

It takes two to in fall in love, I was told. But this was not a love story.

Our love was not enough, even when we tried so hard.

*Ikotun* village was once a peaceful and beautiful place to live in. It was here I learnt my first dancing steps and learn to sing along with wind when it brush-passes through the leaves or when it passed through the hills.

Being a small village, we believed in marrying ourselves so that we will grow amongst ourselves. We could marry too from the neighboring villages to foster peace within us.

I was growing up too fast and I got scared. Growing too fast was getting married anytime soon. I felt I wasn't ready for it but I was growing into womanhood, and we were born to get married.

Our bodies was structure for productivity. "You are called 'Woman' because you are the man with the womb", my grandmother had said. So, from puberty, we were trained and groomed to become women.

Our punishment for not producing a child every month was a painful bleeding from our abdomen. On our chest, we carried the burden of a child's meal all our lives.

So, at 16, the pressure to marry fell heavily on my shoulders.

I have always fantasied about love. About courtship. About romance. About men. About marriage.

I would go sit by the river bank and day dream about him. Tall. Full-chested. Hairy. Strong. Stubborn. Bold.

I would get lost in thoughts of him. Mentally script how we would meet. I knew it would be love at first sight, so I knew, had the strong conviction, that it was not a man from *Ikotun*, my village.

Love was sweet when it was just being thought about. When it lived only in one's head. That way, you could run away when you lost all your butterflies. No one would hurt you because it your story. But why would love hurt?

I never wanted to imagine that love would hurt because it was love, so I'd sing whenever that thought came across. Grandma had said love would hurt because it

was love. She said if it doesn't hurt so hard, then it is not love. She said it would be better-sweet. Hurt me and make me happy.

So, I stopped thinking about love, and boys, and marriage. I stopped day-dreaming.

Then, things started happening in *Ikotun*. Fathers started complaining about their missing children. Mothers cried with no comfort.

This all started when some men came to our beautiful *Ikotun*. They wore clothings we've never seen before. They even had a foot wear! My father said they came with lots of gifts for our *Offong*.

What made them stood out from the rest of us was their bleached skin, as if they had their bodies burnt or they were lepers!

Father said they came from across the great rivers and how they had journeyed over many full moons to get to our village.

It was amazing to finally know there was a world beyond the great river. It was also an assurance that the heavens had heard my prayers and were bringing my dream man.

But these body-bleached men became our nightmare! They came to steal, to kill and to destroy.

Our *Offong* assembled all the youths one evening, both male and female. "My people, we must protect ourselves. We must stand against these men from the river and guard our land. If we continue living in fear, the tales of people missing in the neighboring villages will soon come to our land. We will raise an army and be prepared for their arrival." Our people screamed "Yes" in approval and we began training ourselves in resistance to them.

We were trained against the bleached men, not against our people. Soon, our fathers and brothers went missing. These bleached men planted the seed of greed into our once peaceful village and everything fell apart. While most of the Chief were greedily adding possessions these bleached men came with, our people went missing. The world was not safe anymore. Everyone lived in fear of the other. Brothers sold brothers, sisters sold sisters. Mothers were weeping and fathers lost their sanity.

I had gone to the village stream early that morning, in the company of others, when I felt someone was watching us. I told the others and we all stood alert. Nothing

happened. We quickly grabbed our water pot and hurriedly walked out of the stream. As we climbed the hills, half walking and running, four strong men surrounded us. They carried the thing we all feared the most, gunpowder. Father said it could kill in seconds. So, they took us without a fight.

We never knew what happens when one was taken away, no one had ever escaped to tell the story. Lots of imaginations went through my head as we were kidnapped and taken away. Then, almost suddenly, I realized I'd never get to marry!

We got to a place in the heart of the forest. It was a big space that was cleared and bamboo sticks were used to build rooms where our brothers and sisters were kept. The tears in my eyes dried up when I saw how bruised and inhumane they were treated.

We were locked into those bamboo rooms that had no roof. I saw most of our brothers and sisters that had gone missing. They told us how we must be in total obedience or we will be severely flogged.

I moved to the far corner of the room and sat on the floor. It was the beginning of the end. My mother would not survive if she hears this. My father's anger would rage like a tempest. His three daughters were gone.

I started humming my favorite song as I sat there crying. It was a song I sang whenever I went to meditate by the river bank. One of the guards asked me to keep silent, I did.

That night, it rained heavily. We had no roof and no covering. We had no place to lay our heads. My sisters and I hugged ourselves to get warm from each other. We couldn't afford more tears, so we just sang. Songs, which was the only thing we had left.

