards the garden, were plants and flowers. The flowers

were in small pots suspended from the ceiling, their blue and red petals strewn on the wood-boarded floor below. The plants reached upward from visibly rich, dark soil inside orange clay pots on the ground. And there was Ivy, twisting itself gently around the white pillars that held up the overhang.

‘‘Peter will be down very shortly,” Gail said.

‘‘Peter’s my father,” Julia said as she turned her gaze from me to her mother.

‘‘Julia’s father will be down,” Gail said, with her eyes pointed at the floor. “His name’s Peter. Julia should have told you his name. At least that much.”

She looked at me with a plain expression and piercing eyes. Although she was looking at me, her soft, cold anger was directed at none other than her daughter. Julia must have sensed this. She must have already learned through intuition (the way that children learn) to spy out that it was she who was being spoken to; that it was she with whom one was dissatisfied; that it was she who’d proved not worthy enough even to be confronted.

‘‘There’s so much else I don’t know, because I haven’t asked,” I said. I looked at Julia. She remained silent as she looked back at me. She needn’t have said anything. I was the stranger in the room. I was the new adjudicator who’d entered an age-old battle.

‘‘Well, he’ll be down soon,” Gail said, for a third time. She smiled as though happy again after the brief moment needed to chastise her daughter in that odd way. “Go in and sit down, both of you. He’s on the phone. He’s doing a radio interview with a local station in Japan.” I followed Julia into the living room, while her mother promptly disappeared to tell Peter that Julia and I were in the house.

As we sat in the living room, Julia didn’t want to talk. I surmised that she didn’t want to explain, or apologize, or give me forewarning, or desperately and deliberately begin talking about something else to change the subject. I thought it pointless to beg for clarifications in between, as if I were backstage; as if I’d forgotten my lines. As we sat, I felt myself sinking into the quicksand of unwanted silence until Julia said, ‘‘I’ll get you a drink,” and left the room.

Gail was older than I’d thought. She was visibly older than she was in the photograph I’d seen in our apartment back in Brooklyn. According to the same photograph, Peter was much older than Gail. How much older he will look when he comes down the stairs, I wondered.

Julia promptly returned carrying a small hazelnut-colored tray with two bottles of Heineken and a glass of red wine balanced on it. She placed the tray on the center table, took one bottle for herself, and handed me the other.

‘‘Who’s the wine for?” I asked.

‘‘My mom,” she replied.

‘‘And your dad?”

‘‘He doesn’t drink. Not anymore.”

‘‘Why did he stop?”

‘‘Health reasons. He wants to live as long as he can. I don’t think he ever drank heavily, but he decided to stop altogether a few years ago. It’s paying off, I think. He tried to retire last year, but he was bored, so went back to work. He’s past retirement, but he’s full of energy.”

‘‘She’s angry,” I said after a pause. “The way she looked at me. She’s angry.”

‘‘Not at you. It’s me moving in with someone she doesn’t know. And not being married. She thinks I should have told her before it happened. I don’t regret not telling her. Not at all. But it has nothing to do with you.”

‘‘Well, of course it does.”

‘‘If it wasn’t you it would have been someone else. Or something else. I can’t please her. I don’t regret it; but I’m sorry I can’t control my mother’s feelings. And whatever they are, they aren’t directed at you.”

‘‘I’ll take your word for it.”

‘‘Dad’s better,” she said. A light smiled formed on her face. “Not so judgmental. He just laughed when I told him over the phone. He congratulated me, and wished me the best of luck. He’s always telling her she takes it all too seriously. I think he’s right.”

‘‘Well, that’s a relief,” I said.

Her mother’s muffled anger could be explained, expected, forgiven. I wasn’t sitting and waiting in trepidation, but I wasn’t sure I could withstand the subtle rebuke of yet another parent, no matter how indirect.

‘‘Speak of the devil,” Julia said as her father walked in. He wore a thick blue bathrobe and white flannel slippers. His hair was ruffled and still bright orange, though with more streaks of gray than I remembered from the photograph.

‘‘How long have you been here?” he asked as he reached forward to give me a firm two-handed handshake.

‘‘Not long,” Julia answered. “Mom said you were on the phone to Japan again. We didn’t want to rush you.” He turned toward Julia and gave her a welcome hug and kiss.

‘‘We’ve heard about you,” he said. He studied me not in a judgmental way; not withholding his approval or waiting to be satisfied, but it seemed out of sheer curiosity. “It’s good to meet you, at last,” he said, as he gestured towards Julia.

‘‘Well, thank you,” I said, surprised at the old man’s warmth.

‘‘Oh, sit down. Sit down; make yourself at home,” he said. “Julia should bring you out here more. Especially now. It’s nice at this time of year.”

‘‘How long have you lived here?” I asked.

