ONE.

This was supposed to be a happy day, didn't somebody say 'a girl's wedding day is one of the happiest days of her life?'

Then how am I here, with a bundle of nerves wreaking havoc in my mind and body, why do I feel like this was not supposed to happen, wondering how I found myself here, with people in my family's home, celebrating me, offering their congratulations to my father and mother, telling them how wonderful it is for their daughter to get married young. An old woman, I think a friend of my mother said to her "it is a good thing really, she has set a good example for her sisters. Getting married at 20 is such a beautiful thing" my mother smiled as she was happy, more happy at the prospects that she'll be a grandmother before she celebrates her 40th birthday.

She beamed with joy and pride, I watched her give food to people, talk to the guests, effectively socialize like it was her day and she was the excited bride "she is so efficient" I said, in a way I was glad that things went well.

To my left sat my husband, the man I have come to marry. I started calling him hubby two months prior to this date, maybe that's what prompted him to come see my parents and discuss marriage. When my dad first heard he was coming to see him to introduce himself properly and state his intentions concerning marrying me. My father thought I had become pregnant and immediately launched into asking me embarrassing questions. How funny that was, it's still unbelievable how this marriage of a thing happened so fast.

I thought I and James would date a year extra and possibly live together for a short time so I get to know him. You see our relationship has been online majorly due to his career, he was often traveling and never in a stable environment for long, James played for one of the leading local football clubs of our state.

I have always fancied myself ending up with a doctor, funny I ended up falling in love with a footballer. I didn't know James on a deep level where we could connect. All that mattered was that he loved me the way I loved him. He didn't know me either.

James called me mid November after I just finished the completion of my culinary studies, he said "hey let's get married December, I love you, you love me, I've got what it takes to begin a family and I'll love to begin a family with you now, why wait, you are the woman for me." Boy that sounded romantic and sure. I fell in love again and I said yes, didn't stop there and proceeded to tell all my friends that I am getting married. Boy were we happy.. very happy girls at the prospect of one of us being pampered and prepared for the wedding day.

James came 4 days before the wedding day to see them. I was elated. I went to meet James and showed him the preparations done before he came. As a classy person that he is, I made sure I prepared the best of everything for him and his people, he sent the money and I did the running around so they could be comfortable. It was a beautiful feeling I had all through as I was anticipating our wedding night. Funny how on the wedding day all I wanted to do was run away. I wanted to run on that day, every emotion possible was felt, from regret to exhaustion to asking myself if this really happened, somehow I had the feeling I have been played for a fool and I didn't even realize it.

My wedding night was beautiful, it was my first you see, so I didn't know what to expect but James tried to make it memorable, he took his time kissing, touching and putting his fingers in places I didn't know hands could go. I sighed softly, time to time because he was touching me in places my body loved, then, he came over me as I lay on the bed and after reading books and watching movies I knew this was the part where my hymen would be broken. He was gentle and when he finally got in, he said "oh you were truly a virgin, all these while I thought you lied to me that you were" that statement he uttered spoilt the mood, it grew bigger and bigger in my head that when I remember that time, I remember those words more vividly. He ruined the feelings I had to that moment with the way he said those words with astonishment like he was pleased to have been wrong.

'Why would you think I lied?'

I asked him.

'you know girls lie a lot about such things'

He said.

'Why have you been concerned with girls telling lies about their virginity?'

I asked,

He didn't answer

He cummed, I didn't and he left me, went into the bathroom and cleaned himself up.

I stood up from the sheets and there glaring at me was the evidence that I was no longer virgin. I really wished to be like the girls who didn't bleed, I didn't want that for me but I guess that was not meant to happen that way.

He came, took the bedsheets from the bed and kept it for laundry so when the cleaners of the hotel room come, they'll collect it. I felt self conscious and wished I could take it with me and do the cleaning myself as I was sure they'll know that was not mentrual blood on the bed sheets.

James took clean sheets from one of the shelves in the wardrobe and made the bed.

Morning came, it was time for James to go see my family and finalize the discussions he had with my father. I had not woken up yet, as I was feverish. James felt the rise in my body's temperature, quickly he dressed up and drove me home, luckily for us we met my mom, she made me a tea with some herbs and as I sipped the fever subsided and I began feeling sleepy. I went into the room and slept.

I woke up to see my father staring down at me like he had knowledge that I just had sex for the first time yesterday. The look of disgust on his face scared me as I wondered why he was in my room.

On my elbow I raised myself up and greeted.

' Daddy good afternoon'

' good afternoon, what is wrong with you, your mother said that man returned you sick.'

He said.

'i was just slightly feeling under the weather'

I said.

' under the weather eh, under the weather.'

He repeated.

God bless my mother as immediately she came into the room and jokingly said,

' New wife hope you're feeling good now'

'Yes mom,' I answered.

My dad left the room, there's never a time in my life when I wasn't terrified of the man that I call father. I look up at my mom and wonder how she has done this marriage thing with this man and I can't understand how.

I wondered if this is what is expected of me too. To come in as the base in any acidic situation my children would likely have with the one I choose as their father? I reasoned. No, I said to myself James is better than this, that is why I chose him right, the possibility he'll be a better father to our children than my father was what calmed whatever doubts I had concerning him. I have seen James with children and he was a natural with them. He was empathetic to their needs and listened, paid attention too and was a provider through and through. These qualities gave me assurance that indeed he was a good soul.

James left for his work place two days after. He hoped that I was pregnant even though my menstruation came on the day he was leaving, he believed that soon I'll be with child.

I had things to sort out at school as I was in my third year in the university before the marriage.

I returned to school and everyone had their congratulations to offer. It was beautiful as immediately they expected me to act in a kind of way and I also expected that from myself and wondered what transformation would occur as first, I'm no longer a virgin and second I'm married.

Nothing peculiar happened. I was the same girl, just more frustrated as I expected the bond I had formed with James over the holidays to bloom and I wanted him closeby. I never envisioned I'll get married and begin living apart like we used to when it was a long term relationship. I was sincerely yearning for stability and never was there a time I let the opportunity pass me by telling James that we needed to grow as a family. We needed that bond, to grow and build together.

MY FRIEND JOY

I find Joy's role in my life a vital one, she was my best friend, I loved joy very much, she was what you refer to as a lost soul with potential, and I went right ahead to play savior.

Joy came to my school hostel one morning, she was moved to our wing and immediately I saw her. We connected having had similar backgrounds, we both grew up in the same neighborhood as children so it seemed cool to meet her again, almost like the universe designed it to happen that way.

Joy is a bit taller than I am, she was plump, made long braids that reached the top of her bum, she looked like someone who loves life and lived it to the fullest, from the colorful jumpsuit she wore, her nails shining in pink nail polish, her iPhone was covered in a squirrel-like fur pouch. She was interesting to look at and turned out to be the absolute opposite of me.

Joy was impulsive, Whereas I had to think, write down a plan and evaluate before taking a step.

I had no idea of fun, she loved fun, she made me hang out, go to parties, and live life in the moment. She was very much of a moment person and that fascinated me. So we moved together two opposites like peas in a pod.

It was frustrating because we were opposites down to the little things, where I liked and valued an arranged home, joy would prefer to leave her clothes on the bed.

Use cups and dishes and would rather not clean. She would clean when she was ready, for me I wanted it done immediately when you finished using the plate or cup. I cleaned up that way best.

So that brought friction often between us.

Joy could wake up one morning and decide to visit a stranger she met on the internet for the fun of it.

How much I hated such journeys made by her, because I was always in a constant state of worry for her, it messed with my head, how do you want good for a person and the person doesn't in any way see the good.

Joy traveled one morning, I came back to our room to a sticky note left on my bunk. It read.

"Welcome oh, I know you'll be angry that I traveled without telling you, but I had to. I just wanted to reach first before I call you".

That was all she wrote. In my mind I panicked.

"What If she doesn't reach her destination, what will I tell her mother now." Those were my thoughts.

We recently had a quarrel and she called me overbearing and said I behaved like the typical mother hen with my friends. I should learn to allow people to breathe and she said sometimes I should learn to have fun. Maybe I'll stop being so uptight.

Those words hurt me. So staring at my phone, I was about to dial her number but I remembered she said in her note that she'll call when she reaches. I tossed my phone on my bed and went to the market to get what I needed for the week.

MOTHER

Memories of my mother begin as early as age 5. I remember waking up to severe screams from her. I woke up, the memory though blurry. I remember my father holding a belt in his hands swinging it with force towards someone on the ground.

I looked down and I saw my mom bleeding from her nose and crying. I screamed and he stopped, dropped the belt and came towards me. He carried me up and told me that he and mommy were not doing anything wrong, it is what mommy and daddy do occasionally. I remember telling him I don't like it. My sister was little then. I remember going to her and holding her. I saw both my mom and dad as two monsters, my mom the lesser monster of the two because she seemed humane most times and we saw her more than we saw our dad.

That wasn't the last time it happened. I grew up seeing them fight and spill blood and seeing them lovey dovey the next week.

I felt mom enjoined the love that came with pain and bruises or she was equally a monster for they were times they fought and each one has adequate injuries on their bodies.

We were two, me and my sister for a while, when they fought, while I screamed I barely heard her make a sound, it was like she was oblivious to the happenings of her surroundings.

My mom transferred aggression to me mostly because I always spoke what I thought, anyhow, anywhere and she often tried to curtail that.

In school one day when we had to invite our parents and the teachers would seat us and ask us questions, the parents would ask the teacher questions pertaining our behavior to studies, classwork, teamwork and all that. I brought along with me my mom. She followed me, she was always the only one who showed up when we needed the presence of a parent at school.

On this day, the teacher finished evaluating my studies, told my mom I was doing pretty good in my studies and I'm a good team player just that I played a little bit too much.

I was saying a little prayer in my mind, to let the teacher not say anything more than that because for little reasons I found myself being caned often and I didn't want that.

I don't quite remember how it played out but the teacher was asking me questions about my mom like a test.

She asked me 'is mom harsh or kind' 'soft or aggressive.'

I looked at my mom, she was smiling, her eyes willing me to say, kind and soft but we both knew that was not true.

I said to the teacher. 'harsh and aggressive' in a barely audible voice.

She gave me the chance to repeat what I said again, I felt like she heard me but wanted me to change it. Still I said again, 'harsh and aggressive, aunty my mom is harsh and aggressive.'

She laughed and said to my mom that I didn't know what I was saying and that my mom should not reason it much.

Till date I wondered what happened what brought about that interview and for a long time when I was little I disliked my teacher because when I got home from school that day, I remember I was beaten, a jug was broken on my knees and I bled and I remember my sister coming to hug me where I sat.

I don't know if it's because she saw that talking didn't take me anywhere neither did it make progress in stopping what my parents did. So she rarely spoke and she was always out of trouble. She never spoke back to our mom, never complained and got the best. More often than I could count I heard the words like, why can't you be more like your sister. Why can't you be quiet like her? You talk too much, you talk too much, you talk too much.

It was exhausting for some time but slowly I saw myself like a rebel of sorts and that brought more canes to my buttocks.

FATHER

I feared my father more the day I saw him kill a rat.

We had this big rat disturbing our kitchen, it ate everything in the kitchen, it ate plastic jars also. It ate plastic with ease so everything we kept in plastic jars or containers were not safe at all.

So one day while he was using the kitchen, he saw this rat and was lucky to have caught it because it was very big and had gotten fat.

My father rather than killing the rat and discarding it easily normally.

He proceeded to boil water while he kept the caught rat in a transparent polythene bag, he boiled the hot water in a kettle, the noise from the commotion in the kitchen woke us up and we came to watch him, he took the boiled water from the kettle and poured into the transparent polythene bag, containing the rat and watched us as we watched with fear. The youngest of us ran back to the room crying. I stayed and I watched him swing the rat in the transparent polythene bag happily, he mixed the rat and the hot water together till the rat died and he took it outside, threw the rat out of the bag, I thought it had ended there but he proceeded to smash the rat with his feet and saw all the insides of the rat burst. He laughed like a maniac.

Since that day, if I was terrified of the man who called himself my father, I became twice as terrified as before.

This man made the first criteria I sought for in a man, was a man that would be a great father to my children.

He was the template to everything a father should not be.

The most controlling human I have ever met. I believed he loved us in his own strange way. He is one of the persons I have met and still never understood the workings of their mind.

He made us have an unstable childhood. One day papa would just wake and decide we should go live in a different state entirely and trust mama to follow. She never challenged his ideas, that's how we spend first term at one school, second term at the other and third term in another.

This made me crave so much for stability.

Papa was so fleeting, in his quest for what we can never understand, we suffered with him. Until we started growing and I think mama in a way got tired and wanted to put her roots down.

JAMES.

On my birthday March 2, I received a text message from an unknown number. She introduced herself as Stella. Stella said she has always suspected the man who was in communication with her to have a girlfriend but she wasn't sure, so she made her findings and it led her to me.

'Me?' I typed to her in response and she said yes.

'don't you know this man?' proceeded to send me the picture of the man.

I downloaded it and it was James.

"Is this not his Instagram account?"

I saw it was James' Instagram account.

"I told her it's a lie she should provide proof that James is the one in communication with her."

She sent me screenshots of their chats. It went as far back as September 2018.

James says "I love you" to her and she tells him he's not real and he doesn't really love her.

She said James only loves her for her money. She was a wealthy woman in Germany. She said she saw my comments are constant on James' Instagram account and she followed it and saw my posts with his pictures scattered across my Instagram page. Proceeded to use my contact information to contact me and it turned out to be my WhatsApp number.

I was first embarrassed by all of it then annoyed.

I was a bit happy it was all online but I said didn't we begin online as well. If this woman believed him what could have happened.

Confronting James was the next line of action I could think of. So I messaged him first asking him if he knew this woman.

He said yes, he knew her but she was the one who came to him. He lied not knowing I had proof of the chats between them already.

He quickly went to the woman's inbox and called her malicious names.

She sent the screenshots immediately to me. It was funny and embarrassing. I had to laugh.

I told him to stop. I have every screenshot necessary. He went and blocked her immediately. She told me he has blocked her and left me with a piece of advice she said that he is not worth it and she believes someone like me deserves better than James. I thanked her and our conversation ended there.

I went to James, He then said that I should give him a chance to explain and he'll say the truth.

He said initially he was just flirting but then he saw that she liked him as well and promised him a lot of things so he wanted that. Not for himself but for us as a family.

"What's wrong with our finances James"

I asked.

He said, "nothing my love, nothing"

"Are we poor now James, that you seek to deceive a woman for money?"

I asked.

"Not at all you're not understanding"

He said.

"What am I not understanding?"

