

An Unmarried Man.

He jerks awake around 6.30am, just at the foreshadowing of dawn, lays back down and rolls over to the left side of the bed. His back still hurts and his tossing around all through the night to take turns sleeping on his right and left side doesn't seem to have made any difference. As he sits up and debates if staying in bed for another 20 minutes would place him in the 'definitely late' or 'barely made it' margin, he feels a tickling in his nostrils as his body readies itself to sneeze, a sure disaster with the saliva that has collected in his mouth overnight and which he has been putting off getting up to spit out in the bathroom. He rushes out of bed but barely makes it to the door before globs of saliva fly out of his mouth with the force of the sneeze that seizes his body. Sucking his teeth, he wipes his mouth and nose with the back of his hand and walks out of the room.

In the bathroom at the end of the short hallway with the burnt out lightbulb that he never gets around to changing, he takes off the spit stained shirt and looks in the mirror as he washes his beard. When he's satisfied that the glistening he sees is merely wet hair and no longer spittle, he reaches for his toothbrush on the bathroom shelf and yelps when his hand makes contact with something cold and wriggly instead. A wall gecko darts from the cluster of items on the shelf and runs across the wall, making its escape through the hole in the ceiling where the wires for the water heater have been passed. He hisses loudly, spits in the sink and then hits the side of the shelf to make sure there are no other reptiles or bugs to startle him, then picks up his toothbrush, and the toothpaste tube.

As he is about to press down on the toothpaste, he stops and stares at the toothbrush again. Just last week, his mother had sent a video to their family whatsapp group; one of the dozens she sent daily that usually consisted of bible verse readings, sightings of queer things like fish with the face of a baby which was obviously photoshopped, or illuminati conspiracy theory videos. He remembers actually downloading and watching one of the videos after his mother forwards it from the group

chat to him with a ‘make sure you are careful with this, it’s very dangerous’ text. The video was of a whole family that had allegedly passed away after eating a soup the night before which was poisoned by a wall gecko that fell into it and must have crawled out before the soup was dished out for dinner. At the end of the montage with the blurred faces of the deceased family, the voice over in the video had stated a warning about how in addition to tightly sealing the covers of pots with food in them and carefully washing plates and utensils before use, viewers were advised to not leave their toothbrushes out uncovered. Apparently, wall geckos also tended to like the sweetness of things like toothpaste and had a proclivity to lick toothbrush bristles. After holding the toothbrush in his right hand while his left one rubs his temple for a short while, he rolls his eyes in disgust, throws the toothbrush in the trashcan and heads back to the bedroom.

On his bedside cabinet, where he is knelt down in front of it and rifling through the drawers to see if he has any spare toothbrush, his phone’s alarm goes off with a soft vibration that momentarily distracts him from his search as he picks it up to hit on the snooze button. His eyes widen when he sees that the time is now 7am, and that his sister has already called him 4 times. Before he sets the phone down, it starts to ring again with his sister’s name popping up on the phone screen. He hesitates for a bit, then stands upright and swipes the green answer icon.

Esther, I know what you are about to say but-

Brother Miracle, I hope you know that if you are late, or worse, if you miss this christening, I won’t forgive you.

He crouches down and opens the last cabinet drawer, begins to look through it, and almost immediately finds a toothbrush pack that has already been opened.

Esther, I’ll soon be there. I’m already dressed, I just have to stop by the chemist and get anti-malaria first so I may not be early. My body is doing somehow but I’m coming.

Brother Miracle, is this not how you were saying that your stomach was purging on my wedding day and Daddy Eze had to walk me down the aisle because the church got tired of waiting for you??

Esther, I have told you to sorry over this thing many times nau. Are we not human because of our shortcomings? See, as I am on this phone with you now, we are wasting time, please let me quickly drive down and buy this thing so I can come and meet you.

And you know how Ajah traffic is around this time, Brother Miracle. Even mummy that we are both on the mainland is already on her way. No wahala, one day, you'll either tell me the reason why you keep doing this to me or you'll forgive me.

Haba Esther! Ndo abeg. See, let us just end this call. If you close your eyes now, when you open it, you'll see me.

