

Blessing Okwong

Looking FOR Ene

A short story.



**Looking
for
Ene**

Acknowledgment

I want to thank God Almighty for the gift of putting words together and making them readable, for putting the image in my head, and for the grace to write them out, even when I got lost along the way.

Every story first started playing out in my head. It took a whole lot of discipline and encouragement from friends to put them all into writing, especially using a phone; the greatest distraction of all time I want to thank them all.

My special thanks go to Godwin Okwong. He has always had his weird way of showing his never-ending love and support. He has always been there.

To Emmanuel Richmond, the Rich Kid (smiling). Thank you for encouraging me to publish this, even though I kept saying it was never good enough. Having someone to believe so much in you is the best ladder to success.

To Etimbuk Inyang, President of The Writer's Manger Network and the Author of "Remember Me Black Child and other poems". Thank you for the daily encouragement that I can always do better. You squeezed out time to go through the manuscript for close reading and thorough editing. I can't thank you enough.

I acknowledge Roland Watson-Grant, Author, Sketcher (2013) and Skid (2014). Connecting with you has been an untold blessing. I guess I will never recover from that.

Ima Udott, my favorite storyteller. You've been an inspiration. When Emma said the story was so good, I thought he was 'overhyping' until you made it 'worse' (Smiles). Thank you, dear.

Thank you to The Writers' Manger Network, The Writers' Club, and all my friends for their love. Writing wouldn't be writing without love.

Finally, I want to thank my family; Dad, Mom, Victor, Koko, Michael, Stella, and Irene for always being there and providing me with the basic needs of life. Their love and encouragement have brought me this far.

Dedication

For Mrs. Kate Okwong - My first Teacher.

You gave me love and helped me find my star!

Foreword

In the literary sphere where there are many stories and storytellers, one requires a great deal of courage to also tell his own story; taking into cognizance the great risk of not being heard or read. The Author Blessing Okwong in this premier publication, tells a simple and uniquely crafted story, exemplified by the smooth flow of her prose and its entire diction. Her words ebb and proceed, with an intriguing allure that makes her story very readable and relatable.

The book “Looking for Ene”, is replete with real-life lessons, and quality imagery that will stimulate the readers’ minds and draw them into a deep love for both the story and the one who tells it. Having read through the pages of many stories before this one, I am convinced that this story stands out for its unique tone, language, and structure; and will be appreciated by both young and old.

The Author handles this story with the skill of Ancient storytellers, whose custom is to divulge the subject of a story piece by piece; thus keeping the reader glued to the pages. In reading this book, one will discover himself through the story and find the courage to break free from the redundancy of conformity.

This is a new and brave literary voice that must be milked and fine-tuned until it becomes louder and stronger.

- Etimbuk Inyang (MBA) Author, Remember me Black Child and other Poems.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events are purely coincidental.

To those who are lost.

To those who have lost.

ONE

I don't know why I kept staring at him. He was handsome and looked well to do, but this was not just enough reason to keep staring at a man for so long. My food had gotten cold. I subconsciously calculated the quantity of rice I took from the plate, as I nursed the feeling that somehow, he might be looking at me too. I couldn't tell because of the sunglasses he had on. "Who wears sunglasses indoors?" My thoughts screamed. I quietly adjusted my red gown, brushed my wig, and positioned myself better. Well, I had to be well-packaged at least.

Turning back to readjust myself, I felt embarrassed seeing the other girls look at him and chuckle. I felt bad for having the same reason as the other girls. As I tried to concentrate on my already-cold food, I saw a wedding ring glued to his ring finger as he wiped his mouth with a serviette.

"Oh!" I gasped, quickly covering my mouth in order not to create attention. Have I been crushing on a married man? I had vowed not to go out with a married man, no matter how frustrated I was in Lagos. The free cinema show of a married woman and a mistress fighting was no news again. It happened every day and everywhere with different storylines.

I took a dose of "God Abeg" every day, with the determination never to be a part of this street drama. I walked out of the eatery with my head bowed in shame. At some point, I felt I was overreacting. I have never been in a relationship and couldn't even place this feeling. Was this the 'love at first sight' of a thing? I believed I was emotionally numb until now. What was it about him?

"Hey! Miss!", I heard someone calling. I turned back even though I tried hard not to. He was the one. I ignored and kept walking on, hastening my steps. He kept calling and eventually doubled his stride to catch up.

"Hello, I'm so sorry. Can I give you a ride??" His voice was soft and palatable. It had this peace and feeling that was not usual.

I wanted to decline but my spirit vowed it would torment my life forever; I gave him a cold look trying to think if to say yes or no but before I could open my

mouth, he cut in... "I won't hurt you, you know..... even if I'm a ritualist, it will be an ugly loss to waste your beautiful head". I swallowed my words back and paused.

On a normal day, I would find the joke irritating but I gave a dry laugh. As I couldn't produce any words at the moment, I had no choice but to follow him to his car. Well, it would save me transportation fare and the stress of entering a bus back to the crowded mainland area of Lagos.

"Why did you take your eyes off wearing a sad look?" He asked, breaking the awkward silence I was already uncomfortable with. What a weird way to start a conversation as though we were not meeting for the first time.

"Ummm... I dunno. Guess I felt embarrassed that I was looking at you like the other girls", I confessed.

"How were they looking?", he asked with a mischievous grin. I knew he was teasing me, so I smiled and brushed him off.

Where do you live?"

"On the Mainland."

"That is quite a distance but it is too early to go home.", he replied smiling. We laughed.

Soon, I could hear myself laughing out loud, smiling and blushing at intervals- it seemed like we had known each other for over a century.

He pulled over just in front of the black gate that led to my house.

"Are you okay here?" He asked, smiling. That very smile proved to be my Achilles heel. "I can walk you down if you don't mind". I could tell he was teasing, again.

"No o.... I'm fine here. Lemme save you the stress. Thank you very much". He laughed.

"You are welcome. Ermmm, please call me in a few minutes to check if I am home. I do not trust myself ", he said with a wide grin making his dimples more obvious. I took the contact card smiling, slammed the door, and walked away. Just then, I remembered that he did not ask for my name, and neither did I, his.

Immediately after taking a shower, I sank into my bed wearing my pink nightie. I unplugged my phone from the charging socket and dialed his number.

"You do not have sufficient credit to continue this call...", came the lady from the other end. This was probably the reason we did not get along.

I tried borrowing, as usual, but again, I had exceeded my limit. I sat up looking at the ceiling in frustration as if the answers to this puzzle were up there. It was past ten o'clock and just the curfew time I had set for myself.

I could not go out to get airtime, so I laid back on the bed admiring my small room while waiting for sleep. It was a self-contained apartment and it had just been three months since I moved in.

I had lived in a 'face me I face you' yard with a roommate for three years. She was not a bad person but we all know the story of two girls who are not best of friends staying together. We expressed our disagreements in verbal fights and sometimes stayed for days without talking to each other.

There was a fight about who last filled the gas, whose turn it was to cook, who carried this and that, and who would wash the public toilet. It was dramatic. We had fun most of the time, especially on weekends, although she spent half of it at her boyfriend's place.

The compound was small and this gave birth to many intrigues: the long queue to the bathroom and toilet every morning, the public water board, the annoying noise from the other tenants, the landlord's wife nagging every month-end about tenants' debts, and of course the most interesting part, the frequent clashes by "runs girls".

My new apartment was entirely different. I had to save up to afford it. It was not well-furnished compared to the other rooms in the compound I had peeped into. I had just a table, chair, and a bed but that was enough. I could not afford all the girly stickers girls used in decorating the walls of their rooms.

My room was not painted pink; just the lame yellow color of an unripe orange. Not that I would have anyone visit, except Bella. But I had peace and there was no roommate to suck the life out of me.

After work that hot Friday evening, I decided to enter Miami: a popular and expensive eatery I had been dreaming of. My boss, who probably woke up from the right side of the bed which happens once in a blue moon, had given me a bundle of 500 naira notes as a weekend tip.

Somehow, I deserved it because I had been working extra hours for the past two weeks on a contract we were working on. With this 'awoof' money, it was the perfect time to explore the eatery.... and give me a nice treat.

Eno, my former roommate was right. “If you want a big catch in Lagos, take yourself out to one of these high-class eateries or bars, especially that Miami Lounge at the Island. Omo! That place is fine.” She had said during our weekend girl's nights.

“Dress very well o. Order food or an expensive wine then position yourself well and enjoy. Your maga will walk up to you,” her friend continued. Of course, I would never consider doing that just to find a man but I understood them better now. It has been three years plus of staying in Lagos and I was just having my first offer for a lift. I slept off smiling.

I woke up late the next day. It was Saturday. Before the day started, I was already tired and felt so lazy to get up from bed. The thought of standing up and doing house chores felt like climbing Mount Everest to the top. I went back to sleep again. When I finally got up, at noon, I had my bath, ate breakfast, and set off to

the market. The rest of the day was spent doing laundry, cooking, and cleaning the house.

I spend most of the evenings on Saturday with my next-door neighbor, Affiong, who for uncanny reasons, decided to be called Annabel or Bella for short. I didn't know the connection between the names and didn't bother asking. She had fine brown skin and beautiful brown eyes.

She had natural afro hair and I could not remember the last time she had it made, except in the evenings to sleep. A professional runs girl with such beauty? Sometimes, I felt she was wasting away, but who was I to cast a stone? I guess her beauty was the attraction of her work.

She was nice and homely and was always giving out goodies when back from one trip or the other, and when she went shopping. We spent most of the evenings gisting and telling stories about her numerous adventures, as I would call them. I wanted to tell her about him but just didn't know how to start. I decided to call him that night when I left Bella's place.

I searched for the contact card everywhere in the room but could not find it. Then, I remembered I had shifted it inside the back pocket of the Jean I wore that morning. I rushed to it and oh dear! I had washed the card during my laundry that morning.

I was about to check my call log when I remembered that I had cleared it earlier. I felt so bad that I could be that careless about a thing I had hoped to see the outcome. It did not help that I could not stop thinking about him all night till I drifted off to sleep.

"Beloved!"

I jumped out of bed. Who could it be at such an early hour of the day? "Beloved! Wake up!" The voice shouted again, knocking on the door as well. It was Bella. I strode lazily to the door. "Good morning Bella".