I asked, at that point I was livid seeing how useless his reason was, as If he really loved her I was willing to even understand, because I have always been the one to let go if I see the love isn't for me anymore, even if I loved you deeply. I felt we could have worked around it if it was love he felt truly. Then he told the truth and I think that was the truth no matter how shameless it sounded.

I told him to give me time to think about all this.

He apologized each and every day I was not in communication with him. He sent apologies and love notes and gifts and after a week my heart softened towards him and he promised a repeat of that won't happen again.

We continued but I never trusted him fully anymore. I became skeptical of everything he said seeing that our marriage was still like our long distance relationship. I didn't trust him to be faithful to me, but I was faithful because I felt that is how it is supposed to be when you love a person. I hoped with everything in me that if he ever cheated on me, may I never find out and let the ignorance that be, be bliss to me.

JOY

She never called me, I called she never picked up.

Her mother called and I didn't know what to tell her. I told her that once I hear from Joy, I'll let her know. As I don't know exactly where Joy was.

I told my mother and she said she'll pray for Joy to be safe and return quickly back to us.

Sleep was hard, eating was hard, a whole week of not hearing from my best friend what am I to possibly do, I was lost in my thoughts. I cried and told myself that if she survives this I'm going to cut ties with her. I prayed, I wished and prayed more.

One evening,I recall we were outside as most of our hostel mates went to the birthday party of a boy who was from one of the prominent families in the state. It was the most anticipated birthday party of the month and all through the week the girls prepared for it.

I and some other girls stayed back, we took the opportunity to clean and bask in our solitude, we were outside sitting on the rocks in our compound, inhaling the cool evening breeze and allowing the cool evening wind to dance on our skins as most of us wore skimpy clothes. We were in our comfortability enjoying peace.

We saw someone stagger, struggling with the chains on our gate trying to loosen it and come in. We went there as it was already evening. We didn't bother with clothes as the outline of the person looked like a female figure. My heart skipped as immediately I thought it was Joy.

We went closer and saw that it was indeed joy. We were happy, we helped her in. I locked the gates, the other girl took her bags and the rest escorted her into our room. Someone from us had already given her water to drink. We sat around her waiting to hear her story as each of us had questions to ask her. She looked up at me, I was standing by the door side looking at her.

"I'm so sorry winnie"

She said,

"Thank God you're safe."

was all I could say.

"What happened to your phone?"

A girl named Lydia asked.

Joy sighed a sigh that was nearly a groan.

I prepared my mind that the story to this all would be a long one she'll tell after she's had her rest.

The other girls, seeing that she became melancholic unlike her usual bubbly self, proceeded to leave the room for us. They left after wishing her a goodnight rest and telling her how happy we all were to have her back with us, alive and healthy. Some expressed their concerns of worry and she smiled and thanked them. For a moment I felt she did all these on purpose as she enjoyed the attention a little bit too much, looking at her eyes I knew for sure that there was a story and I'll hear every one of it.

Joy rested a little. She said she lost her phone. I gave her my phone to speak to her mom, didn't go into details as to what happened but apologized to her mom and promised never to put anyone on such a scare again. The thing about such promises is that they never last so I thought in my mind.

She slept, after bathing and eating. I still did not say anything. She's alive and breathing I thought so what more do I need, was that not all I prayed for?

I maintained my distance. She noticed it and didn't say anything. After she had gone to sleep I went to sleep as well.

Later we woke up to the noise from the hostel. Apparently bad boys came to the birthday party and scattered everything in pursuit of someone they were looking for and so the girls ran back home.

That chaos woke both I and Joy up and after we heard the reason for the commotion, I locked our room tightly. I turned to go back to my bed and I saw joy awake on her bunk, she was always a deep sleeper so it was unusual to see her awake because of the noise. I told her it's nothing, she should go back to bed.

"Why aren't you asking me any questions?"

She asked.

"When you're ready to talk you'll talk I don't need to persuade you" I said.

" But I like it when you worry and do all that." She said,

"Well you'll not get that any longer, I've totally exhausted that part of me out."

I said.

She didn't say anything, for a short time so I figured that's the end of the conversation and proceeded to go to bed. I climbed into my bed and was about to turn the lights off when I heard her say.

"I was robbed"

I didn't say anything. I just looked at her urging her to continue, say the full story.

She continued.

"I went to see him and in the middle of the night he requested sex, I told him that was not what I came for and he got mad, he tried to force me, I took the remote control on the table beside the bed and broke it on him and it cut him, he was bleeding and he slapped me win, he slapped me. So I got angry and splashed water from the jug on the table on him, he then threw me out of his house in the middle of the night. It was cold, he was supposed to give me money for transportation but he ended up giving me nothing. While outside a man came to help me and he took me to a hotel, and paid for a room there, he also wanted sex but I didn't give in he said I could sleep he'll come back tomorrow and check up on me, so I slept. When I woke up I didn't see my phone and the remaining money I had and wanted to use as my transport fare back. I was stranded. I didn't know anybody's number, only my mom's and I didn't want her to worry so I didn't bother calling her. The next morning I offered to work for the hotel for some days so they. Pay me and I sleep and eat in any room they choose to give me. I spoke with their manager. She was an understanding woman but didn't trust me so she said I could work for a few days and I did work. I did and wanted to complete a week with them so I could get good wages and come back."

"Okay" I said

Why did you then stagger into the gate

"My feets hurt. I didn't see a cab on time so I trekked from a long distance before I reached here. They dropped all passengers from IB at the challenge bus stop. From there I walked till I reached here at stadium road."

"Okay" I said.

" Is that all you're going to say?"

She asked in annoyance

"What more do you want me to say?" I asked in the same annoyed tone she asked me.

"What more do you want me to say?" I'm getting really annoyed now.

" Do you want me to tell you so? Or how I warned you that all these and more could possibly happen from your impulsive lifestyle?"

I said.

She said nothing.

"You had all of us genuinely worried for your well being, from me you your mom, to every girl in this hostel and you had opportunity to make better choices but you come with a story that doesn't add up in anyway expecting an I'm sorry you went through that"

I said angrily, almost close to tears.

She said nothing.

I went to my bed and turned off the lights.

The next few days were spent keeping malice between ourselves. Nobody spoke to each other. I didn't speak, neither did she. We existed in peace like two entities in a room, each maintaining each other's space and boundaries.

JOY

Early morning of the month of April, 2 weeks after the incident with joy, I found her vomiting beside the fence behind our building. What's wrong? I asked her, she said she was feeling feverish and had not been well.

I thought quickly and remembered that I saw my period for the month of March and she didn't always align.

"I think I just have malaria," she said.

She was dizzy. I glanced dubiously at her.

I went out to the part time work I just got at a bakery that day, returned to the hostel with loaves of bread and pieces of cakes cut out before the cake would be designed.

I returned to see joy sleeping. She slept all through the morning till the evening.

She opened her eyes to meet me staring at her, with worry.

"We are going to the hospital, you don't look well at all" I said to her.

"I'm fine Win, I'm just tired"

She said,

I looked at her, since she returned she has not been her usual self. I was scared she didn't say all that it was that she went through and just told a tip of the story and I blew it out of proportion by not making her comfortable to say the rest.

So I went out to the nearest clinic and told the nurse present there about her. She insisted on coming with me back to our hostel.

Before she left I told her to please give me some pregnancy test strips as I'd like to check myself. I have missed my period but I'd like to confirm first.

"It's best to take a blood test"

She said,

I said I know but if I tried the test stripes and it turns out negative I'll do the blood test to be certain. She accepted my explanations and gave me the pregnancy test stripes. I pocketed them and took her with me to go see Joy.

"I don't think it's malaria but we have to take tests to be sure, she's not well but I think it's a slight fever, maybe from something she has eaten or the water she drank, I've given her some medicines, she should come by the clinic tomorrow we'll run some tests to be sure."

The nurse said.

"Okay" I said.

Joy was not happy. I brought a nurse to see her and said "I told you I am fine, what's with you and all these worries."

I brought out the pregnancy test stripes and gave them to her. She understood and immediately fear showed on her face. She was afraid and scared I think she suspected but maybe felt like it would pass soon or if she's oblivious to it, it'll pass and she'll be fine again, I don't know which it was but from her reactions it showed she suspected she might be pregnant.

We used the bathroom, the instructions said she peed in a bowl and dip the end of the pregnancy test stripes in it, if it shows two red stripes she's pregnant. If it comes out with just one red stripes the pregnancy results will be negative.

She peed in a bowl, she dipped the end of the pregnancy test stripes in her urine in her bowl and before I could blink I saw two bright red stripes on the test stick. "Fuck!!!" She screamed and started crying, luckily we were just the ones around at that time and her cries were not heard.

I lifted her off the bathroom floor and brought her to the room. She was sad and crying, saying her life was over. She was hysterical and wept profusely.

I felt so bad for her, her education, studies, dreams and aspirations for a better future not gone but certainly delayed according to her.

She said she couls not combine school with studies and she loves children and won't have an abortion no matter what.

I said nothing, I watched her argue with herself and saw how everything would play out for herself and her kid and her family.

I just stayed comforting,I hugged my friend telling her and also believing that everything would be alright hopefully. I made sure she knew that whatever decisions she made, she had my full support.

Joy was very intelligent, she barely went to class or studied but when she did read she read so well and always she passed her exams and tests with good grades.

She was an exceptionally intelligent girl.

JAMES

Everything from Joy's absence for 7 days, to the events that happened at school to my part time job, I let James know. We spoke at length on numerous things and out of happiness I blurted out that Joy was pregnant.

"That would have been you by now if we were together" he said.

"I'm making plans to buy our home soon, be ready anytime it'll be set."

He said.

I was happy, but also found it weird he didn't discuss the process with me but I knew that was how James was, impulsively telling me things out of the blue. No discussions or previous telling signs just out of the blue I get to hear some things and some I don't hear.

On our wedding day that was when I got to know James was 10 years older than I am. He was 30 years old. His debit card pin was in 1988, when he gave me the card to withdraw some money. I asked what 1988 was for. He said that's my birth year and I hid my disbelief. I sincerely thought James was 26 years old because he didn't look 30, I never asked and he never told me. He definitely knew my age, he knew the age difference between us and I think that made him in some way feel he didn't have to tell me stuff about himself or what he was about. He was not accountable to me in any way, but I was accountable to him and the dynamics of our relationship. I found it weird but I loved him and the peace he brought. Maybe if we live together as a couple it'll help better so I thought. Maybe then we'll have a better understanding of each other's mind.

"That's great"

I said.

"I can't believe we'll finally get to live together. I really can't wait."

I said.

We spoke about his job, the new house, our family, how he wants a son for his first child and he has twins in his family so hopefully I'll give birth to twin boys too. Then he said I should send his warm regards to Joy and tell her he wishes her all the best and she has our total support.

JOY.

We had to move out of our hostel, joy dropped out of school, she could not cope with the pregnancy and studies and the girls in our hostel began to have suspicions concerning her ailment. So we saved up money and decided to rent an apartment for ourselves. I was planning on how she'll birth the baby, we'll need space, she needs her room, she'll need this and that, I was more excited for the baby than Joy. She felt bad almost all the time and refused to tell her family of the pregnancy. So half scared and half hopeful I was that she'll be fine and the baby would be fine also and beautiful and her family would come to love her and her baby. I looked for jobs I could do, I was already shuffling between two jobs to make ends meet for us as income was coming just from me.

We had not yet discussed who the father of her baby was. I felt if need be she'll tell me who he was. Meanwhile I asked if he had any health problems that could be a threat to her and the pregnancy but she was absolutely certain he had no health issues that'll cause harm to her or the baby, nor lead to a death and life situation regarding her life nor the baby's. I said okay.

Living with Joy was hard, she was suicidal and mentally exhausting she cried every day, she was depressed and at a point I didn't know what to do. I registered at the hospital for checkup and appointments, but she refused to go. She gets better today and tomorrow she is in melancholy, crying her eyes out and saying she's a failure. I myself was drained.

I didn't sign up for this, I thought a lot. Sometimes she woke up bleeding and we would go to the hospital, sleep there till she got better. The nurses always had instructions, medicines and types of foods she needed to eat for her and her baby to be healthy. Joy never followed any of these instructions. It was like she had a death wish or she wished to die with her child. Seeing how the situation turned and I saw the little I could do to prevent such a situation from happening. I made contact with some of her family who were present in the vicinity where we lived. On seeing them she was happy and requested that some of them come to live with us in the apartment as when I go to work, she's often bored and tired. That worked, that was the plan.

Joy became comfortable with her people and color returned to her life again. She was hopeful that if some of her family were with her, then her mom wouldn't be too mad, so she came to school and fell pregnant instead of studying. For that was her greatest worry.

I was exhausted mentally and physically from taking care of Joy and after she went to meet her people, I saw no point in the house or staying in Jos anymore so I called my husband James and told him I'd like to come to the house he got for us.

"It's still in progress, some final touches have not been made yet." He said.

"I know I'm okay with it I said"

He agreed and we planned that I move that weekend.

I told Joy, she was very happy for me. It was beautiful to see a new Atmosphere do good for her. She was happier and fresh and had already checked the sex of her baby. We were going to have a baby girl and I wanted her to give me a chance to name the baby. She agreed and said

"for sure babe, for sure, she's your baby too, your God daughter." It warmed my heart with the pure genuineness she said. I was touched and happy, even though I felt guilty, I was running away from her, I wanted a break from our friendship and the time she was happy I could not partake in it for fear that maybe I was the one who brought sadness to her so I wanted to flee and take a break, be at peace for a while. I don't think she knew that I was running away from her and the baby, yet I watched her genuinely wish me well.

TWO

RELOCATION

I reached Lagos around 4:30 Pm from ABK. I carried with me just my clothes and books. As James said all that is necessary is available so I left the remaining things we had in our apartment to Joy.

She followed me to the park that morning and wished me a safe trip. I exhaled once I reached Lagos. I felt like if the trip stopped halfway I might not wish to continue anymore.

When we reached, I called James and told him I was at the park. He delayed for 2 hours by then I was tired and hungry, he did not bring any snacks or drinks for me. He said there was an accident at the junction that involved a tanker and a bus so they had to wait for it to clear up so there was a hold up.

We passed the area where the supposed accident took place it was obvious that there was accident, I saw shattered glasses on the road, two vehicles were on the other side of the road, bringing out steam from the bonnet, the driver of the tanker had blood on his forehead and looked dizzy, the driver of the bus had a cut on his arm, I guess there were waiting for the ambulance to arrive as according to James it took a while to untangle the cars without any explosions happening.

We reached the house, very beautiful but in a secluded area, surrounded with flowers and trees. I said to James "I thought you bought a place not rent."

He did not answer me.

When we got into the house, I could see it was freshly painted and the lights were just fixed.