‘‘We’ve been in this house for nineteen years,” he said.

‘‘Twenty, Peter. This year it’s twenty,” Gail said as she walking in. She picked up the glass of wine from the tray and sat on the sofa next to her husband. They were both ostensibly in good cheer. Yet there was an immeasurable difference in the two faces I saw sitting across from me. One was at ease, joyfully indifferent, curious, effusive, and yet sullen by the years. The other face was younger, less at ease, hardened and unsure, lurking perpetually on the verge of change for the worse.

‘‘A long time,” I said. “My memory doesn’t stretch that far.”

‘‘Neither does mine,” Julia added.

‘‘It hasn’t changed very much,” Peter said. “The neighborhood, I mean. That’s what Gail liked about it, that it wasn’t going to change very much. It was more her decision than it was mine. I didn’t care where we moved.”

‘‘It’s nice to be in one place, and stay there,” I said. “You shouldn’t take that for granted. It must be good to have a place, one place to keep coming back to.”

‘‘But people move, Sanya,” Peter replied.

The use of my name in Peter’s response didn’t go unnoticed, or unappreciated. The pronunciation was as good as could be expected.

‘‘I think we’re the only ones here from twenty years ago,” Peter continued. He glanced at Gail in case he was wrong. “And we don’t know our neighbors all that well anyway.”

‘‘So it’s all overrated? We should stay in the city!” I said and laughed.

‘‘Well, yes perhaps,” Peter said. “But we’ve got to account for our time somehow. We’ve had to succeed.” He looked round at all three of us with a pedantic, though kind expression. “And what use would it have been, coming all this way at the age of six, if I can’t say I’ve succeeded.”

‘‘Well, can you . . .account for your time, I mean?” I asked.

‘‘Oh, yes. I’ve made sure of that. But I wish I could say more,” Peter responded.

‘‘What more?” I inquired.

‘‘I don’t know. I’m seventy; and I can’t think of anything better than going back to work. They even listen to me in Japan,” he said.

‘‘The interview?”

‘‘Yes, the interview. Supply chain management. I’m the king of inventory, you know.”

As I sat in front of Julia’s parents in their living room, and endured their subtle and unsubtle examination, I imagined Julia within this household. All around me was the stuff of which she was made. I saw her father; the white indifferent

space, fashioned through turmoil and suffering, sitting next to her mother; the heat of ambition with all its wiles and compromises. She was the child, the great question forged in the furnace of this distinction. Julia came of age suffering, broken, in between the two.

I kept the conversation as light as I could. Point and counterpoint, question and response, I kept it as simple as that. As for the depth, I could sketch that out for myself, and perhaps talk it out with Julia once we were alone again. Gail and Peter had been told very little about me. But they weren't unnaturally curious about me. They weren't prying in their questions.

By the end of this evening Julia was no longer simply the delicate, intricate face with body painted in luscious oil, suspended on a canvas of infinite white. The forms behind her were taking shape and color; and through these forms, these ghosts of flesh and blood, her meaning was emerging. She was not alone. She was not suspended in time. She was no accident. As the canvas materialized in fullness, it seemed more and more to me that Julia took on the form of a combination, a progression, an insufficient answer, and most desperately, of a gift of love to the figures hovering above; the mother and father sitting before me.

I tended to settle on contrasts; on things strange and unknown. Julia had told me already, well before the visit, that this house in Great Neck was the only one she could ever remember living in. The twenty years were an eternity in her mind; and stay away as long as she might, this was home.

I, on the other hand, had been saddled with a string of homes, almost homes, and shadow homes. Some were now lost in the haze of distant memory, and some (where my parents now lived in Lagos, for example) were even unknown to me. Yet no matter how numerous, foreign, or lost all these were, I was obliged to call them all "home," for in each of these homes,my soul still moved, trundling through the motions of becoming.

My home was a concrete row house that stood in what by now was surely a maze saturated in concrete buildings on the outskirts of Lagos. My home was the apartment where I, as a small boy in the early 1980s, in a black Mercedes taxi, arrived one rainy evening in Vienna. My home was the blazing red Victorian boarding house that stood with its great lawn in the foreground, visible from the road between New Haven and Eastbourne; the lawn upon which Canadian war planes landed in 1943; and past which Mrs. Virginia Woolf would have driven to see the other side of the River Cuckmere on her way from Badger's Tea House in Alfriston in the summer of 1924.

Home, for me, was all these, and even more than I could have recollected or conjured up. These were my stages, my exits and my entrances, my many parts, but not my possessions. Yet Julia's home was her possession. We were sitting there after all, in her living room. The rug was real, as were the chairs and the walls and the ceiling. Her parents were real, too. Laughing, moaning, breathing, waiting, and merely subsisting in time, made them all the more real. However much Julia had wanted to leave and recast herself in the world, and remove herself from the orbit of her mother on one hand, and the loving indifference of her father on the other, home, her real home, was never beyond reach.