"Good morning Bae. Why are you still in bed na? It's past 7 am", she said, pushing me aside to gain access to the room."

"And why are you up early today? It's not as if you attend church."

"I'll slap you o..... what kind of insult is that?? Not as if you're more spiritual than me o".

"Sorry, Ma. What is it this morning? Why did you wake me up?"

"Just a good neighbor waking you up for church". She said smiling with confidence like one who was sure of cashing out from a betting shop. I looked puzzled. This was so unlike Bella.

"I smell something fishy", I said with my hands akimbo.

"Okay, okay, fine. Stop looking at me like that. Hmmm... there is this guy I met at that birthday party I told you about yesterday. He invited me to his church this morning and he will be coming here by 8:30 am to pick me up".

"Okay! How do I come in now?? Or, don't you have church clothes?"

"You are annoying, I swear. And you think I'd come to borrow those 'deeper life' clothes you wear? Don't be stupid, my dear. Well, you're coming with me. Hurry up, shower, and bring your dress to my room. In fact, don't worry. Just shower and come now... there is no time o."

"I don't understand I'm not coming mbok. I have my Church and I'm in the ushering department, you know."

"Please na.... just today. Encourage my spiritual life na"

"Bella, it's not working. No o... I can't come"

"I'm giving you 5 minutes. It's church not party. I can't lead you astray, you know. At least, your prayers do cover me. Love you". Bella slammed the door before I could protest further.

This was just her in a happy mood. I thought about the dress she would probably gift me after the service, the free makeup I'll wear to take pictures for Facebook, the car coming to pick us up that morning saving me from the stress of struggling for a bus on a Sunday morning, and of course, 'joy go follow'. I rushed to the bathroom.

He arrived just in time. Bella and I still had time to snap and do selfies before entering the car. "Hey baby!", Bella said as she kissed the guy. She sat in the front seat next to him while I occupied the back.

"Meet my friend, Beloved. Beloved, meet Frank

"Good morning, Frank", I greeted.

"Good morning, Beloved. I wish I had met you first, you're prettier". He said teasing.

"Which kind of joke is that one na? I don't like it o", the frown on her face got me scared.

"He is joking na. Smile joor before you ruin your makeup", I replied with a cold smile. Frank didn't stop laughing and we all joined in the laughter. I don't know if I laughed because it was funny or because his laughter was. We giggled and talked throughout the journey which seemed a little far.

Most of the talk was 'bodied' and the attack was majorly on Bella and a little on Frank. I was just an audience. Bella was definitely in love!

"Thank you so much for coming to Church with me today. It means a lot". Frank said, a toothpick in his mouth, fighting the crumbs of meat between his teeth. This was the second time in Miami. I couldn't stop looking around to check if I'll luckily spot him somewhere. I prayed and wished there would be a coincidence somehow. Bella tapped me to say something but my mind was not there.

"Are you okay??" Bella asked.

"I'm sorry. I'm fine. Was just lost in thoughts".

"What are you thinking about??" Frank asked. A serious face didn't suit him at all.

"Nothing to worry about. It's work."

"Oh!" Just then, we all laughed... Again, we didn't know why we were laughing.

For a week, Bella stayed at home for all the nights, with Frank visiting most of the time. I was tempted to write a story about them or a script that will end with 'and they lived happily ever after'. Watching their romance, I could now see how lonely and boring my life was. I refused to go out with them on a few occasions when I was invited. I always had excuses of course. It wasn't out of envy, I just didn't want to be a third party.

Somehow, I missed Bella. She was the only neighbor I could relate well with. Mimi and Ayo had invited me over and tried coming close but I just didn't know how to break out of my shell. I found them lousy and did not know how to blend in.

My other neighbor, Musa, was nice and generous. I remember how I bumped into him at the supermarket and he insisted on paying my bills and beckoned me to pick more. Emeka! I never liked him from afar. He had too many girls visiting and was not ashamed to ask me out. *Na see finish cause am na.*

The rest of the neighbors were either snobbish, proud working-class ladies or gangsters. I didn't know their names, so, I gave them names according to their 'character'. Oops! How can I ever forget Mike? Mike the "booker", I'd call him. A young successful lawyer who lived on the last floor which was a flat. His sitting room was decorated with books and his room with newspapers.

The first and last time I visited him, he made me read a book to him and tried talking politics with me. He was so disappointed realizing I knew nothing in that field so he promised to read newspapers with me every evening after work. I escaped that day and vowed never to climb that floor again. Since Bella was no longer free for our daily visits, I buried myself in work and watched movies on weekends.

"Good morning Sir"

"Good morning Miss Asukwo"

"You sent for me sir"

"Yes, dear. Sit down... I believe you slept well?"

"Thank you, Sir. I did"

"You've been working hard since you came to this company, and you've given no troubles at all. I must say thank you, dear."

"You're welcome, Sir. Thank you for making my stay convenient."

"Okay. We have a project to work on. It should take you about a month. A promotion awaits you after this one."

"A promotion? Sounds like a bribe Sir."

"And I'll take that as one of your drama. You will go from being a regular office girl to becoming my secretary with a mouth-watering gift of course. Are you in?"

"With this price, it sounds like a tough project sir.

What is it about?"

"This document contains every information you will need. You can take the whole day to study it. Do have a lovely day!"

That is how practical my boss can be.

Mr. Greene is a very nice man. I call him 'Mr. Last Good Man' when he is in a friendly mode, and I avoid him the best I can when he is crossed.

I had come to Lagos with the mindset that after a few months I'll blow just as is depicted in movies..... in Nollywood movies. Well, I won't blame myself now, I was young and inexperienced. After job hunting for three months without success, I

became a sales girl at a local food sit-out with the help of my Aunt who I lived with. The sit-out was a popular and big one. Rumors had it that the owner used charms in preparing the food, but that was all there was to it. It was only a rumor. It was there I learned how to cook.

Mr. Greene was one of her usual customers then. His wife had traveled home with a six-month pregnancy to be looked after by her mother since work wouldn't afford him the time. I attended to him on one of the evenings and served him Afang soup with fufu. It was fun watching as he rubbed his head while taking a swallow.

He looked cheerful and so I asked him why he kept doing that as I packed the dishes. He confessed that the meal was really good. With my head swelling already, and with me having issues controlling my big mouth when excited or nervous, I told him I had prepared it.

He felt so excited like a proud father whose daughter had just won a competition. He gave me his contact card and 500 naira for 'Akara and bread'. And that was how we became friends. He would not let anyone else serve him. My colleagues grew jealous and said I was having an affair with him. I didn't let that bother me at all.

I visited him for the first time when his wife came home and she didn't let me go that night. She called me her son's wife... It was a baby boy. I felt at home. They left for the Island a month later when the project he came for was done.

A few months after, he gave me a job as a receptionist. It paid just a little higher than the restaurant. There wasn't much difference anyway. I had to buy food at the reception, but I had free food while I worked at the restaurant. After some time, he made me his office girl to help him lessen the workload as the family needed him too.

"Look into my eyes and tell me you are not a runs girl and I will believe you!"

I paused. It was Frank. Just then, I heard Bella cry- the type of cry that you let out when you are so pained and hurt like a sharp object was thrust into you. I tiptoed at a rather fast pace to eavesdrop on them.

"Oh! She can't speak now? God! I've been fooled all along? You were probably making fun of me every time I'm gone, right? And I'm sure you named me the most stupid maga....." He cried.

"No baby. You're wrong. Maybe I thought of that at first but I fell in love. I love you, I mean it. Let me explain."

"Don't touch me, you slut! Stay away from me. I've warned you. Or you'll regret it".

"Bab, please... I'm sorry..... oh God! Hear me out....."

The door opened. Frank paused. I could see how hurt he was. His eyes were already red like that of a vampire.... maybe I'm exaggerating here, but I had seen "Twilight" the night before..... I didn't know what to say or do. I felt guilty too.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He asked.

"Tell you what?" I feigned ignorance.

"Oh please! What can you say after all? You are her friend. Birds of a feather". He barked at me as he stormed out.

I was not going to allow him to get away with that. What does he mean by 'birds of a feather'? I ran after him and blocked him by the staircase.

"Now listen, I don't know you and you don't know me. Because you have issues with your girlfriend shouldn't make you call me names. I won't take that. And what man are you? A crying man? Or a man who can't face the challenges before him and solve them, but prefers to walk away? You'll be an idiot to ruin whatever you two had. You're an idiot already sha. Because she was a runs girl doesn't make

you better than her. Her mistakes are not worse than yours just because she is a woman."

I waited for him to slap me or something, but he only pushed me slightly and walked away. After that long recitation! I concluded that he was a fool after all. Then I heard a loud cry. It was Bella.

I refused to go to comfort her. It was not as if anyone had died. It was just heartbreak. Everybody in the world has either experienced that or was bound to, sooner or later. We should just get used to it. I studied the material for the office project instead.

The project was different this time. I was to go work for another company for six weeks. The company I worked for was sinking due to financial issues. They couldn't pay their debts, purchase goods, or even pay their workers. This didn't affect me as I worked for Mr. Greene and not the company.

This was the first time I would venture out alone. Not only would I get the chance to be promoted, but Mr. Greene too would be promoted to the position of Managing Director, and we would have to merge with the other company for their financial support in exchange for the services we render. This project was supposed to attract their attention.

I called him afterward to accept the proposal. "I knew you would accept. Make me proud my dear! This is the opportunity I've been working on. Save the company", he said and ended the call. He was just too much of a straightforward man.

It was Friday and the next week would be my first week at the new company.

Friday night was the happening night in town. Clubs were filled, and people held parties here and there. The Lagosians had a strong party culture. Back at home, Fridays were for All Nights and one church meeting or the other. Our Pastor would always say "pray for Nigeria". I guess our prayers covered the partyholics.

I had promised myself over time that when I got the opportunity to leave, I would leave for good. I would lay aside every church activity and live my life to the fullest and enjoy my youthfulness. I felt I had been religiously abused and couldn't wait to have my life at last. But when freedom finally presented itself, I ended up very disappointed with myself that I couldn't keep to the one promise I made to myself.

Those days, my friend would invite me to a birthday party and Dad wouldn't let me go, even when I swore to come home by 7 pm. It made me look like an outcast among my friends. I remember how my classmate had stopped by to see me following an after-school meeting I didn't attend and my dad had said, "Ama is not home. She should be in school or at the church." My classmates haunted me with those words throughout school.