When he hears the call disconnect, he gets up and walks to the bathroom for the second time that morning. The state in which he found the toothbrush in his hand raises questions about if it has been used or not. He usually keeps spare toothbrushes in his bedside cabinet in case he has an overnight guest, a gesture he did for an old girlfriend once and her reaction motivated him to keep the practice on long after they broke up. He can't tell if the person who had ripped the toothbrush pack did so, changed her mind about using it, then dropped it back in the drawer, or if she actually used it and then stuck it back in the pack before returning it instead of taking it with her when she left. Either way, he is ready to take his chances with someone he had already exchanged other body fluids with, rather than with the toothbrush he had thrown out, or worse, go out with stanky breath.

He is now dressed up and moving around the kitchen in his socks to see if there is anything that needs to go in the freezer or be thrown out before he leaves the house for the weekend. Familiar with how celebrations of any kind goes in his family, he knows that even though his younger sister's baby christening is a short church ceremony that would wrap up in a hour, the main event would take place in Esther's

matrimonial home where caterers and DJ were no doubt standing by and waiting. After it was clear that mother and child needed to retire and rest, the party would move to his mother's house. She is the Ada of the family, the big mummy, and her duplex, which he had built for her, was considered the family house where everyone would drive down to and continue to party late into the night. That was when the trouble would begin.

At Esther's traditional wedding, he had found himself hiding in one of the back rooms with a can of beer while the festivities that took place after the ceremony went on. Since he turned 40 three years ago, his family and some of his friends had turned from hailing him as 'baba for the girls' or 'odogwu' to asking questions about whoever was the last woman they had seen him with as soon as he showed up for any function. Ifeoma, his girlfriend at that time and who he had brought with him to the wedding rites, was seated under one of the canopies outside surrounded by aunties and grandmas who had pounced on her with greetings of 'our wife' as soon as he showed up with her in matching aso-ebi. They had snatched away her hand from his and peeled her away to go join the other wives and women of the family while he laughed awkwardly and pretended not to see the frantic plea in her eyes to save her. Ifeoma was barely 22 and fresh out of law school, both of them had recently met at a trade fair in Lekki where she was helping one of her friends set up a stand for organic skincare products, and he was there as a representative of the trade fair's sponsors, a bank where he worked at as a Compliance officer. Both of them had exchanged contacts after he hovered around her stand and pretended like he knew the difference between a hydrating cleanser and an exfoliating one. They had been together since. He knew how these things went, he was an older, single Igbo man in Lagos with his own apartment, car and more money than he needed, he knew why Ifeoma had chosen to date him instead of men closer to her age, who were more attractive, who understood her jokes and what she meant when she said things like 'its giving' when he asked her opinion on an outfit. They had a nice time together, and he knew that she was fond of him, if anything. But he knew how these things went.

Which was why when those women dragged her away, while clapping their hands in glee and showering her complements on the brightness of her skin was, the curve of her hips and how their son really took his eyes to the market, he knew she would be upset. She had dressed up in matching outfits with him to look like a beautiful trophy and be fawned over, not to be put in a situation where she was accessed as wife material. But he had simply let them take her away and gone to sit with the men throughout the rites, before later slipping away with a plate of peppered meat and a can of beer to hide in the room where they kept the bridal gifts. He stayed there till he got a ‘I can’t believe you left me alone with them, where are you???’ text from Ifeoma and left the room about 20 minutes after. When he found her after searching through the building and under the canopies, she was standing outside the gate by his car with her arms folded and a large paper bag with the picture of his sister and her new husband printed on it, ‘Marital bliss, Esther hooks Uzochukwu’.

He could tell she was mad. She was wearing bathroom slippers instead of the stiletto heels she had on earlier. Her makeup no longer had that immaculate look that he had complimented her on before they left his apartment, and she had a wrapper that looked like it was his mother’s tied on her dress and around her waist. He could imagine what had happened there.

I cannot believe you, Miracle. What the hell is this? How could you do that to me?

He raised his hands and moved toward her, but she quickly put her hand out to stop him.

Uhm, I’m sorry? What happened? Are you okay?

