

Go

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Go

Jodie Clark

Anna gripped the banister of the university library's vertiginous staircase with the same white-knuckled power she'd discovered during her turbulent transatlantic flight. She felt the bottom drop again as she reached the ground-floor helpdesk, now grasping nothing more substantial than a flimsy slip of paper, wet with her sweat.

Anna had inscribed the words on a sheet from the hotel pad before she'd started out today, in case she lost the power of speech or failed to contort her Virginia accent into something more understandable, if not more palatable, to her English addressees. She'd already mispronounced *Birmingham* twice since she'd arrived, once at Heathrow customs and once at Euston station, her thick tongue reluctant to renounce the Alabama namesake.

The bemused librarian glanced over what she'd written. *Abena Amina. Imperatives in Omotic Languages. PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 1985.*

"We don't hold hard copies of theses here anymore. They're all sent to the British Library."

"Can you tell me how to get there?" Anna whispered, like a frightened child.

"It's in London," was the response. "But you don't *go* to the British Library to access an archived thesis, you write to request it. They scan it and email it to you."

Anna imagined a less foolhardy version of her past self, discreetly filling out an online form from her work computer in Roanoke, scrolling through the returned digital file later that

evening while Rich graded papers, unaware. In a flash of hindsight she saw the tensions on their budget and marriage erased, never forming.

Shame pressed against her like a blinding wall of fire. She blinked. Her interlocutor's face appeared now as a blur of purposeful motion, silhouetted against imagined flames. "The departments sometimes hold onto the bound copies," she conceded, and made a few phone calls. The campus map she eventually handed Anna held the clues to the next stage in her ill-planned scavenger hunt. A name scrawled in the margins: *Adam Draper*. A circle drawn around one of the buildings: *Frankland*.

The Frankland Building, it turned out, housed a neglected repository of doctoral theses from days gone by. They'd been piled unceremoniously onto the sagging shelves of the cluttered psychology postgrad room. Adam Draper was the psychology postgrad who'd been tasked to serve as guide to the uninvited American visitor.

Anna spotted the volume within minutes, retrieving it from among scores of gold-embossed maroon spines, half-hidden behind the misshapen blades of a Venetian blind caked with layers of dust. Its heft spoke of a mystery soon to be revealed. She pulled the tome to her and hugged it to her chest, as if it were a child she'd forgotten, returned to her fully grown.

"There must be something rather valuable in there," Adam said, and Anna realized he'd witnessed this devastatingly vulnerable scene. Her lips moved to excuse her behavior, but no words formed there. The vertigo she'd felt in the library still pulled at her, but now with a singly directed propulsion – a force that would not allow itself to be squandered on unnecessary words.

She'd not released her grip on her prize. "Do I sign this out or something?"

“Well... the thesis isn’t really supposed to leave the postgrad office. But you can stay and read it for as long as you like. I was planning on working in here today anyway.”

So her guide became her silent companion as she plunged into the secrets of *Imperatives in Omotic Languages*.

*

“Did you find out what you needed to know?”

They were perched on tiny stools at an only slightly larger table in the university staff bar. The room was so crowded with bodies and voices that they had to lean in toward each other to continue their conversation, a necessary intimacy.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. She inched forward on her seat to avoid the flailing arms of an unkempt man beside her, loud and red of face, holding forth to a small sycophantic audience. Anna looked out beyond this impromptu seminar, over the worn upholstered seats, the dark paneled walls, the garish beer-stained carpet. She couldn’t imagine Dr. Amina feeling comfortable in this environment, twenty-five years ago. She couldn’t imagine her feeling comfortable *now*, if she were somehow able to join them. People wouldn’t see her for the esteemed academic she was. They’d probably think she was Adam’s mother.

“Well, tell me one thing you did learn, then,” prompted Adam. “What’s an Omotic language? What’s an imperative, for that matter?”

“Omotic refers to a family of languages spoken in southwest Ethiopia,” Anna said. She found herself checking his face for a glimmer of interest with the mention of the African nation.

Stupid, she chastised herself. She'd fallen victim to the insensitivity she'd just projected upon the bar's scholarly clientele, seeing Adam as Dr. Amina's son, when the only thing that connected them was that they'd both studied here. And that they were African American.

Not American, of course, neither of them.

Her mind reeled in its spiral of microaggressions, mercifully unvoiced.

"And imperatives are just commands," she continued, dizzily. "Did you guys learn it the way we did in school? A sentence can be a statement, a question, or a command. Indicative, interrogative, imperative. There is one thing I didn't know, or had never thought about, though..."