There was a big building in the compound bigger than the one we were entering. That one was painted in navy blue colors and white. It was beautiful the way the white color danced with the Navy blue color.

Ours was painted in royal purple and cream color, it was beautiful as well. The interior decorations were beautiful but there were no properties in the house so we went into the bedroom. The bedroom had a big bed, bed cabinet,mirror shelves and the curtains were beautiful. I loved the bedroom and I liked that he had beautiful color choices and his taste fits mine, they looked like what I would have picked if it were me.

He came in with the bags I brought and I sat on the bed. He also sat beside me on the bed. That's when James explained, he said the house he needed was not yet finished and he had to get this place for us for the meantime so we stayed. The owner of the place was a general in the army and the big building beside us was theirs.

"So we would be living with our landlords?"

I asked.

He laughed and said

"you, my wife would be living here with them and I'll come during weekends mostly and when we have long breaks at work"

"Wow" I said

"Another semi-trap" I thought

He saw that I didn't accept his explanations as easily as he thought I would. So he proceeded to say it's just for a while in 4-5 months our own house would be done and we'll be there. That I was happy about at least. He showed me pictures of the place that would be ours, spoke about the vicinity, it's proximity to the market, church and had more closeness to city life than this place where we rented to stay momentarily.

He went out and got food, I showered and changed into fresh clothes. I went to the kitchen. The kitchen and bathroom had adequate facilities. The kitchen had everything necessary to cook. Every kitchen equipment was in the kitchen, so aside from the bedroom, the kitchen was the next place that had it's necessary properties, the sitting room remained empty, the guest bedroom was empty as well.

James returned, and I asked him, why were there no properties in the sitting room, dining room and guest room. He said he spent enough money on the building he got and thought this was a second option. He just got it so the furniture would arrive in two months' time as he deposited them but as he was yet to make full payment, he couldn't get them.

"Why do you wait for me to ask before you say anything?" I asked softly because I was sincerely tired.

He said that's the best way he thought men handle things.

I had to tell James what I sing over the months. Now we're partners, we are in this together so share what you think it's best for this family with me. We are a family now, with or without children. We are family. He smiled. He kissed my forehead, kissed my neck, kissed my lips passionately. He took me from the kitchen where we were to the room. First of all I took off my shirt, drew the shorts I wore, took them off me, he was more attentive this time. He kissed my nipples and suckled on them softly, a low moan escaped my lips and I held on to him right, he was gentle and soft. After we were spent, we ate in silence while watching a movie on his laptop. We slept in each other's embrace before morning we made love again. He was to return back to work the next morning, he left 10am, he worked in another state and they had training in the evening.

I checked my flo calendar and I saw that I had my ovulation, yesterday, the day I arrived and we had sex. There and then I hoped that I'll be pregnant, it was funny but I knew how these things worked. I had a diploma in community health sciences before my public health science degree studies, but I also knew things could not be certain.

That day I took time to arrange my bags and I went to the market for some foodstuffs for myself, I spoke to my family, my mom and siblings most especially. After the whole wedding I never spoke with my dad and he never called me. He only knew I was fine and healthy, my mother too only knew as much as I allowed her to. I spoke to my sister at school regularly. We communicated more, she had nothing to say in return but she was always a great listener and always listened while I listened to her also and always offered my solid advice when she needed it.

JOY

After speaking with my family I spoke to Joy, she was doing well, her baby too was well. She was yet to let the family know of her situation but she was hopeful things would turn out well eventually for her. I told of my new environment, of the people in the house, how I am yet to meet with anyone but I hear noises like people are active in the house.

We laughed and said maybe they're your regular "mind your business family."

She said she missed me already and I said I missed her as well, though in actual fact I did miss seeing her but I didn't miss living together with her.

She gave me updates on her recent antenatal meetings and said soon she'll hear I am pregnant too. I laughed, she laughed and I said "I pray so oh"

It was a peaceful call.

After her call I called to check on my husband. He said he was fine and would call me once he's settled, which I knew he would.

I communicated with my husband, my friend, and my family everyday. For a week. After a week, Joy stopped picking her calls, when I messaged she told me she was busy. She stopped responding to messages eventually, even when I saw her online and saw that she left the messages on read.

It was painful and heartbreaking, I was worried. Until I communicated with her sister and she said yes that joy was fine and they spoke today. Seeing that she was fine and that she had her reasons for not wanting to be in communication with me, I let her be. I was just glad she was doing well and was fine.

ENVIRONMENT

I familiarized myself with my environment. I met with the landlady the other day, a bubbly woman, full of energy, she was classy even in her gym wear. She was a full time housewife and derived joy in taking care of her kids and family. There was something peculiar about the house. The woman changed domestic workers every two weeks. The people or persons who worked for two weeks were not seen again, I often saw another set of people after two weeks, new driver, new house assistant, new cook, new gardener. It was weird. There was one who lasted up to two months. He was my friend and favorite of all their domestic staff. His name was Anthony, Anthony was kind and polite.

One evening on my way to church for the Catholic evening mass, I remembered that my period was two days back and it had never missed my date, out of wishful thinking when we closed from church. I went to the pharmacy and got the pregnancy test stripes. I got them, 3. On my way home that evening, I got milk, bread and butter as I felt lazy and could not bring myself to cook.

Sitting on the floor of my bathroom, I had already peed in a bowl, so I sat down with the bowl beside me and I dipped my test strips into the bowl. It took time before I saw the two red stripes. It was very faint but it was there. Showing visible but not as dark as Joy's own.

I was happy, I kept the test stripes and washed my bowl clean and went to bed. Prior to this day I was already anticipating what pregnancy would look like and I joined groups on Facebook, connected with "TTC" trying to conceive women and I could not wait to share my news with them. I also felt this would bring back my friend Joy with this news. I could bet that she would be happy.

JAMES

I was video called James thrice, he didn't pick. I tried the fourth time.

"Hello… hubby, I have good news" I said

"Really? What's up" he didn't seem happy to hear from me.

"I'm pregnant, I took a test today and here's the test strip. It's two big red lines that show I'm pregnant."

"So soon?" He said

" What do you mean by so soon?" I asked.

"I mean it's been two weeks since I last saw you." He said.

"Well, I was ovulating on that day and it happened that we had sex when I was ovulating. It takes two weeks for pregnancy to show on tests, I could take a blood test to be sure, but I know that'll be positive as well." I said.

"To be honest with you I'm not sure that pregnancy belongs to me, I think you came with that pregnancy. So best go tell the father of that pregnancy this news, not me." He said.

I was speechless, I turned off the video call without a word and I cried. This is not how I envisioned it to be. I sincerely felt he'll be happy. He had sex with me on my period when chances of getting pregnant was slim but he was pretty optimistic about it. "Why now what happened, what went wrong.

Why did he talk to me that way?" I asked myself over and over again, and I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning I woke up to six missed calls from James.

I picked on the seventh ring, "Hello my wife" he said.

I didn't respond. "I'm sorry I spoke to you in that manner yesterday, I was overwhelmed. I'm sorry." I said nothing.

"Please don't tell your family about the pregnancy yet" still I said nothing

"Wait till I come, we'll talk things out," he said.

I said nothing. He put off the phone call and I cried some more. "What an embarrassment this is." I thought. "What's going on?" I could not understand what went wrong. This is what we planned now. Why wasn't he happy?

I read books all day.

I told my mom after two weeks that I was pregnant. She said "why aren't you happy it's a good thing"

I told her I was happy but James wasn't happy with it and said I possibly want to pass off another man's child as his own.

She said "it is well"

James called me at night. He apologized again and said it wasn't him talking, it was his friend like I could not distinguish the difference between him nor his friends.

I still did not say anything.

I searched for what to do in Lagos online and offline. I was tired staying in the house and was in search of what to do. I found a vacancy for a customer representative at "Crunchies" , a modern bakery and restaurant. I didn't tell James about it but I started going to work, we communicated less each day and that was fine with me.

PANIC

One morning when I woke up I felt sharp pains around my abdomen, on going to the toilet to pee, blood was already dripping down my legs sitting on the toilet to pee, I saw more blood in the water closet. I started crying. It was about 4 weeks then, by my calculations. I called my husband, he was unavailable. I called my mom, she picked and she said I should lie down for a moment and not force myself to lift nor carry anything. So I took sheets, put them on the bed and laid them there. I was scared that the energy we used to recieve this blessing was bad and hence now I am having a miscarriage. I stayed in one position for a while and the bleeding stopped. Mama said I should visit the nearest hospital and get a doctor to check me tomorrow while she tried to reach my husband.

James called me late that night, they had a game and he was not close to the phone for a long time. He couldn't even chat. He also said I should go to the hospital and asked if I was feeling pain in any way, I said no more pain, I mostly bled and the sharp pain happened once before the bleeding started.

It was draining and I tried to be strong for the next day.

Early hours of that morning, I bathed and dressed, took the stained bedsheets for laundry, used sponge and soap and tried to wash off the blood so only the stains. I did that and so the light stained bedsheets I took them for laundry.

Reported at work told them I had to go to the hospital and it was an emergency. They accepted and said I could take all the time I need and possibly call if I needed any help. Our boss was a kind man. He treated each staff member with respect.

At the hospital, I booked an appointment with the doctor. He came and said "The first thing you have to do is go for a scan." Bring the results back to me. So I waited for the radiologist, while waiting I was asked to drink enough water, I did that. They said it would help my scan results show better. So I took enough water till I felt the urge to pee, then I was asked to enter the scan room. First time I saw one was when I went with Joy to the doctor when she bled during the first trimester of her pregnancy. So I was familiar with the routine, positioned myself as I ought to and waited to feel the wet gel on my belly and the radiographer continued with the rest of his duty, I could not understand most of what he was doing, he just said I had a "threatened miscarriage" and I had a retroverted uterus. And he said something was thick, the walls of my uterus looked thick but the embryo did not attach it self properly and that caused the bleeding as it almost fell off the walls of my uterus. I took the printed out results to the doctor.

The doctor said the same thing, and adviced I don't labour myself, lift any hard object that'll cause another "threatened miscarriage." The doctor recommended fruits like bananas, watermelons, avocados for me in case I don't eat fruits on a regular basis. He said I should begin eating those regularly. He mentioned veggies and proteins and milk. He said I should eat healthy as I was underweight, he said my weight might affect the growth of the baby so I should eat up so my body could prepare. My joy knew no bounds once he affirmed that yes, the baby was fine and would form well once I followed the advice given to me.

I went to work and told our manager that I won't be able to work with them anymore and told them the reason was medical as the doctor said I could not stress myself further if I loved the life I was carrying and also my life.

I took screenshots of the test results and sent them to both James and my mom. James was happy I was fine and my mom was happy the baby was fine. Each shared their joys adequately.

AFTER PANIC

That morning, I woke up feeling miserable. After my visit to the hospital, I settled in, I was mostly at home doing nothing, I slept more and vomited more. The symptoms of my pregnancy came in full force. I vomited severely, not even water could I stomach. It was a horrible time. The room was often dirty as I had little to no strength to clean or even eat.

Some days were better, I woke up, cleaned and ate but before the food would settle to digest I threw it all up again. I hated the smell of my own body, I hated perfumes, soaps, sometimes I showered with only water.

I made a friend. Angela.

She was a domestic worker in the home of our landlady. So she came to me most times to collect my cell phone and make calls to her boyfriend as the phone she used to use was spoilt. She said it fell into a bowl of water while she was washing. She said she took it for repairs but it was damaged beyond repair and had to wait for her salary to be able to buy a new cell phone.

Angela helped me buy food, sometimes she came and helped me to cook and clean. She never asked if I was pregnant because my baby bump was not visible at all. She often thought I was too ill, but she never asked if I had gone to the hospital, she never asked what was the cause. She just stayed with me. Keeping me company, helping out and telling me stories. She often finished her work at the big house before coming to me. She always came when the woman of the house, went out or traveled. Once she hears the sound of her car or hears her car approach she runs back to the big building.

Angela's stay with me was often short and once she leaves I retreat back into my shell, waiting or sleeping.

I tried Joy's number often but she didn't pick it so I decided to send her a message, I messaged her, telling her I was pregnant. She was so happy she called and was screaming her congratulations on the phone, I was happy she was happy for me. I told her of my challenges and she sympathized with me.

She said the reason for her prolonged silence and ghosting was because she felt I was the married one, I needed a child more and she was the single one pregnant with a child, that it made her feel incomplete.

"Have I ever made you feel any type of way?" I asked

"No Win," she said

"But it's just that I could not help but see the difference clearly in my head and I didn't like it. I know now you'll be with your husband, soon you'll have a baby and your family is complete, mine is incomplete, just me and my baby." She said

"There's no complete or incomplete family, family is love, what's with the complete and incomplete family. Am I not family enough for you?" I asked

She didn't answer

"Anyways Win, just forget it eh, just forget it. I am sorry and I promise to keep in touch with you" she said.

"Oh okay then, talk to you later, hope you don't ghost me again." I said.

She laughed.

I spoke with James too daily. He said he would be home the weekend of that week, but I knew his pattern. By now I was already expecting him, Wednesday or Thursday of the week because he told me he'd be home on a Tuesday. I even suspected he might be in town already. Lagos was a big city and he could be in any part of it. I didn't trust his yes to be yes with me neither did I trust his no to be no with me any longer.

JAMES

Thursday morning I had a premonition that he might be home today. I had little strength, I cleaned the house, washed the plates in the kitchen, took out the bed sheets and spread a new one, I mopped the floors clean. Little by little I finished putting the house in order. By 3:00pm he came, my friend Angela came to wake me up, that I should come outside, she had not seen this person before. She needed me to confirm that I knew him before she let him enter the house. It was a policy by the landlady that they be able to identify who is entering her home or they don't grant access to the person. Angela resumed when I was already in the house but she never saw my husband neither did she know how he looked, I never showed her his photos. So I followed her to the gate and once I peeped and saw the person standing there. I confirmed that yes it was my husband. I didn't wait to carry anything he had because I became nauseous and had to go and puke. He came in, the other domestic help helped him bring in the things he brought. He came with some furniture for the house and bought a lot of foodstuffs, he had with him new kitchen equipment also. I sat down watching after they brought in the things he bought. He went out immediately, I went to sleep in the bedroom because I was tired. He returned with lots of perfumes, room freshers, smelly soaps and toiletries. Immediately he sprayed them.

"Please please I can't stand their smells please." I said

He ignored and went ahead spraying them murmuring that the house stinks.

He finished and came back to the room. I took the remaining sprays to the guest room. I told him if he sprayed anything in the bedroom I'll go sleep in the guest room and I was pretty serious about it. Seemed he knew I was serious; he didn't attempt it in the bedroom.