The next afternoon, I was picked among five others to go prepare food. They said they needed us alive for the journey ahead. They were two bleached men in the camp, one was ugly and dreadful, the other kept giving me reasons to look at him. His eyes were blue like the sky on a very fine day. His hair was thick and colored, like his skin. He looked sad, like he wasn't at peace with whatever was going on but he was a bleached man, and bleached people were evil.

We finished cooking and we returned to our bamboo rooms. One of the guard came, looked around the room and picked one of the girls to follow him. She cried and said she wouldn't go, but the guard slapped her and took her away.

She came back hours later, bleeding. She sat silently by the corner and didn't utter a word. Her clothes were half torn and she was almost naked. I drew close to her and sat beside her. One of the older girls said she had just been deflowered. I could imagine the pains added to her. The girl never said anything since then.

I caught him looking at me again while I silently hummed my song. The blue-eyed bleached man. This time, I looked back too. He smiled at me but I couldn't smile back. I had no reason to smile so I just sat there, looking.

That evening, that same guard came, again. He looked around as before and asked me to join him. My sisters cried and tried to stop him but I told them I will be fine.

I followed him into the dark. The moon was covered with the cloudy skies and except the light from the rooms where the bleached men stayed, everywhere was dark.

Amidst the darkness, a figure emerged from the shadows. It was the blue-eyed bleached man. He walked unto me and the guard went back to his position. He held my hands and led me through the bush. Somehow, I was not scared but I felt secured and safe in his hands.

We got to a nearby stream and we sat on a fallen palm tree, sitting opposite each other. We sat, worlds apart, language apart and colors apart. Did it make sense that my heart would beat for this man? A man with the embodiment of evil who orchestrated my captivity and that of my brothers and sisters, found a way into my heart? How could this be?

Few days later, we were all marching to the great ship that would sail us all to the other part of the world. John, the blue-eyed bleached, had told me to escape but I couldn't leave my brothers and sisters behind.

He had taught me the basic of his language and it was amazing that speak some words. He said I was too intelligent and I told him how his eyes amazed me.

The walk to the ship was the most dreaded journey in my life. The people who were too weak to trek were shot by the gunpowder and left to die by the road. We were chained and moved with sickles in our neck. You couldn't afford not keeping the pace.

At the ship, we were packed like sardine in a ship that couldn't carry half of us. John had told the other man how this was dangerous but he wasn't listening.

Life on the ship was an unending nightmare for me and brothers and sisters. But in the abyss, we found strength in each other. It was during this darkest hours that I taught them the song I have been humming to.

As the ship sailed on the treacherous waters, our fears increased. We began to pray. It started raining cat and dog. If this was an answered prayers, it came as a disguise.

A violent storm descended upon us, threatening to consume the vessel. In this ensuing chaos, the captain of the ship ordered that some of us be cast overboard, leaving them to mercy of the raging sea.

John interceded that these lives matter but he was told that there was no other way round. Like unwanted garbage, they were dropped into the sea to fight for their life, which was already taken from them.

The deafening roars of the storm competed with the anguished cries of the terrified captives. Fear and despair gripped us and we clung to the chains that bound us, our cruel instrument of torment now served as a lifeguard in the tempest.

The situation worsened every passing second. The captain had ordered we all be unbound.

The storm grew ferocious. Amid the crashing waves and the relentless tempest, we all fought for our lives. The ship hit a big rock from nowhere and the ship emptied all its occupant into the sea.

In this struggle for life, we decided to extend a lifeline to the very people who had once imprisoned us. We all managed to reach a deserted island and swim to the shore.

The slaves were okay and complete, except those who were thrown overboard and those who were killed during the journey to the ship. The wicked slave master didn't make it. He had drank too much water and had drowned. John and the captain were indeed grateful.

John and the captain resolved to making a boat to travel, and we joined them in making some for us to get back home.

I spent those few days engrossed in the presence of John. One night, sitting under the full moon in the desolate island, we confessed our love to each other. Our love didn't make sense and we knew it. It didn't have a future, so we decided to make

the most of the time we had together. We could now understand each other as I had learned their language, but all the same, there was a language of love; a language of few words, a language we could never express in words.

Under that canopy of stars and the full moon smiling at us, we shared our lives' experiences and what our worlds look like. John shared his adventures and confessed how blind he has been and how I had opened his eyes to the inhumanity of slave trade.

The waves by the sea whispered softly on the shoreline where we sat, as if nature was offering a backdrop to our love story. His eyes glistened as he gazed into mine. Eyes that drown my fears and pains, such as I have never seen, blue as the heavens.

John's hand