Even with my newfound freedom, I still couldn't get out of my shell. Sometimes, I felt he was watching me somehow. Like when I and some friends went drinking once, I couldn't take more than two bottles- two bottles of Smirnoff of course, and when it was past 9 pm, I felt I had sinned. "We aren't good kids", I would defend myself, " we are just products of good home training."

I miss Dad and Mum! I thought they were too hard on me while growing up, so I always wanted my freedom someday. How stupid I was to think of such.

They feared I would go astray. What an irony of life! Most nights, I would hear Mum cry to God to change me and make me a better person. I would get up and counter those prayers, returning them to the sender. If only she had directed those prayers to her first daughter, everyone's favorite, who got pregnant while the child's father denied responsibility.

Maybe, if I was not heady, Mum and Dad would have noticed when she started sneaking out or overstayed during an errand. Maybe they would have directed those prayers to her instead, and Mum's sleepless nights of worries would not have been wasted. How disappointed Mum and Dad were! I guess that is when I changed. Should I say changed? No! I'd say 'grew'. I wasn't really what everyone thought of me.

Everyone saw me as stubborn and headstrong. I did my things whenever and however I wanted to. After Dad had said that to my friend and I was laughed at in school, I attended every after-class meeting. I can remember when I almost beat up Eka Ikwo at the market when she called me names because I wore trousers to the market.

The drama I created at the market that afternoon left footprints that dragged my family for a long time. I was reported to the Church and given a suspension.

The two weeks of suspension went by quickly, but I was pained because I didn't beat her. She, however, learned to keep her big mouth shut and mind her business. I wasn't a superhero but someone had to stand up at some point.

Most of the time, I was covering up for Ene, my elder sister. To everyone, including my parents, she was that "trophy daughter". On occasions, my parents would always show her off and were so proud of her. "Meet Ene, my first daughter, and her sister", my father would always introduce us to friends and distant family. I was that sister who didn't have an identity. I stopped going to family occasions and any gathering that would require an introduction.

I thought covering up for her and taking the blame was love. Like when she had dropped one of mum's favorite china plates. I remember how hell was let loose and I was the suspect. The thing is, she didn't ask who did it. Every mischief done was Abasiama and every good credit was Abasiene.

It was Abasiene who had the best results from school and Abasiama who came home with numbers. I was the black sheep of the family. Well, we all learned our lessons. Dad and Mum seemed to exercise authority by not apologizing to me. They always blamed me for Ene's waywardness. I almost believed I was adopted!

Ene didn't learn her lessons. She left home a year after her child's birth and we never heard from her; maybe the shame was too much for her to bear; maybe for some other reason best known to her. Rumors had it that she had joined the 'customer night' business in Lagos- nobody knew the truth. Mum never stopped asking about her whenever I called home. Ene was why I had to come to Lagos. I have been looking for her for years now.

TWO

I decided to break out of whatever shell I was locked in. I decided to go clubbing. I needed to enjoy life before the rapture comes. I went over to Bella's. She had slept off in a pool of her tears. This sleep is one of the sweetest kinds. You'd wake up feeling refreshed.

I do not know the connection between crying and sleeping. One feels sleepy after crying especially when you have a headache. I did not want to wake her up; who knows, she might be dreaming of how Frank forgives her on a picnic at Disneyland. I woke her up anyway.

"Wake up Bae!"

"What is it? Can't I have peace of mind again?"

"Not when the house is burning down". She made for the door like an Olympic sprinter. I couldn't help but laugh. This was my first real laugh in two weeks.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She screamed.

"Exactly my point, a burning house is the same thing as hell.... Just that the former is primary and the latter, secondary".

"It's not funny. What you just said is like suya with no pepper and onions."

"That is why I'm here. Let's go clubbing. I need to catch some fun and you have to clear your head. I met Frank this afternoon"

She inhaled for a long time and I was scared she had forgotten how to breathe out again. It was such a relief when she finally did.

"I'll take that as a yes? Yes!", I concluded before she could think of any excuse to back out. "But I will need a dress and make-up, you know. I promise to work on mine..."

"You know I don't mind. Thanks for asking me out. I was thinking of committing suicide this night", she didn't smile.

"And how unfortunate it is to make you cancel such a wonderful adventure." We laughed. "You are a strong woman", I said. And we ended up hugging ourselves. This is one of the things I hate about being a girl, but we just can't help these things.

"Okay! If we continue like this, we won't make it tonight". I said breaking free.

"Alright. I agree. Where exactly are we going?" She asked selecting our dress from her wardrobe.

"How am I supposed to know? This should be my first club".

"And you're not ashamed of yourself? You're 23, not 13. I'm not ready to babysit you there."

"Lemme worry about that aunty".

I was quite uncomfortable with the dress Bella picked for me. It was tight and revealing. "Thank God you have a flat tummy, enticing hips, and shape together" was all Bella could say. But the gown..... 'thumbs up'. That's how best I can describe it. It was a red dress with a scale-like design embroidered around it that made it shine and sparkle in the night as lights reflected like a Christmas light.

"This will cause traffic o", I cried.

"Wait until you see the other girls..... You'll thank me", Bella replied and that was enough to convince me. She wore a flair almost-touching-the-knee gown with spaghetti hand. It was red too. One can't possibly bend down with such a gown without revealing the butt. She called it 'easy access'. With her wearing this, I felt like a saint myself.

The music at the club was loud enough to make the deaf hear. I had to scream my lungs out to have a conversation with Bella. The crowd there was crazy. I now

understood why Bella insisted we leave our phones at home and gave me a pocket purse instead of a handbag. I refused to let go of her hand as we kept pushing our way through.

"We will have to go upstairs to the VIP section. That is where the fun is. This place is for chewing gum girls and pickpocket guys". She screamed. We got upstairs and met two bouncers by the entrance. Bella excused me and talked with one of the guys and within seconds, we were allowed in. Up there, it was cool.

The Air conditioning, the cool music, etc. Everything seemed to be in place compared to the mini-market downstairs. There was much drinking and gisting, eyeing, and creating attention to attract your prey. And then we entered, and everyone turned in our direction, as we see in the movies.

I felt like I was walking in slow motion but there was no air to blow my hair. Bella and I walked to an empty table. It felt like forever walking down there. I was scared at some point that my legs would fail me.

"Go get us a drink", Bella said.

"I'm convinced now that you are mad", I replied.

"Okay then. We will stay without a drink".

"Fine!"

Bella turned her body to the beat of the hip-hop music that blared from the large speakers. I realized she was serious. While still wondering how to walk to the bar without attracting anyone, a bartender brought us a drink saying it was from an admirer. Bella thanked him, took a sip, and raised the glass. A guy from afar nodded his head and raised his glass too.

"I guess someone is tripping for you already".

"What makes you think it's me and not you?"

"He has been staring at you forever now. Please don't disgrace me"

"Hmmm. Is it always like this here? I mean everything from downstairs to here".

"Nope. The Governor's son is coming today. That's why there is a crowd downstairs. No how, no how, joy go dey. Here is for the big guys in town. You see all these guys here, they are maga. Before I could have access up here, it cost me a lot.

The girls here are tight. Up there, the last floor, well, I'm not sure I'll ever go up there as I have resigned from this business", she laughed. That dry laugh that doesn't require you to open your mouth, nor show your teeth.

Then, I felt proud of her somehow. She had a story to tell.

"You see that white rat", she continued, fixing her eyes on a light-skinned girl. Her skin looked like it had been through a lot. It was evident that she was using bleaching creams. "She is worse than anything you can imagine right now.

She has been up there several times." The girl dressed almost naked leaving nothing to the imagination. I couldn't even look at her twice. She caught our eyes, smiled, and approached us.

"Hey, loser!" She said taking a seat beside us.

"Look who we have here. The devil herself", Bella faked a smile as well. Looking at them, one would think they were probably close friends.

"I could not get my eyes off the wig. It suits you. I'm sure you bought it outside the country?" Bella continued.

"That's right my dear", she laughed. "Is she replacing you or are you back already?" Bella didn't reply and she continued. "You know I ran into Frank this morning and you know how it is with my mouth, it just never stops opening".

Bella gulped down half of the wine we had left. I was scared. I closed my eyes hard and prayed there shouldn't be a fight. I could see the thought racing through Bella's mind.

I bet she wished she could fling her outside and give her the beating of her life. Her eyes were red and I could see how they begged for the bouncers to fall asleep so she could pounce on her. She scratched and shook her head like a freshly mad man I had once seen at the market. The girl took a sip from her glass and held my chin up.

"You are so beautiful. I saw you walk in." I shook free from her and gave her a dead look. I dared not utter a word. To Bella she said, "I hope that doesn't hurt. You know how much I love you. But I have to go now, it's a busy night for me. This place is about going crazy". She blew her a kiss and walked back swaying her rather stiff waist so vigorously that I feared it would break. Surprisingly, Bella recovered herself as soon as she left.

"I told you, right? This is her in her best mood." I swallowed hard. The night just got started! The big boys arrived and more girls trooped in. Then I met two girls who gave me their contact.

I frowned at the few guys that approached, ignored those that eyed me, exchanged smiles with those I liked, and felt bad for not walking toward those I admired as the other girls did. Bella and I laughed, as she kept reminding me not to get drunk. Soon, I found myself sitting alone dancing to the music subconsciously. It was a crazy night.

"Need company?" Came a voice from behind. He brushed my hair back, kissed my neck, sending shivers down my spine, and took the seat opposite me. He was the one, I mean him!

"Hey! We meet again", I said, shivering.

"Yes. You delayed the process."

"Well", I relaxed, "some unforeseen circumstances ruined the process."

"Oh! Really!"

"I...Ummm lost it?"

I looked for words to defend myself but I stared at him, right in the eyes, speechless. Maybe there was something about him I just couldn't pick out.

"Well then, I'll leave you to think of an excuse. I have a meeting upstairs. Don't go without seeing me. Okay?"

"Okay!"

Before I could regain myself, he was gone. He must have had some charm. This was not some assumption. I was convinced. But what is the crime in being charmed? Maybe he was just the vibe I needed for this party or maybe I had too much to drink. Whatever the case, I found myself joining in the dance and insisted we stay a bit longer.