"Look how slim you've become and you say you're pregnant." He said

"I have been unwell and vomiting" I responded.

"Where's the bump, why's your stomach this flat and you said you're three months gone already." He said.

"I don't know where the bump is." I answered, I was exasperated already.

"I thought you'd be happy to see me." He said.

"How would I be happy to see you, when all that has come out of your mouth are negative and unpleasant words." I said

"I am sorry for it all, I never meant to doubt your pregnancy, my friends made that suggestion jokingly and I then allowed doubt to come into my mind." He said

"Why are your friend knowing about our business James, do you tell your friends the sex positions used too?" I asked angrily now.

"Hell, no, why the hell would you say that?" He asked me.

"Why won't I? What's there to trust about you? You said you were coming this weekend to my wife and you arrived here Thursday. Were you hoping to sneak in on me and catch me with a man in your bed? I told you I have been unwell, yet here you are bothered about the smell of the house first!" I said

He stood stupidly looking at me, like I had grown three heads.

"This is not whom I married," he said.

"You were never sure of who you married to start with." I responded

I turned around a bit too fast to get into the bedroom and the last thing I remember seeing was his legs taking a step towards me.

ME

I woke up, I saw James in a chair in front of me, the walls of the room were white. There was a bed like the one I was on at the far end of the room but it was empty.

There was an IV stand beside my bed and it connected to my left hand. My hands went to my stomach, I felt weak and my throat was parched. James woke up. First thing he said was,

"The baby's fine, you fainted".

I could only nod. "What's wrong" I managed to ask,

" The doctor said you're anemic."

He said. I knew what being anemic was, too little hemoglobin or too few red blood cells I thought. He said that I was admitted in the hospital and would be here until I feel better or the doctor sees an improvement in my situation. I nodded, whispered thank you to James. He looked tired and stressed. I went back to sleep again.

When I woke up this time I didn't see him anywhere. I slept again. I went in and out of sleep four times. I opened my eyes for the fourth time to see James beside me. His lips were moving like he was saying something but I could not comprehend what it was. He called for the nurse and she came, she checked me and asked slowly,

"how are you feeling?" I heard her, I said "I'm fine" she told James that it was nothing I was just slowly coming out of unconsciousness, that it happens.

James asked the same question, I responded fine, I asked him where he went to, he said he went to get hot water, clothes, brush and other toiletries I needed. I thanked him. The doctor came during the day and checked me, he checked my eyes, thumb and toes, he checked my heartbeat. He concluded I was much improved and we could be discharged if I wanted this evening, as I was out of danger. My husband finalized everything, I asked him if he called my mom, he said he didn't.

We returned home that evening. James cooked fish soup for me. He got catfish and I don't know how he came to know the steps to preparing it but it tasted good. It was very nice and I realized the furniture had arrived and our house was completely set up. It was beautiful. I thanked James, since the hospital ordeal he had been quiet, not saying much. He moved around the house like a robot doing what was necessary for him and keeping his distance while maintaining politeness. He arranged everything, did everything by himself and I just sat watching. Even when I stood to go help him in the kitchen he refused. He said it was necessary to regain my energy. He said the doctor said I had a severe case of morning sickness, hyperemesis gravidarum, that I was anemic and underweight so I needed more of proteins, so he got milk, fish, eggs, Vegetables, and meats, he stocked the refrigerator up. I saw he panicked a little. So I held his hands. I looked at him and said "I'll be fine, thank you so much." I proceeded to hug him, I hugged James and he cried a little, he said he was terrified, that I was gone. He was lucky because this was their break time, so he'll spend time with me and help me.

*Hyperemesis Gravidarum.*

Never have I heard that term before but I could see what it was doing to me and my body, knew what it, felt it weakening me felt what it was doing through my bones, for every part of me was tired and weak, gut and stomach every part at all felt it, knew it and saw it.

I was often pale, weak and tired. Nothing tasted good. So that was the name, that was the reason for my incessant fatigue and vomiting. Terrible it was, but there was hope the doctor said it'll pass with time. So I felt hope that this all would definitely end in praise, if this was the price to pay for my baby, I would pay gladly I thought.

9 weeks pregnant still, my mouth felt like I chewed metals and bile together, it was a constant Sourness and uneasiness, I was always feeling terrible.

I was unable to eat, unable to do my usual activities. I thank God James was with me then we would be at home all by ourselves. When I vomited he held my hair up, brought water, medications, everything I needed to feel better.

Weakness was the order of my day. At 12 weeks I was becoming worse. Nothing I ate made sense, I concentrated more on liquids, still they too didn't help my case much. I was pathetic.

At 13 weeks James grew tired of me. He started going out more, and would return home late. One day, he returned with a ghastly wound on his right arm. There was a cut on his left palm also. He refused telling me what happened, what it was, he didn't answer any of my questions, just bathed, cooked for himself and went to bed.

With time, it felt like we were just roommates, he cooked when he could, and I did when I could, if it remains for the other we share, if it doesn't they make another. He made sure to often remain, as most of the time I had little to no strength to cook.

James' salary was delayed for a month so the next month he called his manager, telling him that he was a family man, he needed his pay. The man said okay he'll check if there was a mistake somewhere as others had been paid, maybe it was an error. They spoke for a while about football and how it wasn't easy with the underground politics going on in the club. He put down the phone, went to carry the shelve they put outside, he just got it and they off-loaded it, put it in the compound and left, so he wanted to bring it inside the house, it was a tedious task which he couldn't do by himself so he went to look for any of the male domestic staffs present to help him. Immediately his manager called, seeing that I heard what they discussed before, I picked so I'll know the date they'll pay him, so I could relay the info to him. The manager thought he was the one on the phone so skipped formalities and went straight to the talk.

"O boy, coach talk, say na you're so so carry of woman, make them delay your salary oh.. you and woman matter na die wait fess you talk say you don marry now. She no de do you well for bed ahbi. Na you go marry virgin now come wan finish our girls for here because them Sabi do well well, bad guy, omo I don follow am talk Sha him go send your pay tomorrow no vex too much greet that your jew wife for me."

He ended the call there.

So James was actively cheating on me, he told people he married a virgin who could not satisfy him in bed. He talked about our sex life to strangers I don't know. Is this why he refused to rent a place close to his working area?. Women were the reason why. He was here because of pity, or fear. He was afraid something would happen to me and he'll be held responsible hence why he still stayed. I didn't say anything but on the inside I was wondering how long he would continue to try and hurt me.

He came in and saw that my mood was different, went straight to his phone and saw the call that came in.

"Did you pick my call?" He asked.

"Yes, your manager said your pay would come tomorrow." I said

"Is that all?" He asked

"Yes that's all." I answered

"Then why's your face turned up that way?" He asked again

"Why did you marry me James?" I asked.

"Why?"

"Obviously because I love you now, see why are you asking me this stupid question, don't you know if it is some men, seeing you in this disgusting position they'll run?" He said.

" Do you want to run?Do you also want to be far away from me?" I asked.

" No I'm not saying that but I'm saying you should know I stay here watching you vomit, be disgusting, smelly, sick and bony because I love you." He said.

"Indeed hubby, indeed, I see you love me clearly". I said sarcastically.

He turned around and left.

FINDING SOLACE

I attended my antenatal meetings regularly. I never missed any of my appointed dates. The nurses did their regular routines and I had scans, received my vitamins, and other necessary supplements. They said all was well for us for 5-6 months.

From there I went to the chapel. We had a big catholic church before the junction of our home, from hospital, I stayed there all through till evening, reading the Bible, saying novenas, reading any pamphlet I saw, I slept sometimes there, ate there and stayed there till it was time to close the church as the house we lived in never did feel like home. To me It was just a house, I cohabited with James. I returned late one evening, I found James on a video call with a naked woman masturbating. He didn't know I returned. He was caught up in the act and he didn't even sense someone watching him.

"What a disgrace I thought" The only thing I felt for him at that point was pity and disgust. I went to the kitchen, took a big pot and hit the floor. It made a loud noise. He didn't come immediately, he took time composing himself so when he appeared before me, he wore shorts but was flustered. When he returned, I looked at him and didn't answer.

"You'll say you go to church but see how late you're coming back, are you sure it's just church at all because you can't go to church, come back with the holy spirit in you and when someone is talking to you, you won't respond." He said.

"Yeah I went to my boyfriend's house now" I said with apples in my mouth.

"Hear what you're saying," he said.

"Oh please, I have seen you come to that chapel and peep to be sure if I am there on your way out more than once, you and I both know there's nobody I know in this town, in this neighborhood I know no one and have no friends let me be James, don't stress me and don't come close to me." I said.

"I am not violent like your father, you should be grateful for that." He said

"That's not even the topic of discussion, if you were would you have hit me? For saying the truth as it is?, Go fuck yourself like you were doing". I said

"Oh so that's it, ehn the basis of all this nonsense." He said

I said no further and took my pillows and clothes to the guest room and settled there. I stayed there till I heard James leave in the morning, he cooked, I dishes out mine, back to my room, I made reading the Bible my habit. I have searched for bookshops around, didn't see any, even online found none and I was tired of reading books with my phone. It was draining having nothing to do all day till the next till the next.

We had just approached month 6 of my pregnancy and nothing was definite yet, I wanted to be sure of the sex of the baby before I begin shopping. I had missed my last appointment because I was too ill to move and was not in a good headspace with all that had happened and went to the hospital to go get another date. I did that, they rescheduled my appointment for me so I went home waiting.

At home, my James attitude changed drastically, despite the fact we had money with us it felt like all this was my fault, I get that he had feelings of resentment dealing with my constant state of being sick, with the marriage not possibly turning out like he envisioned, even though I barely know what he envisioned. It was overwhelming for me but it wasn't my fault, it wasn't my body's fault either and all I prayed for was for strength to just move through this phase of life as I wasn't even sure of what the future entailed. My prayer was just to be well for the baby and to have my baby well.

My next appointment was on September 26 before then I had begun feeling flutters that later turned to hard kicks, then felt signs of growth and much limb activity. My bump was visible now. I didn't show till month 6 and one morning I woke to see Mrs bumpkins on my belly saying hi. For this month we were 26 weeks gone and I was very much looking forward to a scan during this appointment. The recommended number of scans the hospital gave us who registered for antenatal meetings was 3, but already I had two scans, so I had just one remaining and wanted to use it to request the sex of my baby. I refused earlier but seeing James attitude change towards us, I wanted to be sure of things so I'd know how I'll navigate through.

Sadly that wasn't the case I didn't get any scan that day, just drugs and they said I lacked blood, that I was possibly anaemic again and may have a miscarriage.

"I can't eat and I won't stop vomiting," I said to the nurse.

"No worry, it's because you're a first timer " said the nurse.

"But nurse I am 26 weeks gone now oh I am still vomiting even blood and something like bile sometimes" I said.

" Just find what you like to eat and eat it well please, eat it very well" said the nurse.

" Nurse please this is different, the doctor even said this one is different. I browsed it. He said it is called hyperemesis gravidarum," I said.

"It's just first timer, take your drugs even without food these drugs would supplement" she said.

"Nurse I can't eat food, how is it advisable I keep taking supplements?" I asked.

"Please next person madam take your form to the doctor" said the nurse and that's how I was dismissed from her presence with no suitable answer to my worry.

I reached the doctor's place hoping he would take care to hear me and answer all my questions. I told him how I felt, what was still happening to me, and I answered his questions.

He prescribed some drugs for me and said from my eyes it showed my blood level was low.

"How about my vomiting sir?" I asked.

"Don't worry, it'll soon go because it's your first time," he said.

I felt unheard and it increased my frustrations and I was in a sour mood till I reached home.

"Let this pregnancy end now please, they say be careful what you wish for, I wished for pregnancy now I got it with all it's troubles" I said to myself.

On reaching home I couldn't stop crying, my partner was around then and he tried his best to console me, he bought foods that were healthy and increased the production of blood in the body. Nothing changed, I always ended up vomiting it all out, he was frustrated and distant already. I felt he too was waiting for it to be all over so he made his next decision known to me.

JOY

"Good morning win, Joy has given birth oh since two weeks now, her baby is very fine and the baby daddy came. We've not seen your call since hence why I texted you to ask if Joy told you about her delivery." Said Joy's cousin one morning late September

"Wow, congratulations to her" I typed in response.

I called Joy and she didn't pick up, so I messaged her.

"Congratulations on the birth of your baby girl. I really do wish you all the best as you didn't see me worthy to know about your delivery since two weeks ago. Wow babe after all we've been through together." I sent She replied immediately,

" Wow babe "my baby"? Seeing how things were with you and your family, I didn't want to disturb you at all."

"Did I ever by my words or actions say don't disturb me, what's with you." I wrote.

" Anyways good luck on your life in general, do you, it was nice to be a part of it, even if it was momentarily, thank you."

I wrote.

"Wow babe, thank you"

That was all she said and it sounded weird I had to call my mom and tell her about Joy's behavior, she said I should not bother maybe she had her reasons.

Her reasons, everyone in my family that's j called to explain what's up, were bent on saying she had her reasons, "okay" I said. "No problem at all".

JAMES

James got a new contract with another team upon resumption of their league. He was happy and he got that news on Friday night. James prepared to leave Saturday morning. He said he had to catch his flight early. He didn't talk to me, he didn't say anything, he didn't ask about the baby either. It was almost like he was running away. He was practically running but I didn't want to believe he was running away. He packed in a hurry all through the night. He occasionally called his sister, they spoke at length and laughed. I was jealous, he should have been doing all that with me, why did he even marry me? I wondered, what was the rush if he only wanted to keep living his life the way he lived when he was single.

He left early this morning. He told me he'd call when he reaches Calabar. I said okay. Wishing him a safe trip, after he was gone, I cried, I cried so much for the mistake I had made for this mess I had put myself in. I blamed myself, I blamed Joy for her impulsive advice. Because she was very convinced that I accepted James' proposal, she said husband was scarce now see what I landed as husband. Is this all there is to marriage, is this what was so hyped and craved by my gender or along the line I messed up the instructions from the manual and ended up in this mess.

I blamed my father, if he wasn't so much of a bad father and half husband to my mother, I would have not looked for all that he wasn't in a man and ended up with someone who had other worse parts I didn't know of. I should have focused on the good and not thanking God I got a man who wasn't abusive, I should have found one I had an emotional connection with rather than judge on how well he provides. I still went for one who was as unstable as him.

Lastly I blamed myself for no one had the power to make the ultimate choice but me. I messed up and I needed to know what to do as now my life was turning upside down. I cried and cried myself to sleep. James arrived in time for his training and settled in. He told me when he called, I said okay and wished him all the best. I told him of my appointment the next day. He said he is happy because he knows the sex of the baby would be a boy. That if the baby is a boy, he'll change and be loving and attentive to me. I doubted but a little part of me wished that it was true that I had a male child.

