Twice a month, I visited my parents. Retirement had changed them. They were over 85, small and black skinned. They looked alike. They smelled alike. When I arrived, they would always be sitting on the veranda or the sofa, watching TV. They were always amazed.

They liked incredible stories.

Fifteen years earlier, they would have laughed at these stories. I was confused that they had changed.

I tolerated them. I listened to their stories. I tolerated their questions: “When will you give us a grandchild? (2) When will you bring a girl home?” After Sunday meals, I asked myself if they would die. I knew if I had a family, I wouldn’t visit them regularly.

In November, my parents talked about armed robbery. My mother told me a story about armed robbers in Onitsha.

“Do you know,” she said, “one of the armed robbers was Raphael? He was our houseboy.”

“Raphael?”

“It’s not a surprise,” my father said.

My memory was awakened.

My mother said, “You probably won’t remember him. You were young.”

But I remembered.

Nothing changed when Raphael came to live with us. He was a normal teenager. Many houseboys had worked for my family. (3) They had problems with my mother. All the houseboys treated me the same. “Please come eat your food,” they would say, “I don’t want trouble from Madam.” My mother shouted. She wanted everything to be perfect.

I was my parents’ only child, they were old when I was born. “When I got pregnant, I thought it was menopause,” my mother told me. I was eight, and did not understand “menopause”. She and my father were brusque. They had met at the University of Ibadan. Their families had not wanted them to marry. They lived in competition. They read together in the evenings. They drank rosé. When I was a child, I worried I could not respond quickly enough to them.
I also worried because I did not like books. I read books to make my parents happy and to answer their questions. My bedroom had bookshelves with my parents’ books. I knew my parents were disappointed when I spoke about books. (4) I did not like going to the staff club with them; badminton and shuttlecock were boring.

I loved kung fu. I watched Enter the Dragon many times and I wanted to be Bruce Lee. I would fight imaginary enemies. I put my mattress on the floor and jumped from books onto it, screaming “Haaa!” like Bruce Lee. One day Raphael saw me. I thought he would be upset. He had made my bed that morning. Instead he did something from a Bruce Lee film. I was amazed. “I watched the film in the other house where I worked,” he said. “Look at this.”

He jumped and kicked. I was twelve years old, I identified with someone for the first time.

Raphael and I practiced kung fu in the backyard. Raphael taught me. My practice became real with Raphael. This was happening. I could become a black belt one day. When something was too dangerous, Raphael told me.

On weekends, if my parents went to the staff club, Raphael and I watched Bruce Lee films. When Raphael said “Watch it! Watch it!” I knew a move was important. Raphael knew what mattered. (5) We watched the scene when Bruce Lee used a nunchaku.

“I wish I had a nunchaku,” I said.

“It’s very difficult to use,” said Raphael.

Later, Raphael said, “See.” He had a nunchaku. Two pieces of wood, cut from an old mop and smoothed, attached with metal springs. He showed me how to use it. His moves were not as good as Bruce Lee’s. I took it and tried. I couldn’t do it. “You have to practice for a long time,” said Raphael.

At school I thought about the nunchaku. My life began after school with Raphael. My parents did not notice that I became close with Raphael. When I played outside they did not notice Raphael. One day we fought together. He pushed me hard. I hit him with the nunchaku. He was impressed. Time disappeared. At the end we were breathing heavily and laughing. I remember today how he looked.

On weekends I ate lunch with my parents. I ate quickly. I didn’t want them to ask me questions. Raphael served vegetables.
“The vegetables are too tough,” my mother said. She looked at him, “What’s wrong with your eyes?” (6)

Raphael’s eyes were red. He said it was an insect.

“It looks like Apollo,” my father said.

My mother looked at Raphael. “Yes it is. Go to your room and stay there.” Raphael hesitated.

“Go!” my father said. “You will infect us.”

Raphael looked confused. “Have you had this before?” my mother asked.

“No, Madam.”

“It’s an infection of your conjunctiva,” she said. “We’re going to buy medicine for you. Use it three times a day and stay in your room. Don’t cook.” She turned to me, “Okenwa, don’t go near him. Apollo is very infectious.” She thought I had no reason to go near Raphael.

My parents drove to the pharmacy and came back with a bottle of eye drops. That evening I went with my parents to buy good. When we returned it was strange not to see Raphael working.

Later I went to Raphael’s room. (7)

“What is it? He asked.

“Nothing. I came to see how you are.”

“I don’t know how I got this. Don’t come close. But I went close.

“I had Apollo in Primary 3,” I said. “It will go away quickly, don’t worry. Have you used the eye drops this evening?”

He said nothing. They bottle of eye drops was not open.

“You haven’t used them?” I asked.

“No.”