I woke up the next day with a migraine. It was noon and I was still in bed. The last thing I remembered was that I went to the bartender for more drinks. Gosh! I must have messed up myself or talked shit. And I didn't even get to meet him again. I tried sitting up but the hangover was terrible.

Anyways, I managed to get to the bathroom, washed my face, and brushed my mouth which felt too sour to taste. I was sorry for Bella. How did she bundle me home? It must have been so embarrassing. I laughed.

I checked on Bella next door. She was on her laptop seeing a movie with a pack of popcorn between her thighs. She gave an amebo smile as she watched me walk in.

"She is out of wonderland finally ". She said,

"How did I get home?" I asked, sitting on the couch opposite her.

"That guy na. But girl you try o. How was I supposed to carry you home if the savior hadn't shown up?"

"Oh dear! I'm sorry. Did I do anything stupid, tell me". Bella started laughing. That explained everything. Wait. Did she say a guy?

"What guy is that?" I asked.

"Aunty na. Mtcheww. No do abeg", she sighed, paused her movie, and looked up. I knew that look. "The Prince Charming you were waiting for."

"Oh Him. He came!"

She gave that look again and continued.

Much later that evening, someone was at my door. It wasn't Bella, she had gone for an evening stroll. It was him.

He requested to come in, and I allowed him.

"How are you feeling now?" He asked, making himself comfortable in my study seat.

"I'm better. I'm so sorry about last night. Thank you for bringing me home."

"Nah! It's fine. It's my fault anyways, I made you stay that long."

This is one thing about love, it makes you weird and childish. It breaks all your defense and you laugh in your sleep. But I won't call this love. I just knew I had some connection with him. Maybe he was my destiny helper. We talked at length about random things.

I do not know how I got so relaxed with him or when he was no longer seated on the study chair but on the bed. Soon, I heard my voice echoing laughter in the lobby. I threw a pillow at him and he gripped my arms till I winced in pain and surrendered. That was fun to me. Does it sound right? We ran out of things to say, we looked at each other, smiling.

I felt my chest tighten, just like when I am dehydrated. Then he looked at his Rolex wristwatch and said he was running late for a meeting. Everything felt so awkward, I didn't even notice he had such white eyes with no blood lining.

He insisted I don't bother walking him out. I watched him close my door as if he was sneaking out. It was cute in a way though. It left a feeling I could not explain. I suddenly realized my door was painted brown, my room had a little touch of pink- I had played with it to make it girly.

My study table and chair looked weird with only a handful of books I could boast of. It felt so empty, like my life, and too quiet. For the first time, I realized I was lonely and I don't know why it felt so unbearable now. I played Adele's 'Million years ago' and cuddled myself to sleep.

I woke up very early on Monday morning. Punctuality was a good impression to exhibit at the new workplace. I picked out my best outfit, put a new wig on, and prayed very well about my first day.

The firm was much bigger than the company I worked with. I was nervous. I spent Saturday and Sunday learning common business terms and how to keep a business conversation. I had just SSCE and a Business Masterclass Mr. Greene had once signed me up for. Thank God for YouTube. I lived there all weekend.

The meeting with the Board of Directors went well. I was accepted and work began. My duty was to send the work files to Mr. Greene via email, get the feedback and submit it to the manager of the new firm and then continue the cycle. I acted like a watchdog too, sending every input to Mr. Greene and I acted all smart over there.

Acting smart wasn't easy at all. A blonde lady with a fake American accent almost threw me off balance. Everything about her seemed fake, including the blonde wig. Was it just me who noticed it? I'm not a bitter person but the sound of her heels while she walked, rang like a bell in my ears.

I didn't care to know her name but I was going to be careful with her. Very careful! Well, the first week went on successfully though I was becoming a shadow of myself.

He had called last Wednesday. He invited me for dinner on Saturday evening at Miami Eatery. Bella appeared to be happier than me when I broke the news to her.

"Aunty come out na. You have been in there for an hour now, abi you dey wash your sins?" Bella screamed.

"Ah ah, calm down o make God use you", I laughed while coming out from the bathroom. "I entered there just 30 minutes ago, used the toilet, and showered," I said.

"Keep the explanation to yourself. It's not good to keep a guy waiting, you will not hear now o"

"Shun that talk mbok. I still have time"

I requested an Uber ride, after dressing up. Bella said I must not use an anyhow taxi. I didn't know which one was anyhow taxi. I wore a blue dress with red shoes and held a red purse. I felt uncomfortable in the rather tight heels Bella had given me. It was all her idea. But what would I have done without her? I had planned to wear jeans and a t-shirt with sneakers. Beautiful right?

I entered the eatery but could not find him, so I picked a table for us and ordered Hollandia yogurt while waiting.

The eatery was full. It was my luck to find an empty table downstairs as the couple who arrived five minutes after me had gone upstairs. I was happy I did not have to climb the stairs with the heely shoe I wore.

I nodded my head in a sustained rhythm, to the soft music that played in the background. I did not know the song because I was not a fan of blues- almost everyone at the restaurant had the song on their lips. Not that I didn't love music, but I mostly listened to gospel music and the few secular songs I played when depressed or wanted to force a night of sleep.

One could easily say I was a good dancer with the way I was moving my body- well, that's a story for another day. Just when I wanted to get angry after waiting for almost 30 minutes, he showed up.

"Hey dear, I'm so sorry. Got caught in traffic. You know how it can be, don't you?"

"I know..." I faked a smile.

The waiter came over and we placed our order.

We ate in silence. He practiced the table manner thing. Like, who does that? Up till today, I believed it was only practiced in boarding schools. I remember back then in high school, it was compulsory to be a boarder in the final year.

At the dining hall, we were to use cutleries to eat. It was easier with rice but not funny at all with garri and soup. Thank God I was in the final year. We used our hands to eat when the matron or boarding mistress was not around.

After dinner, he decided we would go over to the bar for drinks and a little chat. He was wise enough not to order alcohol for me. "I'm not ready to carry you home," we laughed.

"I'm Ernest, nice meeting you," he said, extending a hand.

"Wow! Finally"

"Yeah, finally," we laughed.

"Abasiama, but you can call me Beloved or Ama, for short."

"You're Calabar?"

"Nope. I am an Akwa Ibomite"

"Yeah. But you guys are called Calabar"

"I don't want to be disappointed in you. Calabar is in another state, that's Cross River. I'm from Akwa Ibom."

"I know, I know", we laughed again.

"So, you are married?"

"Yeah!" He touched his wedding ring and looked down. Drank up the wine in his glass. It was obvious everything was not well. Somehow, I felt bad going out on a date with a married man. I never wanted to be the reason for another woman's broken home.

"Okay? Want to talk?"

He looked up at me like the answers were written there. I got uncomfortable when our eyes met, and I looked away.

"Oh yeah! Yeah. Well.." he cleared his throat, took another shot, and wiped his face. "My wife is dying. She has Coronary Heart Disease and has about 3 months left to live. It's been tough, Ama, the nightmares of having to raise our three-year-old daughter alone. We were expecting a baby boy but we lost him because she had to fight to be alive. I'm scared." He cried.

I saw tears trickling down. I had never seen a man cry and I didn't know what to do. My Dad never cried, not even when my sister left home. Maybe I heard Frank do something like that, but I didn't see him do it. I gave him my handkerchief, filled his glass with wine, and offered it to him. He needed it. I held his hands and patted them gently.

"I'm so sorry about that," I paused, biting my nails and crying as well. "I don't know what to do or say but I'm sure you'll be fine. You have to. For your daughter. God knows the reason for everything."

"You say, God?" He laughed. "Have you ever lost someone you love?"

"I could say I lost my grandmother but you would think I'm dumb. She was the only one who truly understood me and it felt like my world would end. I have lost relatives too.

And there is no hope of ever seeing my sister again. I don't even know if she is dead. What am I even saying? It's okay to cry. It's even okay to doubt God but it doesn't mean He doesn't exist. Your wife isn't even dead yet. Who knows, there can be a miracle. And if there is none, you have to keep pushing. Life is shit. Everyone out there has a story."

We sat in silence, looking at each other. I felt his pain and wished I could make him see reasons to be strong.

"Thank you." He reached out for my hand.

"I'm sorry for dragging my problems here with you. I didn't mean to. I just needed someone to talk to. You know! It seems I'll collapse with all the burden on me."

"It's totally fine. I don't mind going through this with you. Like, I know I can't take the tears away but I'll always be here to cry with you."

He chuckled.

"Like seriously, you're laughing?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it"

"Really! Am I that funny?" We laughed again. It was a big relief though.

It was my second week at the firm. Harriet, the assistant manager, had been annoyingly nosy. It seemed she was on a mission to make me fail. She almost made me go back home to change into heels, even though I appeared very corporate in my flat shoes.

How was I supposed to wear heels running from one department to another gathering files? I had never felt so embarrassed. She walked up the stairs, leaving me standing there with a bunch of files not knowing how to walk back to my seat as I could feel all eyes on me.

When she was out of earshot, the silence ceased and I heard the cleaners laugh. It got to me. Musa, the guy by the door, walked up to me with a friendly smile and walked me back to my space. Everyone had something to say. I had never felt so lost before.

Should I rebuke all of them for making fun of me like that? No, it would be a bad idea. Musa told me in his Hausa accent I loved hearing, that she was always like that and it was not me they were making jest of, but her.

We heard the sound of heels approaching, and everyone went back to their work in silence. Looking up, I saw one of the cleaning girls making a show. Everyone threw curses at her and we all laughed. Nobody downstairs liked her. Downstairs was one big hall partitioned into a group of personal workspaces separated by a see-through glass door.

The cleaners stayed below the staircase. The editors and copywriters had their space opposite mine. I had a personal working space which made much sense.

I had settled in at work here and knew the rules to keep my head up. I even learned the signals and some funny gestures. Musa was always the one to signal us whenever someone like Harriet or the Manager stepped downstairs. Everyone would keep things in place and act focused.

Harriet came to my space for the second time that day, complaining that my telephone was not connecting. She would not stop calling, asking me to bring this file or that one. I had disconnected the telephone to concentrate and only fixed it back when Musa had signaled. She dropped a file and leaned by my desk.