My memories, though far from being entirely trustworthy, had not failed me completely. My homes were no longer made manifest, as Julia's was. My attachment to these homes, now buried beyond reach, was as that of a mother separated from her child at its birth. It tasked my imagination to recapture what had been lost; to recreate the ground beneath my feet, for any ground beneath

my feet, even an imagined, fabricated ground was better than no ground at all.

‘‘How long did it go on for? The interview?” I asked.

‘‘Only about thirty minutes,” Peter said. “But we needed an interpreter since I don’t speak Japanese. It’s a great act of faith you know, conveying your thoughts through someone else,” he said.

Peter spoke with an unmistakably American accent. But suddenly, he asked me a question in German. I immediately recognized Peter’s Austrian accent of German. Julia hadn’t told me much about her father. Not a little taken aback, I responded in German, expressing my surprise, even shock that Peter spoke German so fluently, but also at the notion that Peter’s American accent of English concealed something entirely different, yet something to which I was privy.

As Peter and I exchanged a few pleasantries in German I looked at each of the two women to find both their expressions in a kind of amazement though not surprise, for at least one of them must have guessed that an exchange of this sort would likely occur. Julia had mentioned that her father had been born in Vienna. This must have been strange to Julia and her mother. It was a demonstration that their husband and father, an American as much as they could tell, was not simply an American. Deftly hidden was the vivid memory of another history, another life, another place. In that brief exchange between their beloved, and me they saw me engage the history to which even they were not entirely privy.

What language do I think in? If I’d learned only one language, the question would be redundant. In this case, language for me would be distinct only in its physical expression, in its manifestation in sound, in words uttered out loud. In this case, what was unuttered would remain in the realm of the abstract; of pure thought, where ideas are unimpeded and unconstrained by language. But engagement with more than one language reveals this realm of the abstract as a fallacy, for language dances around in the air of our minds, even in the perfect stillness of our tongues; even without the utterance of a single sound. I think in English, but I couldn’t tell what language Peter thought in.

When the food was ready, we moved into the dining room. Peter quickly reverted to English. The dining room was large enough for a table seating eight and had a bay window at one end, and a large opening on the other, out of which the kitchen could be seen across the corridor. The table was covered with a white tablecloth and furnished with an array of glass, silver, and china. There was one seat at each end of the table, and three on each side. The chairs were a dark, soft wood, laced with green striped embroidered upholstery. The lighting in the room was subdued, like that in the living room.

Julia played the gracious hostess, and drew my seat for me, before walking around to sit directly across from me. Peter sat at the head of the table, facing the window, leaving the other end for his wife. Once again, the curtains were drawn open.

At a slightly frenetic pace, and with a desperately earnest look on her face, Gail moved several times between the kitchen and the dining table, carrying with her large bowls and dishes filled with food. Just as I was tempted to offer help, it seemed she’d completed her task and Peter was on his feet with bottles of wine,

red and white in each hand, ready to fill all the glasses on the table except his.

‘‘I wouldn’t have known that you weren’t born in America if we hadn’t spoken German just now,” I said.

‘‘Julia never told you?” Peter asked.

‘‘I told him you were born in Vienna, but not much else.” Julia answered.

Peter looked at her and then turned to me and continued, “I was six years old when we came over, so I managed to get rid of the Austrian accent in speaking English. But you should have heard my mother when she was alive. Unmistakable.” He laughed.

‘‘I should do my impression of my grandmother for you. But not now,” Julia said.

‘‘When did you come over?” I asked.

‘‘Nineteen thirty-eight. We had to leave in nineteen thirty-eight; and as you might imagine, we left in a bit of a rush. I was too young at the time to understand. My father had already died, so it was me, my siblings, my mother, and an aunt.” He spoke rather quickly, and seemed at pains to say all this, as if he felt it needed to be said, but not dwelt on over dinner with his wife, his daughter, and his daughter’s friend all present.

I didn’t ask any further about the matter, having, in fact, been told enough. The mention of the year nineteen thirty-eight was itself more than sufficient.

It was another forty years or more before I appeared in Vienna; the city from which Peter and his family, their relations, their friends, and others like them were dismissed, expelled, and evaporated. I was assured that forty years was within a lifetime’s memory. But it takes time for history to descend from abstraction. For me by now, Vienna had descended from abstraction. It had descended from near perfection, like a dead lover whose skeletons are revealed only after she’s gone.

‘‘Onion soup?” Julia asked him.

‘‘Yes, please,” I replied.

And so the meal began.

‘‘Cheers,” Peter said as he raised a glass of water, after which we all echoed him. “And a warm welcome to our guest. Herzlich Wilkommen.”

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