She paused. She'd drained half a glass of ale in her nervousness. The alcohol, the jet lag, and her whirring mind were luring her toward an uncharacteristic loquaciousness.

"Go on," prompted Adam.

"Well, one thing I read in Dr. Amina's thesis is that imperatives are often the simplest form of the verb. The root form. No inflections. No subject, even."

Adam leaned further in and grinned. "You're going to have to dumb this way down for me," he said. "I haven't done English since GCSE."

"GC...?"

"Exams we have to take when we're sixteen," he explained. "But enough about me. Imperatives. Go."

She smiled. “Well, you’ve just given me the perfect example. *Go*. It’s the simplest form of the verb, and you’ve delivered it as a command. As a question it might be “Are you going?” Three words, with an *-ing* ending on the verb. But the imperative is one word, *go*, with no inflection, no pronoun, no auxiliary. *Go* is all you need.”

“Simple,” said Adam.

*

Simple, it was not – not when she’d first heard that very same imperative – *go* – as a clear instruction from who knows where, probably the same force that had propelled her bewildered steps toward the Frankland building in the last phase of this baffling adventure. It had started with a half-hearted scroll through Facebook, which had brought the unexpected news of Dr. Amina’s death.

A memorial service had been organized in Washington at Howard University.

Go.

How could she go? The event was in two days. It was an eight-hour drive, round trip. She had work.

Go.

She couldn’t call it a voice. The message had not been spoken. A compulsion, perhaps. A propulsion, a vector, a magnetic pull. A circle on a map. A wise hand on her back, reassuring but unrelenting, pushing her forward.

Rich hadn’t seen the point in her making the trip. He couldn’t even put a face to the

name: Dr. Abena Amina, Dean of Students at Farley College in the late '90s. Anna was astonished that the defining moment of her early adult life had left no trace in the annals of her husband's memory.

*

“It turns out it isn't actually as simple as that,” Anna told Adam. “Certainly not in the Omotic languages.”

“Why not?” he asked.

Anna had just returned to their table with another round of drinks. Having successfully negotiated the press of the growing crowd and the shouted transaction at the bar, she was feeling relaxed enough to absorb some impressions of her companion. He was young, she realized, at least ten years her junior. His facial features betrayed the restless energy of a very young man. His mouth, framed by a carefully trimmed moustache and goatee, was quick to burst into a smile, his eyes always ready to dance. His eyebrows curved gently, generously, like the arched windows of a church. He wore a pale blue gingham shirt, the top buttons undone, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He would become a different type of professor than Rich, who preferred a more slovenly look, a sweatshirt to cover his growing paunch, his straggly hair failing to hide his bald patch, his face turning blotchy when something excited him. The corpulent gesticulator beside her, who was still captivating his retinue of female postgrads, was probably an English professor.

Adam was waiting for her answer. “What makes Omotic languages less simple?”

Was it politeness that made him ask with such seeming eagerness? The light in his eyes

suggested otherwise.

“Well, linguists make a distinction between canonical and non-canonical imperatives. Canonical ones are the simple ones – the ones we’re most likely to find in English. Where the root of the verb is used to tell someone what to do.” She was muddling this. She took a sip of ale and tried again. “Canonical imperatives are addressed to a second person – to *you*. When you say *Go* you mean *You go* as in, you want me to go. Non-canonical imperatives are directed at someone other than the addressee.”

“What, like first person? Like when I tell myself to do something?”

“Yes, well in English there’s no grammatical system for non-canonical imperatives, so you’d probably just address yourself in the second person.”

“Adam, go!”

“Exactly. But you’d do something different if you wanted to address an imperative to the first-person plural, to *we*. To *us*, I mean. To you and me.”

He’d understood. His grin felt like a blessing, like the sun peeping out of the clouds to warm her shoulders on a brisk day. “Let’s go,” he said.

*

They did go. He directed the taxi driver to an Indian restaurant a few miles away from campus. The walls near their booth were decorated with small, jewel-framed mirrors, in which Anna caught surprising glimpses of the light in her own dancing eyes.

“So speakers of Omotic languages are more likely to use first-person imperatives?”

Adam asked.

“They’re not necessarily more likely to use them, but some of them have more distinct ways of encoding them in their grammar. Hortatives, they’re called – the first-person imperatives. Jussives is the name for third-person commands.”

“Third person is he or she, right?”

“Or it or they, yes. Someone or something outside of the interaction.”