"This is to assist you with the presentation next week. The CEO and other members of the Board of Directors will be present. This presentation is a step that will decide if a merger with your company will be accepted. Best of luck."

"Thank you, Ma. I will do my best."

"You're welcome. What about the PowerPoint presentation?"

"I'll send it to your email. I am still working on it Ma"

"I need it before lunchtime"

"Okay, Ma. Thank you, Ma."

She looked at my legs before heading to another partitioned table. I had been quick enough to change to heels when Musa signaled us from the reception.

Besides her unlikeable character, she was hardworking and result oriented. I felt bad for judging her and I could imagine how it felt not to be loved at the workplace. I wanted to tell her the red lipstick was too much and that the American accent was funny.

Nobody was interested that she had studied abroad and her fashion sense was poor. But I didn't want to get fired.

I brought out the already-frozen soup I had made during the weekend from the refrigerator, before heading to the bathroom. It was Wednesday but I wished it was Friday. I heard my door open. I quickly tied my towel and stepped out of the bathroom.

"You scared me," I said, as Bella walked in.

"Na wa o. I'm sorry. Just coming back?"

"Yeah! You okay?"

"Not really. Frank is in my room. He has been here all afternoon. "

"Really? What does he want?"

"I guess he is back or something. I dunno"

"Hey! It's fine. He deserves a second chance, okay?"

"Okay! Do you have food? He is hungry. Please".

"Sure... there is soup on top of the refrigerator. Dish out a little for me, carry the rest. There is garri in the custard rubber."

"Thanks, dear. I will gist you later"

"No wahala. Enjoy."

Things had gone sour with Frank. He lost his job and was a shadow of himself. Bella heard of it and decided he needed her now more than ever. Who would have believed that Bella would settle for a broke guy? She rescued him from depression and a mess of himself surrounded by bottles of beer.

Not only did she find love, but she also found God. I could not believe it when she dragged me to Church the previous Sunday even though I had not wanted to go due to work stress. With such a miracle, I began praying for Abasiene, that God would visit her as well. Maybe we don't have to fight God's battle but leave it to Him, pray, and wait for the appointed time.

Was this not Bella who would not hear anything about church when I had first moved in here? She was now in the choir and had even led in praise last Sunday. I could remember the very words of the Pastor last Sunday and they never stopped ringing in my head.

"The time to favor Zion has come. You only have to be patient and wait. Write this message down: though it tarries, it shall surely come to pass. The Lord will do new things for you at His appointed time. He visited Sarah, he will visit you." The church chorused a loud Amen.

"The prodigal son will come home soon and the Lord will do a new thing for you." I took those words personally and meditated on them day and night. Every pointer was towards Ene and I could not wait to have her back. It had been four years plus since she left. With the turnaround for Bella, I felt a miracle was close.

I did not hear from Ernest throughout the week. He had promised to call the last time we met at the bar. I felt bad for not calling too. I was occupied.

I dialed his line but he did not pick up. I tried again, and towards the end of the call, he answered. His voice was really low and I had to strain my ears to hear him. He apologized for not reaching out as promised. His wife had a fever from worrying about her day of death.

The thought of leaving the little girl in the hands of a prospective wicked stepmother was another nightmare. He wished his relatives were close by to come to get the girl and let him spend her last days with her.

I thought of having the girl around as a way of showing my support to a friend in need but I ignored it. Just then, he asked if the girl could stay over. I came up with many excuses- the stress from my office, not knowing how to care for a baby, his wife not knowing me, etc.

"I trust you Ama," he interrupted, and I gave in to his request.

I left for his place that evening at 7 pm. I could not tell Bella about it since Frank was still around. I tried staying awake inside the taxi but nature had its way even though I was engaged in a friendly conversation with the driver.

I had formed the habit of being overly friendly with whoever rendered a service to me, which is the reason I always sat in front of a taxi. The taxi driver woke me up when he arrived at my destination. I was so embarrassed and I apologized. He smiled and told me he understood. I left the change he offered, with him.

Ernest's compound was easy to locate. The house number was boldly written in the space between the small gate and the big gate. I rang the doorbell and held my purse jealously; watching left and right as I waited for a response.

The first thing I learned in Lagos was to shine my eyes. After a few minutes, Ernest opened the gate smiling apologetically. We hugged sideways and then he beckoned on me to come in. The house was painted white and gray. There were many beautiful flowers planted outside, just like the houses I saw in movies. "Beautiful, right?" He asked, smiling.

"Yeah! Just like I see in movies."

"Ivy planted all these. Come inside, you will see more." He held my hands leading me on. There was a swimming pool by the far end of the house and a jingle over by the side. I fell in love with the compound immediately and it felt weird. The house was indeed beautiful. Everything was just in place and very neat.

"Do you have a maid?"

"Nope! Why do you ask?"

"The place is neat..... I am sure you are not this hardworking."

"Oh!" He laughed., as he offered me a glass of juice. "Ivy does the cleaning"

"Even with the sickness?"

"Yeah! The disease does not make one look sick at all though the thought of dying soon torments the patient. " Just then Ivy came out with their little daughter.

"Oh! Here she comes. Ivy, meet Ama."

"Ivy?" I exclaimed. I don't know how long my mouth was open. I could not believe my eyes, it was like a dream. I could not help but let the ocean of tears in my eyes flow freely. I looked at the little girl, she looked so much like her and it reminded me of when we were young. What a small world indeed!

"Ama!" She cried, head bowed regretfully, extending out her arms. "I'm sorry baby sister. I am"

"You are sorry indeed!" I wiped my tears, carried my purse from the couch I sat on, and headed out. Ernest ran after me and held my hands just as I opened the door.

"You can't just leave like that. What is going on?"

"Ask your wife. Please lemme go"

"Please don't go. I'm sorry," Ivy said crying as well, "please, if not for anything but to honor my death!".

"Seriously? Nobody wants to explain what just happened?" Ernest said after what seemed like forever. We were all seated in the living room. I was about to speak out to save my time but Ene said she would.

"Okay! I will start with an apology. I am sorry. I really am. Everything fell apart when I got pregnant. I felt like committing suicide. Brother David, our choirmaster, was responsible and he threatened me not to tell anyone. He took advantage of my innocence.

He had forced me to abort the child but I could not do it. Killing an innocent child would not make a right. I am sorry I ran away, I could not face everyone. The shame and disappointment, it was just too much. I missed you, I missed my baby, I missed everyone. I remember how I stayed awake most nights crying myself to sleep, the emptiness and loneliness ripped my heart to pieces.

I followed Mama Emeka to Lagos when she came to buy the ladies' wear she sells. I explained everything to her and she promised to help me though she did not support my decision. She informed her sister who helped in getting me a house girl job. The first house was hell.

I ran away after a year. I was frustrated and stranded. I was at a motor park one day looking for a petty job. I offered to help a lady in NYSC uniform who was struggling with her luggage. I didn't do it for money but when she gave me 500 naira, I could not refuse it.

She gave me her contact card as well and asked me to come visit her someday. After a week, I decided to honor the invitation. She was a rich man's daughter, living in a heaven-like mansion, so I thought then." She laughed, looked up for some time, and continued.

"She welcomed me happily and introduced me to her parents as her friend. I was shocked. When we were seated in her room, I told her not to trust people so easily, I could be a thief or something but she laughed away my words.

She asked about me and I told her my story except for the part about having a child. She comforted me and offered me a sales girl job in her newly opened boutique and from sales girl to manager. That was where I met Ernest. Today, I have my boutique. Ibukun and I have been best friends since then though she later moved abroad."

"And so?" I said angrily. "What then is your excuse for abandoning us? It got rosy for you, right? Hear your fairy tale story. You got married without a relative being invited. You are now rich while your son is suffering in the village without motherly love."

"You think it's easy, don't you?" She stood up, allowing the tears to flow down. "You call it a fairy tale story. Do you know the pains I lived with? You think I never wanted to come back?"

I stood up as well, meeting her eyes. "You don't have an excuse, Ene. You have always been lucky and greedy. I have been struggling right from the day I arrived in Lagos. I declined a great opportunity at Port Harcourt just to come here and look for you. I send money home every term for your son's school fees and our parents' upkeep. How much do I earn? And you boldly tell me you own a boutique."

"I am dying Abasiama! I'm dying." She cried.

"That is my point. All I ever do is clean up your mess! All those sunny days of yours, I was never in the picture. Now, you're dying, I'm being dragged in." I cried. "I hate you, Ene. For all the pain you've caused me. How am I supposed to watch you die? How?"

Ernest, who had been silent all the while, got hold of me. I cried out uncontrollably.

"I'm sorry." She kept saying.

My phone alarm rang, it was 10 pm. I picked up my purse and told them I was leaving. I called the taxi guy who had brought me that evening and he said he was close. "Is she still coming with me?"

"You don't have to go, Ama. It's 10 pm and it's dangerous out there. You can sleep over."

"Thank you, but I can not. What is her name?"

"God's Beloved," Ernest said. "She named her after you."

"I did not ask her to. It doesn't change anything." I carried the sleeping baby while Ernest carried her bag.

"Will you ever forgive me?"

I looked at her. The nightmare of losing her flashed back. I held the baby tight and looked away.

"If you do the right thing. You know what I mean. Good night." I walked away immediately. I entered the taxi waiting for me outside. Ernest opened the back door and put the bag in.

"Thank you," he said as I fastened my seat belt.

"Was this a setup?" I asked, searching his eyes.

"I swear to God, I never knew."

"You're welcome." I tapped the driver.

Throughout the drive, I looked out of the window lost in thought. I could feel her heartbeat. What will I tell her when she grows up and asks for her mother? Life has not been fair at all. When you think you have overcome the storm and that the sun will soon shine, you see the beautiful rainbow up above but it disappears within a twinkle of an eye.

Why do I have to be dragged into her mess all the time? I have lived my life for her. I had to fill the gap she left at home. Being cash trapped, I borrowed from

Bella to pay her son's fees, yet she lives in a mansion with a husband who worships her feet.

Why did I have to meet her when she was dying? Why is it always her but never me? My thoughts screamed and my chest tightened in pain.

THREE

Bella and Frank were seated on the balcony with their chairs placed against their door. Frank turned towards me smiling then tapped Bella. She was surprised.

"Small aunty, whose baby did you kidnap?"

"Open the door, please. My heart is breaking."