That night I couldn't sleep because the dogs in our compound were barking, the sky was still and dark like the atmosphere in my room. The couch where he usually sat was empty, the master room where he slept had the smells of his perfumes, his shoes all packed, his wardrobe too was empty he carried everything with him and I wondered if it was necessary or seeing how much he spent at home he didn't want to begin getting new wears, sport shoes but even his wrist watches all were gone. The room was clean and arranged, he took some of his bedsheets and left just two on the shelf. The house felt empty.

APPOINTMENT DAY

The next day after his departure was my antenatal appointment. I prepared for it, took food, snacks and two bottles of water for I drank water all the time. I was eager for the appointment to know the sex of the baby so I prepared. I hoped for a boy.

I planned on how I'd deliver news of my baby's sex and status to James. Even though at that point I was just seeing the child as mine only no matter what happens, I was sure there'll be love enough for us two, I felt knowing the sex and maybe if it turns out to be a boy, that would bring us closer together or when the baby's born things would be how there were meant to be. Hopefully it'll be better.

7:34 am I was at the hospital, waiting for the antenatal appointments to begin.

We were 28 weeks pregnant. They said our appointments from henceforth turned to every two weeks.

I came early but met a lot of pregnant women like me waiting as usual they continued their usual chatter of likes and dislikes, bumps growing, shopping, what they eat, how they liked to have sex, if they liked it more now or less now. Some said sex was more enjoyable now that they're pregnant. Some said it was a chore. They congratulated me, for my bump. Two women said they doubted if I was pregnant at all, because aside from looking pale and weak I showed no exterior signs that I was pregnant. The discussions continued about what they could still condone and what they could not take anymore. I felt like a fraud among these women or like an ugly unicorn, such beautiful experiences you could see, hear and feel how happy they were to share their ordeals so far, not even a single happy story did I have to share with them, so I kept mute.How happy they were to become mothers for the first time, third time or even the last time for some of them, there were older than me, more experienced and had things going well for them.I couldn't contribute or say a word. It felt awkward and uncomfortable to be honest.

The women, as if sensing my silent thoughts, shifted their attention to me, they asked questions like where I lived, what my husband did, who did I stay with now that he was away some were worried for me because I looked pale and young, some didn't care and continued their conversation with a friend or two entirely we were about 46 women present. Waiting for our antenatal appointment to begin. I too was relieved to have my bump showing, or showed signs that my baby was growing and I'll reach the end of my pregnancy soon.

The appointments started and we took numbers already prior to our arrival so, while these discussions were going on,we were moving on the line, that's how we moved till it was my turn to speak to the doctor.

"Good morning madam" said the doctor

"Good morning Sir" I said.

"How are you feeling?" asked the doctor.

"I'm still vomiting but not as often as before but I take mostly liquids and I've been experiencing sharp pains in my waist region" I answered.

"When was your last scan?" He asked.

"Since the antenatal appointment I had at month 4 " I answered.

"Oh you're due for another" he said.

He made light conversations asking me what brought me to Lagos, where I worshiped, where I came from, he was such a conversational doctor, different from the previous one I met on the previous appointment. No appointment did I come for. I met the same doctor for a second time.

We spoke for a while, while waiting for him to confirm from the radiologist if it was time for me to go to him. I told him of my experiences so far and how I was currently feeling, my worries and discomforts all of them I told him.

So he wrote out a request that I do a pregnancy scan to know the status, sex and general well being of the baby and come back to him once I was done.

Excited and nervous at the same time. Like a student who knew they performed poorly but waited with hope that it won't be as poor as he thought and actually was waiting to see that they were good and really tried above average, just a good result was what I was hoping for.

While waiting for my turn I remembered back to the day I had my second scan. It was a nice memory. James came with me for that one, I felt loved. The doctor was saying that all these young ladies looked beautiful during pregnancy. when I saw how fine looking I was, I smiled.

He asked why I was doing a scan for a baby that's the size of a palm and showed me the baby's head and size. He said it had a little head just like mine and showed active limb activity, five fingers and five toes. My partner wanted to enter but he wasn't allowed to. That Scan was done 15 weeks into the pregnancy.

It was still 3:00pm and I was still at the hospital. Most of the women present at the hospital finished their appointments and were gone, we were just 3 left. I was to go before them. I entered and was smeared that pap used before the scan on my stomach, cold substance and had to lie down to have my scan done. The radiologist asked me to go outside back and sit and wait, he didn't say anything concerning the results seen from the scam he just conducted on me, just asked me to wait outside. He didn't tell me anything. He finished with the women after me. The radiologist still asked me to wait. It was 4:20 pm. I called James first and he wasn't available, so I called my mom next.

"Mommy I don't know what's happening, oh, I've been in this hospital since morning 7am and everyone's gone except me and the doctor is refusing to tell me anything, he's asking me if I'm alone or I came with someone mommy please speak to him" I said. My mom spoke to the doctor and he explained how it's well that he just wants to confirm something.

"Hello baby girl don't worry, maybe it's twins he's seeing and only wants to be sure" said my mom.

"Amen oh Amen mommy" I said.

The Doctor I saw earlier, came to me and asked that I follow them to the head hospital, where there was a bigger scan room necessary for them to confirm what he needed to confirm. I said okay, hopefully it's good news. He took his car and drove us to their head hospital in the central area, the most equipped hospital in the city.

When we arrived, he told them the situation and we went to the scan room in the hospital. There he did a second scan, he left halfway and called a female senior doctor to come see what he was seeing on the screen. She came and they kept speaking in medical terms I didn't understand but was waiting for them to explain.

I waited for 10 minutes, and the female doctor came to explain to me what was happening.

"You have to terminate this pregnancy" she said

"Your baby is anencephalic, also it seems like they were two, one is gone, the other has no cranium but there's forehead, eyes, nose, mouth and ears too." She said in a as a matter of fact way

"How's it surviving?" I asked.

"It's surviving cause it's in you once you deliver it's another case altogether it's not compatible to real life and would die, it can't survive it'll surely die, and the only way to take it out is via surgery" She said,

"You have to terminate it," said the doctor.

" Terminate as how" I asked.

"You need a surgery done as soon as possible, come to the hospital tomorrow morning so you'll be told the next steps necessary"

That was all she said.

I quickly called my mom to explain what it was. James's number wasn't connecting and neither was he online.

"Hello Mommy they said my baby doesn't have a skull ha mommy the doctor said it'll die." I said to her,

"Holy ghost fire," my mom started praying and telling me not to tear up till I reach home. I shouldn't cry. Confusion became the order of my day.

I reached home all by myself and kept trying my husband's line. He finally picked up, I couldn't string the right words to tell him in the midst of my tears, he asked what's wrong? I narrated what the doctor said to him.

He said I should stop crying, I'll be fine. He asked if my mom should come and take me or I'll go to them. I chose to travel to them instead, that night, there was no light, I managed to pack everything I had, his nonchalant way of talking made me feel everything was over and this is where I have to be strong for myself till I see the end of this all.

My cat, Mary, kept looking at me like she felt sorry for me, she felt the change in the mood of the house, and sat beside me all through.

I called my mom again.

She said "Stop crying just come perhaps they're wrong the medical reports has to be wrong"

I parked all the necessary things I needed to leave and go meet my mom because I needed support and at the moment my partner was not around, never has he been when I needed him the most, I thought.

I took the food stuff and my cat, Mary and gave it to Angela, because she was used to her in a way and I felt she would treat Mary well. She was most considerate. I regretted leaving my cat behind because of her sad eyes, whatever the situation that be, she must have felt pity for me at that moment,I could have carried her with me but all I could think of at that moment was me, my life, my baby,my marriage surely over I thought, I felt this was the end for me. When I thought I had hit rock bottom, but life showed me ways in a million that rock bottom was just the beginning of a deeper fall.

I reached the park for cars and I boarded the available car to Abuja, it wasn't an easy journey, everyone in the vehicle knew I was sick and were supportive of me and encouraging. I met a lovely woman on the bus. Her husband works at a university in Abuja, she was traveling with her daughter to meet her family. Told me her story, she's had 3 miscarriages which they had to excavate her womb. She said excavation was a more painful process than labor, and I didn't want the excavation process to happen to me and prayed to whatever powers that be at that time to continue keeping the child in me alive. The doctor told me it was a girl. That if the baby died in me that'll be risky.

This woman kept me company till she got down from the car when we were at her bus stop.

I reached Abuja late at night and took a taxi home.

Told my family all that happened and we all agreed I rested a few days before we began to visit hospitals in our vicinity. Luckily for me my father traveled, he has a project coming up and for the next 7 months would not be home. I breathed a sigh of relief.

ME.

I rested for three days then we started our hospital visits. The weeks that followed were hectic, and emotionally draining. I told James everything happening every step of the way, along the line I felt he was more relieved than worried. He was happy I was with my family and was tired of me through and through. The first hospital we visited did a scan and said I needed surgery immediately. I told James he said we should go for a second opinion at another hospital. I went there with my mom, the doctor there was harsh, he accused me of trying to terminate the pregnancy and I had a failed abortion, he asked if I was a sickle cell patient, I told him no, that my genotype was AA. I told James everything, I wanted to be as transparent as possible but sooner than I thought He stopped responding to my messages especially when he saw the bill we would pay for the operation.

Every hospital we visited insisted on surgery, my body was still in a shock mode and my mom felt operating on me at that time was not the best option. Just motherly instincts, we knew nothing.

Most hospitals once they saw my scan results refused to give me consultation, they treated my case as strange and bizzare. My case was rejected in their private hospitals.

Some hospitals thought I attempted abortion and it failed so I had no option but to wait, let the child grow. I wondered how I could attempt an abortion on a baby I wanted and also loved despite our situation.

The first hospital we visited, if we've had cases of such in my family before , I answered no to all their questions because they were all strange.

They all kept insisting on surgery, surgery surgery. Surgery involves a huge amount of money if done in a private hospital or a government hospital.

In the government hospital they said you'll get the drugs and necessary things yourself but it can be done at a slightly lesser amount than the private hospitals we had around. We didn't have that amount of money at that time. I prayed like never before hoping for a miracle from heaven. It was like all the superpowers that were kept quiet on me.

I'm a believer but never ever did I imagine or guess that I'll be in such a situation. I prayed and cried day and night.

My mama didn't believe it initially, she had her doubts but when she entered the scan room and saw for herself and heard for herself what it was. She was broken.

My baby still kicked frequently, the limb activity was still high, was doing things a normal baby in the belly would do, I'd speak she'll listen, we bonded, I named her Camillia because she was my rare flower, she could not be touched or held but her beauty was felt and seen through the scans and she was strong. When my thoughts or moods dipped, I received strong kicks and tickles from her like a warning of sorts to be happy like she needed me to keep pushing on.

She was my most trusted companion, a companion I carried in me. We both needed each other to survive. I depended on her kicks to tell me she was strong, active and won't die in me until it's time for labor, because that's what everyone feared, let her not die in me before it was due. We carried on looking for a hospital or a doctor that'll handle my case but we could not find any. Hospitals rejected my case and refused to commence treatment on me. First of all they complained that I was too far gone to carry out inducement of labor and the easy way was surgery perhaps because they stood to gain more from the surgery, 3 standard private hospitals and 1 government hospital, none agreed to take me in as a patient until we had the amount of money requested for surgery.I refused surgery, I dreaded it not out of faith but out of fear. Fear is such an emotion that makes you become a coward in situations where you have no choice but to be strong.

After so much negative opinions from hospitals we resorted to stay home and wait for natural labor to begin and also wait on God.

Risky it was but we felt that I needed to rest, eat to recover all the weight lost, and also let my blood level be on a normal healthy level.

Yes it was risky and a huge leap of faith for us all, blind faith. At that point I zeroed my mind from every communication with James as he stopped responding to my messages. I did my best to be happy, my mom and siblings were everything to me, they were very supportive, tried their best to keep me happy and healthy, they spoke to Camillia, kissed my bump and carried on like neither of us had a possibility of dying. Everybody was close to me, they helped me, spoke to me, cracked jokes, shopped for the baby, bought toys, it was crazy but helpful the way they made sure I never felt lonely or alone.

I couldn't wallow in self-pity, was not allowed to self. I knew I was strong. I had courage, I prayed to God, and kept affirming positive words.

That was the last time I ever set eyes on James.

WILLIAMS.

It was the air, definitely the change of atmosphere, environment and being with people who loved you genuinely. I glowed, I became beautiful and expanded all round. My skin shined, my hair was long, my nails longer than they ever were. During this period, I met Williams, Williams was a lawyer, he spoke so well, he was so supportive, loving and calm. He brought gifts every evening when he came to see me. Williams knew about my situation, it was no longer a story of shame to me, I owned my mistakes and decisions and no longer apportioned blame to anyone. So I told williams and through it all he choose to be a friend. He kept me company after work, he always stayed for an hour or two. We talked about the future, past, we talked about the country, the government, we talked about love sometimes. I knew Williams had feelings that bothered love for me. He wanted more but was willing to wait and see the outcome of my situation. He never spoke about the possibility of Camilla surviving, I feel like he sometimes wished she didn't exist in me. He often spoke about the future and would often refer to just me, he talked like I didn't have a child in me.

One evening he came, he brought fruits for me. I was too tired because my legs started to swell and walking became difficult. I felt heavier than I did at the beginning of the month. December is always a lovely month for me. The month always brings Joy to me, maybe it's because of the festivities, decorations you see everywhere around town, banks, churches, malls, departmental stores etc in preparation for Christmas. Williams came that evening, he saw me looking tired and bloated, he then said, "I can't wait for you to be over this ailment" He saw it as an ailment. I didn't know if it was a misunderstanding on his part or he just liked me and felt that all this was some momentary malaria that would go away if I just took the right medicines and adhered to the doctor's prescription. I smiled, I was not in the mood to keep him company that day. Didn't need companionship myself that evening. So I bade him farewell, and returned back inside to bed because the changes in my body didn't show telling signs that it meant well. I was really tired.

I really love Christmas and as we approached December 25th, I was hopeful for new beginnings, good tidings. The festivities always, always, made me happy.

Worthy to note that I had a happy december with my family, Williams and the Catholic Church I attended conducted Carol night, children Christmas party, bazaar, harvest, games and fun nights. I met Williams at church, so he always came ahead of time to help me prepare for these activities. He said they were important to my mental health, he ensured that I never missed any.

I stopped vomiting, put on reasonable weight and it was beautiful to watch. I started taking pictures and posting on my social media pages as I was no longer 'skin on bones' and wouldn't attract questions like "what's wrong with you?" Any longer.