“How can you command someone you’re not talking to?”

Anna had wondered that herself. But an example from Dr. Amina’s thesis had cleared it up. “Peace be with you,” she said.

Her friends in Roanoke would have automatically produced the response: *And also with you.*

Adam’s silence suggested he wasn’t a churchgoer. His poppadom clicked as he broke it in two.

“Isn’t that a second-person imperative? Peace be with *you*?”

“No,” she said. “I’m talking to you, but the one I’m commanding is an entity that’s not in the conversation. Peace. Third person. You can tell it’s an imperative because I’ve used the infinitive form of the verb. It’s not peace *is* with you or peace *was* with you. Peace *be* with you.”

He leaned back in his chair as if delighting in her blessing. “I wish I could be as excited about my research as you are about yours.”

The comment gave her pause.

He thought she was a PhD candidate, like him.

Or even – given the extra years she had on him – a professor.

He thought she belonged in university libraries, in academic offices cluttered with maroon-bound volumes of forgotten knowledge, in staff bars filled to bursting with traders in ideas. To Adam, Anna was no faculty wife, no mere extra at department socials or taciturn hostess of intimate gatherings at their home for Rich’s favorite students, the ones who admired him the most.

“So what brought you all the way here to track down a thesis from the ’80s? Who’s Abena Amina?”

An unwelcome refrain now echoed in the chambers of her mind – that song from *The Lion King*, the one she’d come to detest. Her circle of friends at Farley used to sing the syllables of Dean Amina’s full name to the tune of “Hakuna Matata.”

Abena Amina. Such a wonderful dean. Abena Amina. It ain’t her fault she’s mean. Farley College is free... of diversity. Abena Amina!

It titillated them, to be so self-aware and edgy – to knowingly break the implicit taboo. To be un-PC. The insensitivity of their attempts at sophistication alarmed her now. Rich had participated in these clandestine mockeries – he may even have invented them – and now he claimed not to remember their target.

Dean Abena Amina was the only Black member of Farley College’s faculty during

Anna's four years as an undergraduate. She'd been hired, her friends surmised, to push the school's new "diversity" agenda. As dean her teaching commitments were minimal – she was responsible only for the 300-level special topics course: Literature of the African Diaspora. Anna hadn't taken it.

"She was my senior thesis advisor," Anna told Adam.

"Senior thesis. Is that what we call an undergraduate dissertation?"

"Probably, yes. Anyway, she died last month."

The words surprised her by catching in her throat, and Adam's face showed concern. Once again, she'd given him the wrong impression. She wasn't sure how to correct it, how to make it clear who she really was.

"I didn't want her to be my advisor," she said. "I cried when they told me."

"Why?"

"I was hoping the head of the English department would take me on, Dr. Stuyvesant. He'd given me a lot of advice on my thesis topic, you see. He told me if I wanted to get into a good grad school – if I wanted eventually to get a PhD – I'd have to develop an expertise on an author outside the canon, someone no one had written about. I chose a twentieth-century Ethiopian-American writer named Theodros Cissay."

"But Abena Amina did linguistics. Was she the right supervisor for a literature topic?"

"My boyfriend at the time said he thought it was a political decision."

“In other words, this Stuyvesant bloke didn’t know anything about the author and he didn’t want to be shown up. So he pawned you off on the one member of staff who’d done research on Ethiopia – even if it was linguistics.”

It occurred to Anna that Stuyvesant might not even have known that Dr. Amina was a linguist, only that she was Ethiopian.

Anna hadn’t known anything about Dr. Amina either, except that she approached each thesis meeting with a paralyzing dread. The dean’s office was far away from the cozy cottage that housed the English staff, in the lofty Brunston Building, accommodating the president of the college and other high-ranking administrative elites. Anna had felt dwarfed by the antebellum architecture, which cast its illustrious shadows on Farley’s main quad. Her knees shook as she moved through the Ionic columns and climbed the marble staircase. She announced her presence to the secretary who guarded Dr. Amina’s office and sat outside to wait. When finally she was called to enter the inner sanctum, Anna nearly swooned at the exoticism of the décor. The whitewashed walls had been lavishly draped in brightly colored mementoes of Dr. Amina’s homeland – posters in carved wooden frames, rich tapestries, ebony coffee tables, polished smooth and gleaming. Anna felt like a powerless diplomat in a foreign land where her own customs held no currency.

*

Their entrées arrived – steaming bowls of meat and vegetables in thick spicy stews, accompanied by abundant bubbly flatbreads dripping in butter. “Let me guess,” Adam said, spooning chunks of lamb onto his plate. “You switched to linguistics when you started working with Abena Amina. She was your inspiration.”