"Ah ah! Is it just the baby or is there an invisible burden?"

She opened the door and we all went in. I laid her on the bed. She was almost awake, and I covered her with a blanket, and pet her to sleep again.

"Now, you owe me an explanation."

"You better keep your voice down," I whispered.

"But you're telling me, aren't you?"

" Hmmm. Headlines. She is Ernest's daughter. I'll tell you the news in detail tomorrow. Now, good night!"

"Are you pursuing us?" Frank asked teasingly. I knew he was being silly but it was bad timing. I felt bad too.

"No o... I'm teaching you how to walk backward," I replied, pushing them out. I locked the door.

I could not sleep that night. My thoughts traveled places and kept roaming around. I promised Mum I'll find her and bring her home, not her corpse. Will Ene's son- Daddy boy as he was called, ever heal?

She woke me up with a cry. She jumped off the bed shouting Mummy and headed towards the door. I rushed after her, held her, and made her look at me.

Somehow, she stopped, maybe she saw a striking resemblance with her Mum, or probably the same reason Ernest rushed after me at the eatery the first time we met, or because blood is thicker than water, or because she remembered me from last night.

Whatever it was, I didn't care. She just had to stop crying. Every attempt to make her sleep again ended in futility. I made her watch cartoons on my phone while I finally closed my eyes.

"Beloved!" Bella screamed from next door. I was in the kitchen washing the dishes after preparing Afang soup. I rushed to her apartment with little Beloved crying along. I met her and Frank kissing. I immediately slammed the door shut at the sight of it. She laughed and called me in again.

"And why would you barge in like that?" She asked, demonstrating with her left hand, pushing an imaginary hair to and fro. I wanted to slap her for getting me so alarmed and making the baby cry, but then I understood what was going on.

"It's a lie, Bella!" I shouted. She got up laughing, displaying the beautiful ring in her left hand. She hugged me so tightly that I almost could not breathe.

"I'm getting married, girl! Ahhh! Finally o"

"I'm happy for you babes. Chief bride's maid goals." I replied by doing some modeling up and down the room.

"See this one o... Chief bride's maid ke. Shea I no get sister abi na you carry me come to Lagos."

"Frank, I will slap someone o. Warn her o. I swear," I said as I touched my tongue with my index finger, touched the ground, and lifted the finger towards the ceiling, "ehm, I will pour you palm oil that day." Frank couldn't stop laughing. We all laughed.

"Congratulations guys!"

"Thanks, babe." They chorused.

"Aww! Aren't they cute?"

"Get out jhor! We are having our pre-wedding honeymoon, please.

"You go get belle. It will end in tears "

"Bad belle o. I go soon show sha o"

"I got you, babe."

"What?" Bella shouted. "You mean your lost sister is Ernest's wife?" Bella had visited later that evening as promised. Frank, who was already calling little Beloved his wife, had taken her out for ice cream.

"Na the story be that o. Keep your voice down abeg"

"This life na set up, I swear. What will you do now?"

"What do you mean? I have to let go na. As you can see, their daughter is here with me already. I was born to carry people's burden."

"You dey try o, swears."

"Shun that one abeg. She is my sister no matter what." Trying to change the topic, I began, "Yes o... Lover girl, gist me na."

She laughed.

"Bae, I dunno. As we are speaking, the only money he has left is what we will be planning the traditional wedding with, which is not even enough. No honeymoon and we are coming back to my house sef."

"That is a tragedy. But why? This is so unlike you, you know"

"Yeah! I think this is it. I have to start a life"

"Wow! A lot has happened this year! You've found yourself, you've found love"

"And you? You've found your sister. God has been faithful!"

I laughed. I was amazed by all that had happened lately. "Look at you, Bella! I think the ministry is your calling o."

"Your head dey touch abi?" We both laughed.

Ernest called on Sunday evening apologizing for not coming to get God's beloved. He asked if he could get her in the morning and drop me off at work as well. The idea sounded nice. At least I would not have to struggle for a bus.

Abasiene asked to speak to me as well. She was ready to visit home. We decided on the following weekend, as I was confident, that I would complete the project I was working on that week- if only my final presentation would go as planned. It was going to be a tough week.

"I'm scared of dying, Ama!" She cried over the phone. "I have 2 months left. It hurts. It hurts so much." I was speechless. I wanted to tell her it would be fine but that would be lying. Hot tears trickled down my face. Ernest got the phone.

I could hear him sniffing. Again, sleep ran away that night. My head was pounding like a pestle on a mortar as I could no longer hold my tears. My nose was running too. I had gotten tired of wiping them, so I let them flow. Used tissue papers were scattered everywhere and with my sister's daughter around, I couldn't even cry out loud. I started praying silently, as I didn't want to disturb the neighborhood and Baby Beloved.

I woke up at 7 am the next morning even though the alarm had been ringing since 6. Beloved was already in the bathroom brushing her teeth. She said she woke me

up but I would not get up. Ernest arrived 30 minutes later. She threw her tiny hands around her Dad and began to tell him many things at once.

"Okay! I didn't know someone could talk like this."

Ernest laughed as she covered her face. "This is my amebo partner o. Don't mind Aunty, tell me."

They continued. She whispered to him, closing his ears so I won't eavesdrop.

We rushed breakfast of sliced bread and butter with tea.

"Ivy has not been herself since last night," Ernest said, in-between mouthfuls of bread. "I was thinking I will keep picking you guys up every morning, then you pick her up on your way from work."

"Are you saying I should keep her for the week?"

"Please, Ama!"

"You know my job is demanding. I am going through stuff as well."

He held my hands and persuaded me. Gazing at the dark and swollen circles around his eyes, I simply nodded in agreement.

Everyone stood to applaud me at the end of the presentation. Mr. Greene came around too. I was happy when I saw Harriet smiling and clapping as well. It was a relief. On the Friday of that week, the CEO of the firm called me to his office. Harriet and the manager, Mr. Ade, whom we affectionately referred to as Baba Ade, were present too. I was tense.

Harriet had tapped me to put myself together. Mr. Emeka, the CEO, brought a white file and handed it over to me. He stretched out his hand for a handshake and I grabbed it with my two hands, standing up.

"Congratulations, Miss Asukwo. We were impressed," he said. I could not hold my joy. I hugged Harriet and wanted to shake hands with Baba Ade but he requested a hug.

"Thank you, Sir! Thank you, Ma!" I replied ecstatically.

I ran downstairs immediately to share the good news with my colleagues. But they welcomed me with a bottle of champagne. They had gotten the news that morning but kept it away from me.

"We will miss you Beloved!" Mrs. Ola, the oldest staff downstairs said. Everyone chipped in, gathering up for a group hug. I was going to miss them too.

"She dey come o," Musa shouted from the reception. Everyone took to their heels, back to their respective desks. It was when we had settled it that Musa laughed out loud. We all threw folded papers at him.

Harriet and I had gotten quite close. I told her my thoughts and she was ashamed at first but was grateful. She didn't wear red lipstick anymore, she stopped using the funny wigs, and changed the fake accent.

I stopped by my company that afternoon. I was cleared by Harriet who was in charge of my project. Mr. Greene was pleased to meet me and was overjoyed as I presented the files to him. That was his promotion file and I could feel his joy.

"Congratulations, my dear! You have made me proud."

"All thanks to you sir. I was more of a middle person. You did the job, Sir."

"You better stop being silly. Anyways, you will get your promotion letter on Monday as soon as I close this deal."

"Yes Sir. Please, I need a favor from you."

"If it is about your schooling, I still remember that. You should get a Jamb form and let me know how far you have gone."

"Really? Thank you very much, sir! I'm grateful!"

"You are welcome, dear. You deserve it. You have been a good girl."

"I am honored, sir. But that is not the favor I wanted to ask for." I replied, biting my nails as I said the words one after the other.

"No, Ama! I know it when you bite those nails."

"It's not what you think sir. I have a call from home. Things are not well in the family."

"Oh! So, you need to leave?"

"Yes Sir. But I do not know how long I will be away."

"It's okay dear. You should go home. You have not been there for about four years now. That is a long time. I will forward your salary first thing tomorrow morning and a little Jara on top." He smiled.

"Ah! Thank you, Sir. I know how dangerous your little Jara can be when you're in this mood." We both laughed.

Bella and Frank said they would like to visit home as well, to discuss the wedding plans with their families. They had visited Frank's home here in Lagos during the week. Bella said his mother liked her already.

Ernest and Ivy came around that evening with their luggage and some food items lodged in the trunk of the Pathfinder. Ernest said he would drive down even though Ivy wanted to go by air. Frank and Bella convinced her to use land too as they couldn't afford to fly.

We all set out as early as 4 am on Saturday. The girls took the back seat, while Ernest and Frank took the front seat. We cracked jokes, played Truth or Dare, and

sang. The girls said men like Ernest and Frank were dangerous and the opposite of their names.

The guys mocked the girls for how they came to the city and changed their village names to English ones like Bella, Beloved, and Ivy. I defended myself by saying that it was just the English version of my name. I was accused of always being in a defensive mood. The girls agreed too.

The guys would not let go. "And when prayers are sent from the village to them, the prayers would return, not finding the owner of the names," Frank said. He had such a bad mouth.

Bella was ready to eat everything she saw on the road when we were caught in traffic or "go slow" as many termed it. Ivy accused her of being pregnant. Ernest feared she would finish eating her bride price before they got home.

Ivy kept giving out 100-naira notes to the beggars that came around as we drove past. Frank pleaded with her to invest the money in his marriage, telling her that he was a professional beggar. Then the debate about the beggars disguising themselves started.

Bella said she knew one old man from our neighborhood who would disguise himself as a blind person, but come back to count the money himself at the close of work. Everyone took turns telling their own story.

The guys soon drifted into politics and the state of unemployment in the country. Abasiene and Bella found something in common and were down the fashion lane. Feeling left out, I joined God's beloved in watching a cartoon on Abasiene's iPad. Ernest and Frank took turns driving.

We drove into a rather lonely pathway with bad roads- the potholes made us dance inside the car. God's beloved was forced to wake up as we kept jolting from side to side.

The guys mocked the state of the roads in Bella's hometown, and she couldn't defend herself this time.