I ate spicy chicken soup one evening, the third week of December and I vomited twice. The spiciness of the food made me vomit as at that point, breathing was difficult and my heart burns increased all. Due to the presence of my family, Williams and sound affirmations I listened to daily on YouTube I was pretty confident that no matter what I will be, I'll come out alive. I'll survive. I was motivated to forge on.

I made sure I ate to my heart's satisfaction, I enjoyed eating foods, I ate like that would be the last day I'll eat. Sometimes i had to sit and evaluate my chances and choices and come to a realization of what has happened, what it is, what will be and I realized that the only time I'm going to have with Camillia is the now, the time she spent with me in my womb, I loved my baby. I'll forever love her because she was and is my first.

I spoke to her as often as I could, our kicking became incessant. Sang to her a lot, whenever I called her by her name she kicked. It was amazing to me how a baby with no cranium could do these things. I started to believe it's because she was in me, I gave her strength, she gave me strength too. We bonded so well. The choice I made not to terminate her then, I didn't regret it one bit. I was happy to have known her to this time, her most active moment. It was a time I'll forever hold dear and treasure.

JAMES

He contacted me via WhatsApp one morning. He said he traveled for a trip in Egypt. They had a match to play in Egypt , something about CAF qualifications. That he said explained his long absence and inability to respond to my messages. He didn't apologize this time, my major concern was just me, getting through labor alive so all that he said didn't matter nor change the way I already felt about him. It was obvious he saw my pictures on social media and wanted to come check how things were. He wanted to know what happened, how it happened and if I was still carrying the child or if I underwent surgery as said. He really thought I wouldn't survive, so why was he here I thought.

I spoke with Angela and she said my cat, Mary, recently became a mom. Mary had four kittens in a litter and she wanted to ask me if it was okay to name them all or if I'd love to name one. I said she should name one male "igwe" for me, she could name the rest as she pleases. She sent me pictures of them. They were absolutely adorable.

James said he was going for a traditional marriage ceremony of his friend, on the 24th of December though, although he went there to meet with a lady, a friend of mine on facebook, she informed me that she saw James but didn't go in details as to what transpired. I got to know that on another unfortunate day.

Ah I danced sometimes and some days I woke with silly waist pain. I also prayed as much as I could, as often as I could

It made me relate with God for myself. I knew him for who He was to me who He is and not what the preacher said nor what the people say. Just who He is. I came to a realization that I needed supernatural strength to get through as much of what happened I couldn't explain it. I couldn't let myself down and also let the destinies that are entwined with mine down.

December 28 I received my first signs of false labor, it was sharp and painful and I felt wetness between my legs at noon. We were 31 weeks pregnant. My mom said I should lie down that if it's real labor it'll persist if it's not, then it'll be gone when I wake.

When I woke in the evening the pain was gone and I was like, is that all? Thinking if that's all there is I'll be done in as soon as possible then. Funny thinking though because it was much worse.

NEW YEAR

The new year was special to me and my family. It was eventful. I remember Williams bringing a beautifully knitted scarf for me, it's color was gray and pink, it had hand crafted roses at the edge. It was lovely. We celebrated it grand, we spoke to my dad, I didn't know if he was aware of my situation but he didn't mention it from the phone and sounded just as happy as everyone. We wished him success with his assignment and my mom continued her discussions with him. New year was peaceful seeing how wild the previous year was. We went to church and moving around a bit tasking for even, evening strolls because the stomach became heavier, it felt like I carried a gallon of water in front of me was wetness became a constant feeling for me not in full spurts though just a little more than the previous day everyday but no pains.

Life at that moment was peaceful.

A sharp pain woke me up at 3:00am, on the 16th of January. I slept still waiting for the pain to subside. The pains increased with each hour and so I woke my mom up.

"Mammi it's like it's time oh" I said.

She stood up immediately, carried the things we got for the baby. Packed the bags and put hot water for tea in the flask. She did not allow me to bathe, I brushed my teeths, she did hers as well. She went to my sister's room, woke her up and told her we were heading to the hospital. We drove to the hospital we found, it was a missionary hospital, St.Charles hospital, I don't know if it was a specialist hospital but when we were referred they said, the hospital took absolute care with pregnant women and infants, new born babies and toddlers. We reached the hospital that morning, an old nurse was on duty. She took my hospital card and signed it. She directed me to the checking room, there she asked me to lie down, she then put on latex gloves. I was looking at her and she brought her hand close to my vagina, she said she wanted to check my cervix to ascertain if indeed it was labor. She put two fingers in me. It felt so weird and I winced slightly. She withdrew the two fingers and put in four, it was highly uncomfortable. I felt tears in my eyes but did not allow them to drop. I thought it'll be foolish of me to cry even though I was on the verge of letting my tears flow. I held on still. She withdrew her fingers from me and disposed of the gloves after taking them off her hands.

She called my mom to talk to her. She said that this was my first time so they'll refer me with a doctor's note to another missionary hospital, that the doctor there was very much experienced with situations like mine and incase of surgery he and his team would do it effectively. With the note they'll give to us, my matter would be treated with immediate urgency.

Mama received the note from the doctor and also got it stamped where they directed us to go get it stamped. We followed the directions given to us and we found ourselves at the gates of St.Gertrude's hospital.

The hospital had a peaceful aura, Incase I died here I thought, I'll be most glad as it was one of the most beautiful hospitals I've ever seen. From my experience with how I had seen a lot of hospitals over a short period of time and all made me anxious and sad all the time but this hospital felt peaceful, the staff had a friendliness that wasn't forced. It came naturally, like they knew your answers to your worries laid in the corners of the hospital.

We went directly to the chief consultant's office and gave the note given to us to him. He read it and immediately admitted me, and asked me to go to the scan room for a scan. I did and it was so painful. The movement in my belly intensified. It was hard laying down there and watching the radiologist move that thing on my belly. I started crying. I took the results to the doctor, and he directed me to the nurse. She asked me to take off everything I put on and put on the hospital gown given to me. I did that and was naked underneath.

The amniotic fluid came out more often now. Two pills were inserted in my vagina, It was to increase contractions they said. The pains intensified. "You are 4cm dilated" said the nurse. I was still leaking, the scan showed I had excessive amniotic fluid and the baby's head was compressed downwards and all the weight was downwards in anticipation of its birth. They said she weighed 4kg.

The nurse asked me to lie still on my side for some minutes, for a while after she inserted the pills.

I felt sharp pains, it was like the sharp period pains I experienced during my menstruation. I felt it on my waist and my pelvis region but this was much more intense than menstrual pains. It was not funny, nor laughable, but I found myself laughing at the situation with each pain that came I felt I would die. I wanted the baby to come out any moment from then but it didn't.

I labored all through the day, late at night I started vomiting while still in labor, I couldn't sleep, my energy dwindled and my body was getting weak. The nurse on duty for the night checked on me often. She was young like me and was excited to witness a delivery. She said it made her excited and she was sure my daughter would be beautiful. She kept me company, said sorry when necessary and continued to check other wards I had to ask her if I could give me something to rest or sleep a little bit, so I can regain my strength, she said if my contractions stop now it'll not be a good thing and surgery would be the next line of action. At that point I didn't mind surgery if it would make the whole pain stop. I made up my mind that come morning, if surgery was our last resort, no need panicking I'll be fine. If death comes I would be glad at least I tried.

The next morning, my mom went back home to bring hot water. I drank the warm water we brought and so we needed another. She also went home to give updates to my siblings and check on them. She also had to bring food for me. She brought the hot water and made pap for me to take as I was asked not to take anything solid in fear that I might be operated on if labor persists and I didn't know if I got dilated any further, also the amniotic sac was still intact, it didn't break completely. My body was heavy, taking a step to move was a chore.

The doctor came to check up on me and he said if my situation doesn't improve, in the next 2 hours I should be prepared for surgery.

The next day the nurse suggested I begin walking up and down the corridor of the hospital to quicken contraction as already I was on IV so I moved with the IV stand and drip in my left hand. I paced up and down, up and down, up and down for 10 minutes. Suddenly I felt the urge to poop and I told the nurse that I wanted to poop. She said no I should wait. She asked how intense the pooping urge was. "I want to poop now," I said to the nurse.

I started vomiting with force. Blood was now dripping down my legs to the tiles of the bathroom where I was vomiting. She ushered me into the labor room and was checked.

She adjusted the IV stand and injected something into the bag on the stand, she said everything will be well now your contractions have become short paced. The pains were overwhelming at a point I didn't mind going naked, I wanted to bathe, sleep, cry, be free,be light. The nurse took me to the labor room, and I laid down on the bed. She checked me and said I was 7 fingers dilated, she then used her fingers already covered in latex gloves to burst my amniotic fluid and It was a little bit relieving, all the amniotic fluid was drained out from the amniotic sac and she touched the head of the baby. She said, is this it? I said yes yes because I could feel it. I felt my baby at the juncture of my pelvis. I didn't know how but I felt that any moment from now it'll be over. I had three nurses with me and the second went to call the doctor because the quantity of the amniotic fluid was too much so the nurse in charge sent the assistant nurse to go call the doctor.

The doctor came with the assistant nurse who served as support to me and that I think was when Camillia died, upon the draining of the amniotic sac she couldn't survive any more.

The amniotic fluid was what was sustaining the life in her, immediately it was drained she became lifeless, I had to then push a dead baby out, it was a tussle.

I pushed hard, I pushed when the nurses said push, when they said breathe I breathe, push,I pushed again, with time the head surfaced, the head was out of my vagina and part of her shoulders were out too, so the nurse helped me and pulled her out she kept on another bed.

I had a tear while the baby was pulled out of me so I needed to be stitched and I was stitched without any form of anesthesia administered to me, every pain and Pierce of the needle was felt. When the needle came in contact with the skin down there, I almost screamed, but I bit my lips tight, covered my mouth with my hands and groaned instead. Every pierce was felt each and every one brought a fresh pain, as the needle drove through my skin over and over, I counted 4 stitches. I thought any moment now I'd give up but I didn't, the nurse tried and was done with the lower part of my body. I was cleaned and taken to my ward to rest. I saw my baby Camillia, she had blood where her skull or head was supposed to be. She was really big, had big legs,my favorite part of her body I came to know. She was hairy, and had beautiful fingers too. I could not see her face as they already took me out of the labor room. my mom didn't want me to see her face as I was insisting with the nurse.

They didn't oblige and took me to my room as I was dizzy. I entered the delivery room by 9:00am, 11:50am, I was out but it felt like 24 hours passed in that labor room. Like it was such a long time.

I was relieved. I didn't feel heavy anymore, I felt light and at ease. The one feeling I could not understand was the feeling of loss. It finally dawned on me that I just lost my baby, and I didn't get to see the face.

Another IV stand was set up close to my bedside and I was given pain relievers through the drip, other treatments I didn't know, but everything they did they told my mom for she was with me all through. With everything that happened, the injections, the mental exhaustion, I fell into a deep sleep and slept for 24 hours.I was given an injection on the left side of my upper buttocks. The rest of the treatment I received was through IV. Maybe mami got scared because I slept for so long.

She came and whispered my name softly in my ears and I woke up.I woke up feeling hungry and groggy, mammi went to get what I'll eat, she wanted to know what I was craving before she got anything for me. I told her anything soup would do.because I felt exhausted and tired, and didn't want to eat any hospital food or any solid food. The doctor advised me to begin with soups too. As my stomach may be sensitive. After eating, I asked my mom what happened, where was the baby, she didn't answer me immediately, only said I should rest some more. My chances of survival were slim, the baby's chances of surviving were almost non-existent, but still it felt surreal that everything was over. If not for the pains in my body and vagina I would have thought perhaps all these were still a dream.

A baby's cot was beside my bed. It was empty. I looked at it and said had it been my princess who survived she would have been there by now, telling me with her eyes what she thought of our troublesome world. It was empty, tears flowed down from my eyes to my cheeks and I mourned my baby silently. My chest constricted with various emotions, even though I was thankful for being alive. I couldn't help but feel great loss. I lost her, James lost but I had my life. The doctor also confirmed the possibility that they were two because another fetus and placenta was found in the amniotic sac or so. I didn't understand anything he said, could barely grasp the meaning and was just shocked. I mourned my baby. I listened to sad songs, songs that talked about courage and strength.

We left the hospital after two days of my delivery one calm evening. All the needles and drip they stuck to my veins were removed, I was dressed up in fresh clothes, I brushed and looked better than I even did and felt. My baby was buried in the cemetery meant for babies at the hospital. I offered a silent prayer to heaven and thanked them for the angel baby they sent to me and I hoped she was in a better place than she would have been if here on Earth. It was a beautiful and peaceful cemetery.

We arrived home in the evening. The atmosphere seemed tense but we were all grateful for the fact that I survived, how it happened none of us could explain it, how I did not end up going through surgery was a miracle that needed no explanations. How I pushed my baby who died already out I couldn't explain either cause the atmosphere in the delivery room that day was intense, but I was grateful to have had an amazing team of nurses and the doctor working on me, they were focused and treated me with utmost priority. I was so thankful to all the medical team that worked on me that day.

Especially the head nurse, they sympathized with me and wished me the best and speediest recovery, and told me they looked forward to my check up.

I was visited by our friends, family, Williams, clergymen, and few who knew what happened, those who didn't know still sympathized with us and prayed and wished me well. My breast was full of milk that was never sucked. It was swollen and painful. It felt like it'll burst, it was so full, I checked for remedies online. With time it reduced by itself and my breast was back to normal.

ME.

Williams reduced the way he visited, we still spoke but he became distant, I couldn't see him physically. He said he got a new job in Rivers State and he relocated. I wished Williams the best with his choices and hoped that the odds forever would be in his favor for the kindness he showed to me. He still spoke about a relationship with me but he said he was ready to wait till I was ready as he was sure that now I would love to get myself back and think my decisions carefully.

Weeks after the delivery of the baby, I became active. I wanted to quickly move on, and get busy, as I missed the fast pace with which I lived life before. Also the last of my stitches came off so I felt that was the end of it and I didn't need extra rest as almost 11 months of being inactive I wanted my activity back. I also kept busy to avoid stress, stress from myself thinking, 2 weeks after delivery the bleeding I stopped bleeding. It stopped for four days, and started again on a higher note. I bled heavily, my skin started turning gray and lost all it's vibrancy. I changed five times in a day, it continued for 5 days. My ashen face belied any claims of good health.

we had to book an appointment with my gynecologist and the nurse prescribed rest and gave me some hemoglobin tonics, they literally looked like blood. Said if it still persists I'll be on admission because I needed rest and It was so wrong to want to return back to my routine that it wasn't right, either I had a death sentence and wanted to die. We went home, and I was immediately put on bedrest while judiciously taking my drugs.