“No,” said Anna. “I stuck to my original topic, desperately trying to find an angle on the work of an author I couldn’t understand. I hated writing it. I hated working with Dr. Amina. She found fault with everything I did. She gave me a D on my final thesis, which meant I couldn’t go to grad school.”

“You didn’t go on to further study?” Adam asked in astonishment.

She shook her head no. “My boyfriend did, though. He graduated *summa cum laude* and went on to do his PhD at Princeton. He’s head of the English department at Farley now. He had Stuyvesant as his thesis advisor.”

“Did he choose an author from outside the canon?”

“No. He did Faulkner.” She let the rest out in one breath. “We got married soon after he graduated, and I got a job administering literacy tests in the public-school system. I still have that job,” she added. “And we’re still married.”

That was it, the whole truth, laid bare before Adam’s wide eyes. She’d unburdened herself of the load she’d been carrying, not just during this uncommon excursion, but also for the last 13 years of her life. Now that it was out in the open it seemed paltry, weak, a pathetic thing to have wasted a life over.

“So reading the thesis was a way of confirming she wasn’t qualified to supervise you,” Adam proposed. “To prove you were badly advised, that the mark wasn’t fair.”

The naivety of his assumptions drew out the one thing she’d not yet revealed, the hopeful flicker that danced in the dark emptiness of regret.

“Do you know the verse from the Talmud about the angel and the blade of grass?” she asked.

She was surprised to learn he’d never heard of it. The passage had made a regular appearance, illustrated in a variety of ways, on Anna’s social media feeds. Dr. Amina had cited it as an epigraph to her thesis. It was probably much less well known in 1985.

“‘Over every blade of grass an angel bends to whisper: Grow! Grow!’ Midrash Rabba, Bereshit 10:6.”

Was it an angel that had whispered the imperative to her – *go* – that sent her to Washington to stand among Dr. Amina’s grieving Howard University students – her conspicuous white skin blushing with the inappropriateness of her presence among those tear-stained black and brown faces?

Who was she to pretend to mourn a woman she’d despised?

Or thought she despised. She’d never even troubled herself to get to know her.

The messages from the student testimonies harmonized with a common chord: *Dr. Amina saw straight through me. Dr. Amina challenged me as no one else could.*

Dr. Amina was scary AF. The crowd was swaying, pulsing in these rhythms, releasing pain through the valve of their collective laughter.

And Anna had found herself swaying too, caught in the wave of the sorrow of others, eventually locating the distinct note of her own pain.

“What is it, Ms. Chappell, that you’d truly wish to study? I am not convinced it’s the

writings of Theodros Cissay.”

Anna had known first-hand the terrifying intensity of Dr. Amina’s gaze. She’d reeled in the aftereffects of being so exposed, of having been seen, straight through.

But to be seen through is still to be seen, and Anna had ungraciously refused her advisor’s offering, again and again.

Go! Go!

The imperative had not ceased after her revelation in Washington. It grew instead ever stronger, enticing her to seek out every biographic detail she could find about her late mentor, details that Dr. Amina would have offered freely, had Anna simply asked.

Abena Amina was the child of political refugees from Ethiopia. They fled to London in 1974, when she was a teenager. She studied English literature and linguistics at the University of Birmingham. She moved to the U.S. after earning her PhD. She left Farley to take up a position at Howard where, Anna surmised, she was given a warm welcome, where students would have flocked to her office-sanctuary, allowing themselves to be laid bare by her insights, grateful recipients of her wisdom.

Anna thought now of the fat white man in the staff bar and his mostly silent, mostly female retinue. She thought of the many dinner parties Rich hosted for his eager undergraduates, fledgling academics, mostly female, desperate to please.

Go! Go!

The imperative pushed her beyond this desperate approval-seeking, replacing it with

something less tangible, but inestimably more compelling.

“I did not come here to question Dr. Amina’s judgment. I deserved the D,” Anna said finally. “The D was generous,” she added, and the laughter that bubbled out of her confirmed what she’d always known. “Imperatives in the Omotic languages aren’t just used for commands. Sometimes they’re offered as blessings.”

They said their goodbyes in the buzz of the busy street. She kissed him, generously but not urgently, pressing her palms between his shoulder blades as if to awaken whatever imperative force might be incubating there. Inside her taxi she watched the city lights fly past, their backward neon vectors directing her resolutely onward.