We got to a house that was roofed with deep brown zinc and yellow painted walls that were already washing off. A Mango tree and an Orange tree were planted in the front yard. Close to the house was a small waterleaf garden which an elderly woman in her early 50s was weeding. Immediately she saw the car halt, she ran out calling other members of the family. Bella was crying already. It had been years.

She hugged her mother as soon as she was out of the car. Soon the neighbors came out. They welcomed us happily and even offered us food, which we declined politely, and begged to leave immediately.

Ene gave out a bag of rice and a few tubers of yam with a gallon of vegetable oil to Frank and Bella to present to the family. They felt like crying. Bella said she did not deserve such kindness. I walked up to her and hugged her. "God has not started with you yet. Wait for it", I whispered. She tightened the hug and wouldn't let go. My dress was already soaked with her tears.

Abasiene moved to the passenger's seat. After spending a few hours with Bella's family, we prepared to leave. We still had about an hour's drive ahead of us. The rest of the journey was quiet. It seemed Bella and Frank were the life of the travel. I missed them already.

"Don't tell Mum and Dad about my health," Ene said.

"Why? Isn't that why we are going home?"

"No!" Ernest replied. "She is going home because it is the right thing to do. Besides, I've not paid her bride price."

"Wow! And you are just telling me now? Well, it's good. I am glad you have grown up. Mum does not deserve the pain of knowing you will die soon."

"Watch your mouth!" Ernest screamed. He almost lost control of the steering.

"She's asleep," I replied, not wanting to admit that I had gone too far.

"It's okay," Ene replied. "Just promise me that."

"I was not planning on telling them. Nobody will hear."

When we got home, it was already dark. The house was still as it was when I left. Dad's old car was parked outside. The avocado tree we used to sit under in the evenings was still there. The constructed jangle over Ene and I used to play with was old but did not lose its magnificence. The nostalgic feeling welled up tears in me.

It was a total surprise for everyone at home. I had told them I was coming, but I did not say anything about Ene. When we drove in, everyone rushed out including Daddy. I went out first and everyone hugged me. When Ene came out, everyone was silent.

Our only brother, Abasiono, went inside. Mummy untied one of her wrappers and threw it on the ground. Ene's son, Daddy boy, ran to the backyard crying. He recognized his mother. He had asked me some time on the phone why his mother hated him so much. Ene's feet could not carry her again as she stood still crying.

She wanted to kneel but Mum beckoned on her. Mummy hugged her and they both wept. Ernest walked up to Dad and the men shook hands. I brought God's beloved out. Mum was very happy to see her. She carried her immediately and would not let her sit on her own when we were all seated on the veranda.

Abasiono came around. There was still no sign of Daddy boy. I went to the backyard to fetch him. I knew where to find him- he went to the place that was once my little hideout. He sat, folding himself in a hug crying softly.

"I knew you would be here. You have not changed." I said to him,

"I have changed," he said coming out from his hideout. "You are the only one who knows me."

"I promised you I'll find her. And here she is. Why are you running away?"

"She hates me. She ran away because of me." He cried.

"No baby!" Ene cut in. "I'm sorry I ran away. But I'm here now, never to go away again. Forgive me please."

The poor boy who had been longing for his mother every day gave in without a fight. He hugged her tightly. "Can I call you Mummy?" He asked. Ene swallowed hard. She realized how insensitive she had been.

"Yes, my love. Call me Mummy."

The rest of the evening was awash with storytelling. Daddy boy and God's beloved were already playing with her toys at the other end of the veranda. After dinner, Ernest proposed the idea of paying Ene's bride price. Mummy started dancing. Daddy made a few calls and scheduled it for a fortnight.

Ene invited me to her room that night. She did not want to go ahead with the traditional marriage proposals. After an endless argument, Ernest decided to let go. "There is no need of getting married," she said in almost a whisper. "I'm dying in three weeks. Why waste resources? I just want to die happy. I want to correct the mistakes I have made before going."

I was speechless, and so was Ernest. For what seemed like forever, we were all silent.

"You are so concerned about dying. How about us? Do you know how it feels to know we won't see you again? The pain of losing you, the children you will be leaving behind, your parents who would have to bury you. Have you for once considered this? You are not the victim here, Ene. We are! Do you know how shattered Ernest will be? His only crime was loving you."

"Abasiama!" Ernest called. "Stop it already".

"You have to fight it, Ene! You have to gain victory over death. No one will take care of your children better than you. Think about Dad and Mum, the shock and the trauma. Think about Ernest, who will be completely broken for life. This could be your second chance. Stay alive Ene! Please. "

I left the room trying so hard not to cry in front of her. I went to the backyard to cry my eyes out.

That night, we were graced by a full moon. I tried praying but I didn't know what words to say. All I heard myself muttering was "Have mercy Lord!". I got this inner strength as I felt a cold breeze. I got up from the bamboo chair and started praying, mumbling words I didn't know. I felt something strange.

I found myself lying on the bamboo chair the next morning. The cock crow from Mom's poultry farm had woken me up. It was still a bit dark. I felt refreshed and with a strange strength. I woke everyone up for a family prayer just like in the past- a family reunion with God.

"I can't remember the last time we all prayed together." Daddy said after the prayers.

We all exchanged greetings after the prayers. I apologized to Ernest and Ene for my words the previous night. I promised Ene I was going to stand by her no matter what, and I meant it. After all, that is what sisters do.

In the evening, I visited Mr. Okon, our youth choirmaster. He was now married with a daughter and expecting another. He was also the presiding elder in our local congregation. His wife was from the neighboring village.

I could remember her from the church conventions and choir rallies. They welcomed me with smiling faces. I offered the big loaf of bread and beverages I had visited with. They asked about life in Lagos and commented on how I had grown and looked well.

"You know my sister Abasiene?" I asked his wife when he dashed off to get us a drink.

"Yes! I do. I can remember the music competition we hosted. Your choir won because of her."

"Yeah! I can still picture you crying."

"Those days abi!"

"What did I miss?" Mr. Okon said joining us with three bottles of minerals.

"Women fellowship jhor," she replied.

"We were talking about Abasiene," I said.

"Oh!" He replied feeling uncomfortable. "How is she?"

"She is fine. She came with her husband."

"Awww! That's great!" She said.

"Yeah. Thank you." I waited for him to say something but he became too engrossed with the television immediately.

"You know," I continued. "She finally wants to make it up to her son who she left behind. The poor boy deserves parental love. I think you should be man enough to at least admit that you did it."

"What are you talking about?" She asked looking at both faces.

"What I mean is that your husband is Daddy boy's father."

"What?" She exclaimed standing up. "Leave my house now! Stand up mbok."

"I am sorry for causing this trouble. The truth has to be told."

She hurried me out of the house. All the while, Mr. Okon's head was bowed. I could hear her shouting and crying. I felt sorry for her, but somehow, someone had to speak the truth. I was relieved.

The next three weeks were simply the best. We reconnected with memories from the past and made the best out of them. Ene lived her life to the fullest, I would say.

We spent most evenings at the village children's park, attending church rallies, visiting the motherless homes, paying visits to elderly women, and visiting schools. Daddy boy had grown fond of Ernest and started calling him 'Daddy'.

I have never seen Ene happier than in those few weeks. But time flew faster than usual. Before we could blink our eyes and open them, three weeks had already come and gone. Ene got colder as the day drew closer. She had whispered one evening that she could smell death around. Fear gripped me.

On her supposed death day, Ene called. Ernest was there too. "The day is drawing near. It could happen any moment from now. I want to thank you two for being there for me during my last days, despite my flaws.

Thank you for fixing my broken life and adding meaning to it. If I die today, I will die a happy and fulfilled person. I feel so lucky to have you both in my life. What would have become of me without you?"

Ernest blew his nose silently trying to hide the tears in his eyes. I could not even look at him. I saw a helpless boy instead of a man.

"Do not cry for me, Ernest!" Ene continued. "The truth is, I will never leave you. I will always be here watching over you. I am sorry for repaying your love this way. I am sorry Bunny," she squeezed his hands crying as well. "I am sorry Ama! I am sorry for the pain I have put you through right from childhood. I should have been the one looking after you.

I am sorry I failed as an elder sister. Please take care of my children like your own. Take care of Ernest too. I hope you two find love someday, I pray you find it in yourselves. This is my request Ama. Don't let another woman destroy my home."

"What....." I stuttered. Ernest tapped me not to fight it. I could not do it. I could not live the rest of my life for her. How about me and what I wanted?

Ene woke me up the next morning for devotion. I almost freaked out seeing her, but she welcomed me with the kind of smile I had not seen in ages. All we did that

morning was praise God and dance. Mum and Dad were surprised by this great joy. Ene went about the house chores happily and even Ernest was seen in his best mood.

I thanked God for the miracle. After a week of living past the Doctor's prescription, Ene decided to tell Mum and Dad about it.

"Mum, Dad!" She began. We were all seated in the living room and Abasiono had come home early from his computer class to join us.

"I have been sick for some time now. Last week was my supposed death day according to the Doctor's report."

"Edikan ke iyip Jesus!" Mum exclaimed. "What sort of expensive joke is that one na?"

"Will you hear her out?" Dad had cut in. "Why would she joke about such a thing, eh? Continue my dear."

"I am sorry Mum. The Doctor said I have Coronary artery disease. It does not have a cure."

"But there is no symptom of you being sick at all," Abasiono said.

"I have never heard of that," Dad said.

Ene tapped Ernest to give better explanations since it seemed he knew much more.

"Coronary artery disease develops when the major blood vessels dis-supplies your heart with blood, oxygen, and nutrients. It is damaged or diseased. When the blood builds up, it narrows your coronary artery thereby decreasing the blood flow to your heart, and eventually, this decreased blood flow may cause severe chest pain."

"Hmmn," Dad said. "It should have some symptoms at least na"

"It does, Dad," I said. "It can arise from no symptoms to symptoms like chest pain, shortness of breath, vomiting, sweating, indigestion, etc."

"So, are you okay now? Like the sickness is gone?" Mum asked.

"No Mummy. It has no cure. But God is in control."

Daddy prayed for Ene and blessed her too. We all spent the evening praying and praising God.

A month later, Ene was doing very well. We decided to travel back to Lagos. We were scheduled to leave by the weekend. Daddy boy became moody on hearing the news, but Ernest promised to bring him along. The boy started packing immediately and telling his friends about it.