Before the end of day 5 of taking what was prescribed and resting, the bleeding stopped. Still I was advised to rest and not begin any activity for two months.

Angela called me one day and she said that my cat Mary got ill after she gave birth and was sick for a month and died. I cried, I asked how the kittens were doing, she said they were all fine. Asked about my health I told her the truth. That I was actually pregnant and I lost my baby. She was very empathetic, she said another would come. That the miracle baby would come. Even though I was sure that I was not mentally or physically ready for any baby now, I didn't say that to her. I listened to her talk and was happy to hear that Mary's kittens were sound and healthy. I thanked Angela so much and we promised to keep in touch.

JAMES

James started calling me since he heard from my mom that I had given birth, I didn't know what he wanted to talk about. I wasn't ready to talk about all the mess ups that happened between us yet. I wasn't ready to speak to him yet. He messaged me online and said I should send him the pictures I took of the baby. "Wtf James really?" I said. He didn't respond. He never came to see me, his family didn't care either, God knows what he told them. I didn't care all I wanted was my peace and stability, it may seem like a boring wish at first but when you've gone through the kind of chaos I went through. I think you appreciate peace a little more and walk far away from every semblance to chaos and stress.

Outside of your comfort zone you surely meet with a lot of uncertainties that require you to grow, and the only way through them is growth. I just had to believe that God was out there or the universe itself was golden and mysterious because with God or the universe as your safety net even when you fall deep, crashing into the waters you don't sink, you come back right up, because he pulls you up, you take a gulp of fresh air and forge ahead towards your finish line. With things like that, rock bottom was rock bottom and not the beginning of another deeper bottom. You have faith that definitely one day you'll see the surface level of it all.

THREE

ME.

School was my next focus, I transfered to study it online, so I could find work and help myself.

Papa was to return in March but before then covid-19 happened and the whole plans for the year were put on hold. Papa was on lockdown in South Africa. It was frustrating. I felt like I came out of another lockdown to enter another. Staying at home was depressing, my anxiety issues skyrocketed. I panicked often, was nervous always. Even going out to buy anything was a chore. Coming out to see the streets quiet, the world quiet, reading the news daily and seeing the numbers in death from covid-19 did me no good. I feared people for no reason. I had a deep fear for people. I was always in my room reading a book. I read lots of books.

I wrote on my blog. Writing became the only therapy I could afford because hospitals were not attending to mental health cases at the point. Mama always stayed beside me and made sure I had all I needed from snacks to food, to drinks. She was just hanging by the thread that I should not proceed from the point I was into a deeper zone. So she made sure I was always by her side or she was by my side. I could not tell if it was depression coupled with anxiety or I was still processing all that happened. I was a mess that was for sure. I looked pale and sick most of the time and my eyes were empty.

Mama blamed herself for the part she played in me ending up with James.

James was introduced to us by a family friend. Mama met him first and judged him to be a fine man. I saw James later on and he was a very handsome man, he was tall, dark and had good features from his eyes to his lips. His dress sense was impeccable. I had issues when I heard he was a footballer. I felt that his career would influence his life and James would possibly be irresponsible. He heard all of my misgivings and went ahead to rebrand himself. He talked the talk and did the do. During the times we dated though long distance he was ever attentive, he picked the call whenever I called. He made time for us to have online dates, I dressed and while on video call we went to restaurants and shared the view with each other. What I ordered, he ordered as well, sometimes what he ordered I ordered as well. We did this once a week. We spoke about our dreams and aspirations and I felt that we would marry in two years time. When he brought his proposal to get married that year, though it was not easy to say yes to him, it was totally difficult saying no. I knew we would get married but that soon was the problem.

Then everyone surrounding me at that point was positive about the marriage. It was all "go for it babe" I heard. "Go get married." "You'll make a fine family". All I knew came from a well meaning place, nobody envisioned that I and James would end that way. My background is a humble one. We would have been better than we were but choices made on our parents part kept us stunted away from growth.

WILLIAMS

Williams returned and he came home to see me, he saw the sorry mess I was, he wasn't happy about it. He invited mama to the wedding of his sister. My mama could not go so she thought it was a n opportunity for me to go out and try a little to overcome my fear of people. She knew the process would be hard, but the wedding was a small wedding, with about 50 guests seeing it was held during lockdown. So she knew the crowd won't be much and people won't be clustered together as everyone would adhere to the covid-19 rules, they would be with nose masks and activities would be kept minimal.

'Win you'll follow Williams to the wedding right, I can't go.' She said

'Yes mama I'll go with him'. I said simply.

The wedding party was very elegant, it was a garden party. The garden was beautifully decorated, an elevation was set in the middle, the chairs were arranged I'm a circular motion so everyone saw the stage meant for the bride and groom, the tables were decorated with a sea of plastic baby pink and gray roses. The chairs were clothed in creamy satin and pink bows, the tables had gold looking cutleries with drinks and plates of small chops. It was obvious this was an elite class wedding.

Williams knew almost everyone at the wedding. He went from table to table, shaking hands, hugging friends, patting shoulders. He introduced Me as his friend politely, and his friends doubted and hailed him saying he was playing with what kind of friend we were. They spoke like he just brought a new item meant to be scrutinized to them. ‘Willy boy, our man!' they fondly called him.

'You have good eyes,’ the man said. The women, dressed in embroidered stiff brocades and dresses, passed cursory stares at the dress I wore, I wore a silky Orange dress that flowed all the way to the floor, it gave off another color when I turned, with a cut-out that left my back exposed all the way to my waist no wonder everyone of them looked at me like some exotic bird brought to satisfy their curiosity. One of them – the one wearing rows of pearls that lay thick on her fat, sweaty neck – pursed her lips and said, ‘My dear, your gown is beautiful! Is it Italian or Turkey?'

‘It is Turkey,’ I said.

Williams held my hand and did not let go. He led us to our table, where two other couples sat, he pulled my chair close, keeping his hand slung temporarily over my shoulder. He smiled at me and whispered something. I couldn't hear him above the dissonance around us, but I thought about how happy he seemed to have me here with him. Williams wasn't a facially fine man, but he was well built and moved with a sureness of the man he thought he was. I watched how his eyes brightened and his lips took shape when he smiled at me.

The women talked about their trips to Canada and Paris and how they would be traveling abroad to have their next shopping spree. Williams talked with the men, and occasionally he came to ask if I was having fun.

They wasted no time at the wedding. When it was time for the money-spraying dance, the MC asked that whatever notes anyone wanted to spray be put into the basket going round as the couples danced together while everyone maintained their positions on their seats to avoid people coming together. Williams returned to sit beside me. He spoke in soft tunes telling me the story of the couples, how and where they met. He said the couples met In Nigeria during the holidays, just like we met in December. I saw the link he was trying to create and I smiled.

At the stage while the new couple danced together, a beautiful pink basket passed round, I thought I saw someone write a check in many zeros for the couple. Williams brought out a wrapped stack of notes, tore the wrapper off the stack of naira notes and put half of it in the basket and passed it to the next table. The guest cheered.

It was time to congratulate the couples. I and Williams went to them, he hugged the groom, I smiled at the couples and said congratulations to them.

We left the garden, the women were watching obviously wondering who was this girl with Williams, their gazes flickering from my head to my dress,then to the shoes I wore. It had been such a long time I attended such a lavish ceremony as this with a man, I didn't realize how much I needed this until it was over and I wanted it to continue, i clung tight to Williams’s arm as we left the garden, and for a moment, i wished the wedding party took longer time, it had been a long time I felt pleased to be in the midst of people. Back in the car, Williams’s eyes shone. ‘I am so happy you decided to come with me. You saw how everyone was looking at you. I brought the most beautiful woman with me. I am so happy.’ He said.

He sang a Yoruba song that came on the radio, I sat silently enjoying him singing at the top of his voice. We drove, with him singing out loud with Joy.

The song was cut off by the news and Williams said, 'you remember how that man was trying to hold your hands when I went to get our souvenirs?'

'Nope,I barely remember the faces of the people I met today. I only remember the couples vividly. My attention was on them.' I said.

'That's what I like about you, people don't excite you, men's attention don't excite you and it's good that it's only my attention you'll be used to.'

I stared ahead lost in my thoughts, I was aware of how deliberate Williams grew close to my family, the ease with which he came and went. How he interacted with the family and with me. It was beautiful. I realized I will forever value this friendship we had.

‘You are not here with me,’ Williams said, breaking into my thoughts. ‘Are you tired?’

'No no, I'm not. I was just thinking about how beautiful the whole wedding was, how organized and fast it was.'

'yes you'll like that too ahbi'

'Yes, it'll be nice,' I said.

But then, I remembered, If I ever needed another wedding I had a divorce to process and that would mean contacting James once again.

'Let’s go for a stroll.’ Williams said, breaking me out of my thoughts again. 'okay'.

It was early evening and He packed the car at the entrance of the park he brought us. He kicked off his shoes and I did the same and bunched the hem of my dress in my hands so I don't end up with dry sticks and grasses attached to the hem of the dress. We walked in silence, the birds chirping past us, the wooden stalls in the park several feet away, I dragged dirt with my feet . Young boys on horseback rode past us. Little children dashed around playing at the mouth of the water fountain, I watched them scoop water to pour on the sand in front of the water fountain.

Before I left Nigeria, this park was so dry and people rarely came here. It was a den of thieves and kidnappers, I'm very glad the government has decided to renovate it and make it a beautiful place to visit and inhale fresh air,’ Williams said.

'I'm glad too, at least now we can enjoy this calm place in peace and people can bring their families as well to relax and breathe' I said

Williams turned suddenly He said. 'Win, you've been through so much, you're a strong woman and I love you truly, I'd like for us to make it official.'

I told him I still had a divorce to process and going into a full relationship with him might not be the best thing for us now.

He persisted and said even if it's low-key he would love it very much.

``Okay,'' I said.

He wrapped his arms around me, swayed. ‘Should we tell your mom and siblings that we are low-key dating now once we get back?,’ he asked. I didn't respond, I had nothing to say. When he began to break the hug, I held him back. For a long time, I just held him, for comfort and because it felt so good to be hugged.

The following day, a Sunday, my sister came and shook me awake and pointed at the bloodstain on the bed. I overslept. There was a terrible ache in my lower abdomen. I thought they said that once you have birth your period didn't hurt as much as they did before. Whoever said that lied because the pains I felt we're almost similar to the labor pains I had on the first day.I held my stomach tight as I got off the bed. My sister removed the bedsheet and rolled it up taking it for laundry I guess.

‘You still have cramps, I thought they said when you give birth it'll stop,’ she said.

‘i don't know oh ehn, seeing as I didn't have a normal pregnancy what more can I say, it feels worse this time even.’

sorry oh, go bathe. I will bring paracetamol for you.’

In the bathroom, I washed myself and massaged my stomach with warm water but that didn't bring any relief to me. When I returned to the room, my sister had already brought a cup of water and a packet of paracetamol was sitting on the table waiting for me.

I took two tablets when Williams drove in. He wore a white native shirt that was starched and ironed into fine lines, gold embroidery surrounding the neckline and the cuffs. He looked like royalty and came close to looking handsome but his bald head was still prominently sitting on his head. His eyes were so small and that gave his overall funny look, but the way he carried himself really defined him and gave him a general nice presentation. I watched him as he approached the door of our home from my room's window. My face was so close that I could smell the layer of dust coating the net on the window.

I was still lying in my bed, when Williams looked in.

‘Babygirl,’ he said. He had already greeted my mama, spoke to her and answered her questions.

I opened her eyes and sat up. ‘Good morning Williams, what's up now.’ I said

He came in and sat beside me. The collar of his shirt was left unbuttoned, It fitted him, his neck looked very fine. ‘I want to take you to meet my good friend who is visiting Abuja from the north for the first time,’ he said. ‘I told him about you and he would be very pleased to meet you.’

‘Please I can’t go out today,’ I began. ‘My period has started and it's so painful, wallahi I can't even walk properly.’

His brows crumpled, his face folding in. ‘I thought that when someone gives birth the thing eases now.' the first time he was acknowledging the fact that I gave birth so out of irritation I said.

``Oh so now you know I gave birth ahbi, I thought it was an ailment now.'' He said nothing, just looking at me.

My mama came to the room and he said he would check back later in the evening to see if I was better. I nodded and he left.

Williams came in the evening. When I came outside to meet them, Williams was speaking with my mama. He looked grave. And My mama was holding his hands, speaking in low, assuring tones. I came out to meet them, I made my presence known and the discussion they were having stopped. I knew Williams was complaining about my attitude to him that morning because when my mama came into my room, she simply said.

‘You know this young man likes you and would possibly want to marry you, look at all that has happened with you, I can even say my marriage with your father was better than that thing you went to do and call it marriage. Child you didn't bring out of it, love the man couldn't give you, common respect he didn't give you, he totally abandoned you with me. Imagine you didn't have any family or a caring mother like me. What would you have done? Is that not seeing death when you're alive already ehn, better mind how you talk to him, it's not me they'll say my first daughter has become a failure in marriage.’ And she left the room, her slippers making angry slap-slap sounds under her feet.

I dressed as I felt better than I had in the morning, I wore a black dress with slits by the right side of it. Gray sandals, I was really not in the mood but to avoid any further altercation with my mama I went out with Williams.

For a long time as they drove out of the estate, Tobe did not speak, did not look in her direction. His jaw was grinding, his back was straight like cardboard. She should be angry with him for being so insensitive and callous, but being as naïve as she was, she cared more about his feelings. She wondered why something as simple as her menstrual cramps would make him mad.

We were nearing the Apo area when he pulled the car over at the side of the road and turned to me. ' I am sorry for my callous comments on your period pains but your comment back made it seem like you had an issue with me previously when you mentioned I always referred to your situation as ailment what did you mean by that then?’ he asked, but before I could speak, he was wagging his finger at me, 'Its not like I can force you to do anything you don't want to do, you said yes to me and gave me go ahead for us to date. I already told your mom we're dating in case you haven't told her yet. don’t let it look like I am forcing you into a relationship you don’t want. Please, if you feel this thing we are doing is not from your heart, let me know on time please. Do you hear me?’

I could only nod because I have never seen this side of Williams before. I nodded and he proceeded with the journey.

He did not look in my direction again, neither did he speak until we pulled up in front of a big building in the Gwarinpa area, then he killed the engine and sat staring out of the windscreen, still holding the wheel. I held my breath, while looking at him, but I didn't move, I sat still waiting for his next move, watching if he would explode into more rage. A long moment passed before he turned and wrapped his arms around me and sighed

‘Let's not have any arguments again please, I really hate it, please?’

I sighed also, I exhaled.