Am I okay? Am I okay, Miracle??? They made me stir jollof rice on open fire, Miracle. Can you see how I’m sweating, ehn? They gave me this stupid, ugly wrapper to tie -

Actually, Ify, that’s my mother’s wrapper

Shut the fuck up, Miracle. Do I look like i give a fuck about who it belongs to? They gave me this stuuuupid wrapper and asked me to tie it because my dress is too short and so that my knees wouldn't hurt when I knelt down to serve food to your uncles. They made me serve food and drinks, Miracle. What the fuck is this, eh Miracle? And you just disappeared, where were you??? Where the hell did you go?

Ifeoma, is it me that you are telling to shut the fuck up? That we have seen each other's nakedness doesn't mean I am your mate o. It's because they like you o, they think you are a good girl. Ahn ahn, see how you are talking to me, you this girl

Oh wow, woooow, Miracle. You know what, I'm taking an Uber. If you had told me that you bought me this aso-ebi because you wanted me to come and do house girl in your family house for your sister's wedding, i would have told you not to worry. Rubbish.

When he moved towards her and reached out his hands in a bid to placate her, she slapped them away, picked up the paper bag on the floor and started walking away on the dusty road, her feet in the floppy slippers kicking up a storm of dirt.

Ah, Ify. Ify, wait now.

He tried to go after her at a pace that wouldn't look too desperate for a man of his age, but then he saw her stop an okada, yell 'junction', hike up the wrapper and climb on the bike which drove her away before he could reach her.

As he turned around and walked back into the compound where the party was still going off, he had wondered about the state of the kitchen in his apartment where Ifeoma had begun to cook the previous night before she stopped because she was too tired to continue. He had thought about the fish entrails, onion peels, crushed peppers and dirty plates and pots on the sink and wondered how all of that would get clean, and more importantly, who was meant to cook the soup that he would eat that week.

When he gets into his car and adjusts his car seat, his phone vibrates again. He takes it out of his pocket and sees that Esther has sent him a text. He sighs and opens it.

Bro Miracle, we are almost done at church. Just come to the house, thank you very much.

His head starts to throb with a headache that he knows that he will get for the next one year that Esther will hold on to this and use it to guilt trip him into paying for whatever she decides is compensation.

It had taken him about 2 weeks of pleading text messages, and sending Ifeoma gifts and money before she eventually picked his calls again. When she showed up at his apartment with a bag full of food containers of oha and egusi, and fried meat, she had given him a stiff side hug when he attempted to hold her, but soon relaxed after he spent another 30 minutes begging her and calling her *tomato jos*, *international container* and *mummy*.

Things were good again. Until she sent him a text message saying that she didn't think they should see each other again on the morning of Esther's church wedding. *I think we are at different points of our life, Miracle. I like you but I can't be tied down right now, and I don't want to face your family again. A dispatch rider has picked up your suit at my place, he should reach you soon. Also, thanks for sending me the rent money, I got your alert this morning.*

It took the dispatch rider almost an hour to reach Miracle who sat in his underwear and stared into space with the phone in his hand buzzing with calls and frantic text messages from family and friends asking where he was and why he wasn't at church yet.

After he showed up at church and ignored questioning looks as he settled into the pew with the bride's family, Miracle sent Ifeoma texts pleading that she should at least show up to the wedding. *Ify, please don't disgrace me, I already told everyone you are coming. I'll send you a car, I'll pay for those shoes you want, please just come.* When the

messages stopped delivering, he raised his head and plastered a smile on his face as the sermon went on.

It took about an hour or two into the wedding reception after church before people noticed that he was alone. When the questions started getting thrown at him, he lied that an emergency had come up, that Ifeoma had gone out of town. But he could see from the looks on their face that they recognized the dull fall of his voice, that they had heard it before. He saw it in their pitying smiles as they nodded and pat his back. One of his late father's sisters, a particularly aggressive old woman in her eighties, shook her head and pointed at his crotch.

You have spoilt your amu abi? E no dey work again. That's why all these small small girls are running away from you. If e don spoil, make you talk, make we help you. How man go big and get money like you and e no fit see wife?

Before he starts his car, he sends out a text message.

How far, Tara? The location has changed and I can't come and pick you again. Shey you'll come and meet me at Esther's house, I'll send you the location. Don't worry, I'll pay for the Uber.

A bubble appears under the message after it gets sent and soon, he gets a reply.

Okay Zaddy, see ya soon!