It was a Wednesday morning when it happened. We heard a scream from Ernest's room. We all rushed in to see what it was. Ene was lying straight on the bed. Though Ernest was shaking her with all his strength, she would not get up. I shouted at her to stop the joke and get up. She did not move an inch.

I had feared that this would happen sooner or later. I thought that by living past the Doctor's prescribed death date, a miracle would happen. I saw Ernest completely shattered. Mum almost ran out, but Dad held her. Daddy boy slumped and God's beloved was on the bed tapping Ene to wake up.

Abasiono stood by the door with fear written all over him. Everyone was broken! Beside her pillow, I saw two papers neatly folded with an inscription on each. "To Ama". "To Ernest". Ernest picked it up, and stepped out of the room, his face not to be looked upon. I picked mine and sat by the foot of the bed, mum still wailing.

"My dearest Abasiama", I could hear her voice. She never called my full name except when we had our fights. I regret those times now.

"Grieve not for me, for now, I'm free,

I'm following the path life has laid out for me.
I took the cold hands of death when I heard his call,
Again, I turned my back and left it all.
I'm sorry I could not stay another day,
To laugh, to love, to grieve, to play.
Tasks left undone must stay that way,
I've found that peace at the end of the day.
I know my parting has left a void,
Please, fill it with remembered joy.
A sisterhood shared, a laugh, a kiss,
Yes, yes, these things too I will miss.
Be not burdened with these times of sorrow,
I wish you the sunshine of tomorrow.
My Life has been full, I savored much,
Good friends, good times, you, a loved one's touch.
Perhaps my time seemed all too brief,
Don't lengthen it now with undue grief.
Lift your heart and share with me,
God wanted me now, He set me free.
Don't look for me again, Ama!
Don't live for me anymore, Ima!
You are free to have your life now.

Abasiama."

For the first time in my life, I did not know what to do. I did not know how to react: to cry, to laugh, or to sing. Mum lay on top of her. Dad said we should let her be.

My mind was now like a television displaying all that we have been through together. I remembered her silly jokes but could not laugh. My chest was too heavy. It felt too tight squeezing out my sanity.

Neighbors and friends had started trooping in as if they were expecting such news. Friends I had not seen since we returned, came in their numbers.

People had already gone around saying she was pressed to death by witchcraft. Others said that a ghost was sent to slap her to death. I heard different versions of the story of Ene's death. Why did people have to die? Was there no other way of not existing?

Mum kept saying she should have died and not her daughter. Daddy boy had refused to eat. God's beloved kept asking if her mother would not wake up again.

The house felt so heavy. It got too quiet in the evenings and I kept looking at her door to see if she would come out and tell us "surprise!" in her melodious small voice and her faint laughter. Everything had changed. Everything had fallen apart.

The burial was fixed for two weeks after her demise. Ernest said he could not stay long anymore. Mum acted insane sometimes. She would laugh out loud at times, sing choruses of how she is grateful to God for making her bury her own, and then start crying the next minute. Dad was unusually quiet and had turned to drink with Ernest.

It rained heavily that Friday morning. Everyone was dressed in black except me. I believed my sister had gone to rest from the pains of this world, so I wore white, her favorite color. By 9 am, the sun was shining brightly. The church was already filled with mostly young people. Bella and Frank came around as well.

"Praise the Lord!" the Pastor said, taking the podium. "Man that is born of a woman is but a few days, says Job of old. We believe that our daughter, Abasiene, has gone to rest with the Lord. Let us be cheerful that she is free of life's troubles."

I heard Mum mumbling some words. Will she ever heal?

"I will call on the family to say their last words after that we shall proceed to the graveyard."

I was called upon first. My hands were shaking. The silence gave way to more heartbreak. I took the mic and looked at the crowd. This was supposed to be her wedding. I felt a gentle breeze brush my skin. It smelt like her. Like flowers.

"How can I be a sister without her?" I asked, looking at the Pastor. He bowed his head and looked away.

"How do I live now without her?"

She was the reason I kept going and pushing

All my life, I had to fill the void she created.

Without her, my life will be like a book without page numbers. The story will go on, but it will feel out of order.

I miss her, my sister, her spirit dulled to a whisper.

She was the gift I never asked for but always wanted. Always!

Every time I see two sisters, I smile then I cry. I once had that kind of love. But she was always on the go.

A lost sister is like the missing piece in the game of life. I have looked for her for so long but she loves being lost.

I want to go looking for her again.

But she has crossed the dreaded bridge.

The bridge of no return.

We shall meet again, Dearest Ene

I shall look for you and find you

Never to depart again."

Daddy boy came out as I stood there not knowing if to go, stay, or sing our favorite choir songs. Was he not too mature for his age? He had been unusually quiet. He had lost weight too.

Ah! I screamed. I held onto him as he cried uncontrollably. Mum kept singing and crying. She had untied her hair tie and wrapped it around her waist. I heard her telling Dad that her head was on fire. Dad had poured cold water on her head. He tried convincing her to follow him home but she would have none of it.

Ernest came up next. He held a piece of paper in his right hand and a handkerchief in his left.

"I remember all those happy days,

Those times she called our "Me time"

I can still hear her voice and feel her tiny soft hands gripped on me

Dragging me and running along with her

To all those lovely places where I now cry alone.

And the endearing gestures I thought I knew so well,

Now fading, with the passing of time;

Her words, her kiss, her smell, her laugh"

He laughed.

"Then there is that moment,

When I feel she is beside me in that old familiar way with all those feelings alive again.

But as I turn to see her smile or give in to that tender touch,

That feeling only I could bring out

There is only a dark shadow of her

And hot tears begin to fall

In that deep hole of despair where she once lived

And the memories keep lingering on, much more than my heart can bear."

He walked to where the white coffin lay. Ene had wanted her wedding to be white with a touch of gold. Her coffin was. He laid his hands on the coffin and continued. He refused to wipe his tears nor the dripping of his nose.

"Is it truly selfish to want you back again, Ivy?

I beat myself every day that I could not ease your pain.

I thought my love would be enough to keep you here with me, with us.

Now I know that was never going to be.

As I remember your gentle grace and your love so soft yet so strong,

Your face, your touch, your scent, your flowers;

My heart aches and I fear it will fail me too

I want to rewind the clock and say how much I care and loved you,

I want to silence the talk that you are not there to share.

I want to frown at every laugh that is not yours.

But I try to smile and talk to family and friends.

I try to read bedtime stories and poems to our beautiful Beloved and laugh with Daddy boy

And hope they do not notice that my world is at its end and that my life is lost.

They say that life will get better and time will ease my pain.

How can they not see the truth?

That my life can never be the same again.

Life is not sweet; Life is sour. My Life is lost.

And time has no more meaning now.

It's just an overbearing longer bitter hours

I had just one life; I cherished just one time

And I know they died that dreadful day;

That dreadful Wednesday Morning.

When you slept to wake no more!"

Rain clouds gathered. Abasiono ran out of the Church. Etim, his best friend, went after him. I wish he could have cried and stopped trying to be strong.

Ernest cried. He picked Beloved up and Daddy boy held on to his knees. The pastor stood up to pray for the family but Mum came running out. She said she must say something. Dad tried stopping her from being one of the family witnesses but she would not let go.

Dad had tried convincing her not to attend the funeral as parents were not supposed to bury their children but she insisted. She said life has mocked her.

"I thank you all for joining me to mourn my first daughter." She started. "She was supposed to buy my coffin and dress me on my burial day but here we are.

The Lord gives and the Lord takes... She was your classmate, abi?" She said, pointing to Nkoyo, Ene's childhood best friend. "Your mother will not bury you. You will not bury your child Aunty," she cried, pointing to Nkoyo's mother. "Ene lied to me. She promised she would not go.. she deceived me o."

Daddy tried walking her off the podium but she would not leave without a fight. Abasiono came around with some village youths who carried the coffin away. I wished this was some bad dream.

Ernest called and said he was going away for a while. He was not leaving for Lagos and he would not say where. He had lost his charm in the space of two weeks and his smile had lost its energy too. For the first time, I stopped thinking about myself and felt for him. How would he heal? Would he ever get to love again? He squeezed my hands and looked me in the eye as if he was inviting me into his mind. It was not a place to live in at all. I saw his fears, the questions, the crossroads. In tears, he said, "Please, take care of the children for now. I will be gone for a little while and I can not tell them. I do not know how long but I promise I will be back. Please, Ama."

I did not know what to say, so I just nodded, holding back the tears. It was hard for me too but who will I cry to? Somehow I just wanted to disappear and start a new life, but if I run away from them, will I run away from my memories too? He gave me a pink diary with 'God's Beloved' boldly written on the cover book. "You have the keys to the house. It was Ene's wish for her children to grow up there. I will see you soon, Ama." He patted my shoulder and walked away to his car. I stood there frozen, completely out of the world. I flipped through the diary as I allowed the tears to flow.

To my beloved daughter:

'Your mummy is not dead

She is the whisper of the trees as you walk down the streets

She is the smell of your favorite food,
She is the flowers you pick in the garden,
She is the scent of life itself.
She is your favorite cartoon.
She is the cool hand on your forehead when you're not feeling well.
She is your breath in the air during harmattan.
She is the sound of rain on the rooftop
She is the lullaby that puts you to sleep, She is the color of the rainbow.
She is the beautiful evening sun.
She is the star that twinkles in the night.
And the moon that watches you sleep.
She is your favorite Christmas carol.
She lives inside your laughter.
She is the hot tears that fall on your cheek
She is your first home.
She is the map of life you'll follow
She will be with you every step you take.
She is your first love, your best friend, and even your first enemy.
She is the only mother you will ever know
Nothing on earth can separate you from her.
Not time.
Not the six feet that confine her now.

Not even death.

I hope you will understand in time.

Love, Dad.'

Abasiene was gone, again. She was always on the run. I did not mind going to the ends of the earth to find her. But there would be no coming back this time. My mind wandered off to Ernest, Daddy boy, and God's Beloved. I remembered Ene's last request.



Blessing Okwong is from Akwa Ibom State, where she schools and lives with her family. She has a great interest in people and sees everything around her as a story, ready to capture every moment in a book. She is an Educationist, in the making, and has a fair share of the Tech community. LOOKING FOR ENE is her first published work.