“Why?”

“I cannot do it.”

Raphael who could do everything, could not put liquid medicine into his eyes. I was astonished, amused and then moved. His room was almost empty.

“I will put the drops in for you,” I said. I opened the bottle.

“Don’t come close,” he said again.

I was close. I bent over him. He closed his eyes quickly.

“Breathe like kung fu,” I said.
I touched his face and dropped the liquid into his eye.

“Ndó,” I said. “Sorry.” (8)

He opened his eyes and looked at me, wondrously. It was the first time I was the subject of admiration.

“I’ll come before I go to school,” I said.

In the morning I went into his room, put in his drops and went into my father’s car to go to school.

After three days Raphael’s bedroom felt familiar. As I put in the drops I studied him closely. I sat on his bed and we talked about *Snake in the Monkey’s Shadow*. We had discussed the film before, but in his quiet room they felt like secrets. Our voices were low. His body warmed me.

He stood up to demonstrate the snake style, after we both laughed and he grasped my hand. Then he let go and moved away from me.

“This Apollo has gone,” he said.

His eyes were clear. I wished he had not healed so quickly.

II

I dreamed of fighting with Raphael and Bruce Lee. When I woke up, my eyes would not open. My eyes burned and itched. They produced a pale grey fluid when I closed them. I was afraid that something inside me was melting that was not supposed to melt.

My mother shouted at Raphael, “Why did you bring this thing to my house? Why?” Raphael did not respond.

“How did he manage to give you Apollo from his room?” my father asked me. (9)

“It wasn’t Raphael. I think I got it from somebody in my class,” I told my parents.

“Who?” I should have known my mother would ask. I couldn’t remember my classmates’ names.

“Who?” she asked again.

“Chidi Obi,” I said. He sat in front of me and smelled like old clothes.

“Do you have a headache?” my mother asked.

“Yes.”

My father brought me Panadol. My mother telephoned Dr. Igbokwe. My parents were brisk. They stood by my door, watching me drink a cup of Milo. I drank
quickly. I hoped they would not sit in my room, as they did when I was sick with Malaria.

Dr. Igobokwe arrived and shined a torch in my eyes. His cologne was strong. After he left my parents put medicine and oranges next to my bed. They did not sit in my room, but one of them was always home. They took turns putting in my eye drops. My father was clumsy. They did not know how well I could put the drops in myself. Each time they raised the bottle above my face, I remembered Raphael’s eyes. I was happy.

My parents kept my room dark. I was bored lying down. I wanted to see Raphael, but my mother would not let him into my room. I wished he would come and see me. He could pretend to do something. Why didn’t he come? He had not even said sorry to me. I listened to hear his voice, but the kitchen was too far away.

Once, after going to the toilet, I tried to walk quietly downstairs to the kitchen, but my father was there.

“Kedu?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

“I want water,” I said.

“I’ll bring it. Go and lie down.”

Finally, my parents went out together. I woke up and the house was empty. I went downstairs to the kitchen. It was empty. I went out to the veranda. I heard Raphael’s voice before I saw him. He was standing near the tank, talking to Josephine, Professor Nwosu’s house help. Professor Nwosu sometimes sent eggs. Had Josephine brought eggs? She was tall and round. With her Raphael was different. He was shy. She was talking to him with power. My reason disappeared.

“Raphael!” I called.

He turned. “Oh. Okenwa. Are you allowed to come downstairs?”

He spoke as if I were a child, as if we had not sat together in his room.

“I’m hungry! Where is my food?” It was the first thing I thought of.

Josephine looked like she was about to laugh. Raphael said something I could not hear, but it sounded like betrayal. My parents arrived. Josephine left the compound and Raphael came to me. His shirt was dirty. If my parents not come back, he would have continued talking by the tank. My presence changed nothing.

“What do you want to eat?” he asked.

“You didn’t come to see me.”
“You know Madam said I should not go near you.”
Why was he making it so common? My parents had asked me not to go to his room, but I had gone, I had put drops in his eyes every day.

“You gave me Apollo,” I said.

“Sorry.”

I could hear my mother’s voice. I was angry that they were back. My time with Raphael was shortened. I felt growing distance.

“Do you want plantain or yam?” Raphael asked. My eyes were burning again. He came up the steps. I moved away from him, too quickly. I fell. I landed on my hands and knees. I was surprised and I felt tears coming. I was humiliated, I did not move.

My parents appeared.

“Okenwa!” my father shouted.

I stayed on the ground. “Raphael pushed me.”

“What?” My parents said in English. “What?”

There was time. Before my father turned to Raphael, and before my mother stepped towards him, and before she told him to pack and leave, there was time. I could have spoken. (12) I could have said it was an accident. I could have taken back my lie.