He broke the hug, held my face in his hands. ‘Are you okay now?’ I asked.

His eyes stung with unshed tears, but He said yes, that he was fine. The way he looked at me, his eyes mellowed with remorse, his lips thinned out in sad lines and I felt bad at what I had said to him that morning.

We entered the building, it turned out to be the building of one of his friends, ‘ finally it seems like the lovebirds have arrived, look at them lovebirds,’ said Ali. He looked sharp and smart, there was something about Ali that made me feel at home already.

The next man was Nedu, Nedu stood up to offer me a hug. The third man, Cyprian, was striking in a way that was disconcerting: cold eyes hidden behind Dark green, bold-framed glasses, muscles rippling underneath his black shirt, stretching from shoulder to shoulder. He was a head taller than myself, Cyprian was taller than Tobe and his other friends. My first reaction when Cyprian reached out for a hug was to relax against him. This startled me, I became embarrassed. I stood stiffly against him when he enfolded me in a big hug and broke away quickly after a brief touch of our bodies. I had seen Beautiful men but there was something unique about Cyprian that magneted me.

‘Abuja sun has yet to give you a proper welcome,’ Williams said, hugging Cyprian. I figured Cyprian was his friend from the north, at first I thought it was Ali from his name. How a Cyprian lived in the north all his life. It was obvious from his body and everything about him that he was not a northerner by blood, his voice drowsy with admiration and joy. ‘It is so good to see you again, my brother.’

‘It is so good to see you too,’ Cyprian said. ‘Your girlfriend is very beautiful, oh.’

I could tell that the comment affected Williams positively, he was happy and swelled with pride, his eyes crinkled at the corners.

He said 'Yes she's very beautiful,' while looking at me.

Ali said 'abeg oh let nobody's pants come and tear here because of love oh, we still be children' the rest laughed.

'See this one wey disvirgin from him mama belle himself follow the talk' said Nedu and everybody laughed, myself included. Williams' friends were lively people. They discussed at length about the north, they spoke of gombe, bauchi and Jos. I knew of the places they talked about but I was quiet listening. I had gone to each of the respective States for admission, when I was out of secondary school, I wasn't given admission to their universities because they predominantly picked the core northerners first. They considered them before considering us for other states. But this was not a time to talk about my failure in gaining admission. So I kept mute.

'This your girlfriend is a quiet babe oh,’ Cyprian said later. ‘Since she sat she has just been watching.’

‘She doesn't talk much, especially in places where she's uncomfortable'.

'So you mean to say she's uncomfortable?' asked Cyprian

'No.. she has anxiety issues' Williams said and immediately he said this I knew he regretted it. I had told him before my mental issues were mine to talk about and with him just throwing it out there in the manner he said it irked me a little.

His friends now turned their eyes looking at me like I was a strange alien. It was awkward for a minute or two before Nedu tried to crack a joke. ``Anxiety issues or not Biko eat fish you hear' I smiled at his poor excuse for a joke and dug into the fish they brought and started eating.

I smiled because; it was the only thing I could do. I glanced at Williams and then at Cyprian, who was watching me steadily, curiosity wrinkling his brow. ‘Did you tell me where we met? We met in kaduna naibawa’

‘Kaduna is not so far from Abuja,’ I said.

``We were both in the same seminary school at that time but we never knew each other until the incident at naibawa happened’ He gestured at Williams saying. ‘He was so thin and rough, he was suffering from eating all the silly food the seminary gave us. Obviously People like me we're law breakers from time's inception and smuggled in a good amount of contraband foods. We became friends after that incident.’

Williams laughed. I looked at him. We never had this discussion before and. I realized how little I knew about William's childhood, never knew he was in the seminary, that explained his love for the Catholic Church. I tried to imagine Williams as a young boy malnourished and skinny, but I could not.

‘His family was against his becoming a priest from onset but he refused and said priesthood was his calling,’ Williams said.

‘They always sneaked and came to our field to play football with us,’ Ali chirped.

‘That’s when we weren’t dodging the punishments given to us by those wicked old priests,’ Cyprian said.

They spoke for a while and teased themselves silly about their pasts. I learnt more about Williams than I ever did in that sitting.

The atmosphere had an effect on it. It was chilly and calm with them reminiscing about their pasts, I settled in beside Williams I slung my hands around his waist, nervously tightening my arms around him. He was surprised that, for a moment, he stopped talking, he stopped to look down at me wondering if everything was okay, I nodded, I got that he was surprised. I had never initiated an embrace before, and now maybe because of the comfortability of the atmosphere I shocked myself. But then before I could pull out he encircled me with both arms, pressing my head against the soft of his chest. When he spoke again, his voice lifted, his eyes were bright with laughter.

That night, after he dropped me off, my mama came into my bedroom. ‘Williams is really helping you oh He really likes you, he'll treat you well,’ she said.

Williams had to travel for work, he was selected amongst his colleagues, to go with other co-workers of the company for a deal, he insisted I see him off at the airport.

So I followed Williams to the airport that afternoon, when the sun had come out, angry and blazing. Thankful for the shades I wore, else my eyes would have been burned dry. Even the soles of the shoe I wore burned from walking the short distance I walked from the parking space to the airport . Williams got his ticket and we stood together for a while talking, until his departure time arrived, it was time for Williams to leave. We hugged for a long time. 'Stay well baby girl' he said.

‘Keep well,’ I said, hugging him still. ‘I will see you soon.’ I said.

Williams called me every day to tell me about how things were going with him, he was so accountable. It was a novel experience for me, he asked how I was, he explained his role he had to play for the company to be able to get the deal sealed. He also told me about the stress involved. He never sounded worried even though on his day I could clearly hear the strain in his voice; he had executed every one of the company's assignments. If anything, he deserved a double promotion. I was hopeful that he would be given the much needed promotion for executing his assignment perfectly well. I was happy for him.

FINAL PACKING

The lockdown eased a bit and people started moving around. Interstate travels began, intrastate travels became easier. One morning I received a call from the landlady of the house in Lagos, she said our rent had expired and neither my husband nor I was making an effort to take our property out of her house nor renew the rent. Last I heard about James he was out of the country, he got a club in Morocco and was playing for them now. He traveled once the lockdown eased so I heard. So it was left to me to go take our property out of the house.

'I'm sorry ma'am my husband was trapped in Morocco because of the lockdown but I would make time and inform you when I am coming so I am given permission to come and take our stuff out of your house.'

I said.

I think she liked the way I spoke so she softened towards me a bit.

'Okay, I understand this lockdown altered a lot of plans, I'll be looking forward to hearing from you soon concerning your coming. Warm regards to you and your family.' she said.

I thanked her and the call was over. I had to go tell mom about this. Maybe there was a way we could make everything easy. She always had a solution to these kinds of problems. As an expert in moving properties I was sure she would be knowledgeable about this and know how well to make it easy for me.

BUSAYO

My papa returned and was livid, he vowed that he would kill James. He quarreled with my mama, he said her greed for an early grandchild almost sent me to the grave. That he never liked James but if he talked it would have been said that he was controlling our lives. He called me a fool for getting pregnant. The days that continued were hell for me. I always felt uneasy living in the same house with him.

My friend Busayo, got a new job outside of Abuja and she had left her whole flat untouched because the company had accomodation for her. She contacted me.

'babe would you love to stay in my house for a while, while you look for yours.'

'okay' I said not really sure if I'll take her offer but I promised her I'll go look at the house so she would not worry unnecessarily.

I arrived at her estate right after she left, she brought her keys to me that day. I was the only one at home that day one sunny afternoon in late November. The street was quiet. I saw Soldiers pass toting their long guns. It was a Wednesday, and it was as if everyone had packed their chaos and left. This strange quiet, grave orderliness was like something happened, but before I could ask Busayo what happened she left hurriedly that day.

Busayo's gateman, a young dark-skinned boy who looked as if he should be in school, threw open the gates for me, and then he rushed over to greet me as I stepped in. ‘Aunty! welcome o,’ he said. His forehead was wide and hard. His head, I thought, had the shape of a cashew nut, it took up half of his face.

‘Ehen, Francis, how are you?’ I asked him.

Francis stood and grinned again. ‘I dey fine, Aunty, Madam Busayo tell me say you go come stay for the house now wey she no de!’ He said.

I have been to this house often but the expansiveness of the house always took my breath away each time, the front yard was filled and very wide. It was beautiful, the flower beds with blooming ixora beauties.

I opened the door. Trapped thick air rushed out, carrying the smell of dust and paint. Everything was covered in a film of dust – the dining table, Busayo left the windows open, it was obvious she was in a hurry to leave as everything was left in a disarray, the shelves, the small tables, the Wall clock, her decorative shells and cowries and the flower vase. The same brown film covered the floor of the passage that connected the rooms, the kitchen, the bathroom. I stood in the sitting room, observing, I have always loved the way busayo's house mirrored her eccentric lifestyle, it had colors left and right, it had unique art pieces and it was peaceful, immediately I got an idea to go carry the remaining furnitures in Lagos and bring them here because this house was spacious than ours and taking the things I shared with James to my family home, I was positive my papa would destroy them all.

'We get work to do oh' I said to Francis

I brought my sister to help me clean, my mama too followed us to the house. We cleaned and arranged the place. We took out spoiled foodstuffs, Francis helped us dispose of the wastes. The things Busayo needed were kept in a room and locked. She said she would request them soon, once she settled in Lagos properly she would call me and possibly send money for it. It was all settled. My mama said it would be risky living alone, so my sister should come live with me because the house was a bit closer to where she attended lessons for her entrance examination to the university. I agreed, all of my siblings were welcomed as long as they saw here as a means of escape from home sometime, I was okay, even if they decided to live here with me for the time I'll spend here.

When My mama came to busayo's house that afternoon, shee was edgy, and sad, Her body teller signs of exhaustion and weakness because the driver had barely extinguished the engine before she rushed out and heading for the door, I opened and welcomed her in wondering what must have been the issue to put her in such a situation.

‘The Special armed forces has summoned your father to the Supreme Headquarters oh,’ she said, her voice quavering. She was hysterically crying. Suddenly her tears became louder. 'What happened mama?' I asked.

'is it not your father, that journey he went on, something happened, he took the wrong money and spent it, he came back and didn't say anything about it, we just woke up and saw men in uniform requesting him, he tried to resist but they dragged him out like a criminal. I don't know what he has done this time but I think it is serious. He refused to tell me anything, eh what kind of man is this, oh God.' She cried more. ' I am sorry mama. Let's get dressed first and prepare to go to their office. Nothing will happen by God's grace.' I said.

We reached the supreme headquarters together, we told them our Papa's name and they directed us to where the case was being handled. We saw him, he sat dejectedly, looking humble, for the first time, I saw my papa looking humble and dejected. 'This must be serious' I thought.

My mama came inside to have a closer look at her husband, she found Papa sitting on the edge of the chair, he wasn't relaxed at all. She went to hold his hands, then he started talking and she listened as he explained how the soldiers had handled him, they brought him roughly, here against his will like some criminal he said they summoned him to appear before the Special Committee to account for all the money he received from the previous head of department, how they accused him of conniving with the man and diverting the funds needed for the assignment they went on, the money was in dollars, it had something to do in relation to world health organization and they did not do the necessary task given to them. He spoke too fast, I didn't understand a thing he was saying but all I knew was that we needed a lawyer. I wondered if he feared he would be jailed, because even though he kept telling my mama that he did nothing, and he doesn't know what this is all about, he refused to meet her eyes and was twisting his hands. He looked guilty like he didn't even believe what he was saying.

My mama told him, he'll be fine if for sure he's sure he's innocent, that we would come out of this strong. She said she believed her God will not disappoint her. But he was still restless, he sat like he didn't hear a word of what she said and he was lost in thoughts. It looked funny seeing my papa in such a state it was almost laughable but I kept to myself and said nothing.

‘I am going to see that so-called Committee, and I'll call our family lawyer’ my mama was saying. ‘They cannot just accuse a family man of a crime he didn’t commit. No way that can't happen now it can't ! They can't let that happen, where's the man you were accused with, isn't he supposed to be here with you?.’ my mama asked.

‘don't worry please, I have already contacted my lawyer, my lawyer is going to handle this,’ he said.

'oh you have another lawyer I don't know of? Aside from our family lawyer?'

He said nothing, He only turned and said,

'Whatever happens, if they take me to jail, none of you should visit me in that place you hear.’

‘They will not put you in jail,’ I said.

‘Holy ghost fire, such won't happen please stop saying nonsense with your mouth, stop speaking negative things!’ My mama shouted and clasped her fingers. ‘Stop talking nonsense please. I say, stop saying negative things!’

‘You people must not visit me there I beg of you, do you understand me?’ he continued.

‘Just wait for me. We will sort things out with them. Do you hear me?’

'We? Who's we?' My mama asked. 'Please who's we?'

He didn't respond, our visiting time was up. So we had to leave.

My papa and his lawyer appeared before the panel and submitted all the papers that showed all he received from his boss, Mr Akeduru showing he completed the distribution of items necessary to carry out the tests of bird flu and swine flu influenza in the community, the necessary materials they submitted for the covid-19, how it was in fact the boss who still owed him some money, but the Panel were not convinced they gave him the option of paying a heavy fine or going to jail. Papa refused to pay what he did not owe and they took him away to jail it was almost like he expected it to happen. When mama called to tell me, she began to cry again, her voice choked and trembled. I joined her and we both started crying not knowing what happened or how it all turned out to be this way. My mama knocked on the door moments later, and she went out to get the door.

I crushed her in my embrace, swung her slightly from side to side. We both cried, I ushered her inside and she smelled of her favorite vanilla perfume, Dettol soap and cinnamon spice.

Thinking about how easy everything changed, how quickly it happened. How easily life was crumbling. So I began to cry hysterically

My mama touched my face. ‘Why are you crying, eh? Stop it, look I have stopped crying your father has everything under control. Everything will be alright,’ she said. ‘They must release your father, because he is not a thief, he can be everything but a thief no way, if they told me he injured someone yes, or wrote or spoke bad I can understand but stealing no way, see any of you my children are you thieves? No, because it's not in your blood. Even if you keep it and it's not our own we won't touch it. We don't steal in this family,' she said.

'Now seat and tell me how we're going to go to that place and take everything of yours away from that house so you never set your eyes on that cursed house again,' I knew she spoke of the house where I lived with James.

This was my mother's coping mechanism, typical of her to throw herself into another task immediately to take her mind off worrying for her husband.

I spoke with Williams later. He said he would come to Abuja immediately if I wanted him to. He sounded so calm, and I remembered moments when he had an altercation with a soldier, they harassed him, how he remained calm, despite how they manhandled him and shoved him around. He remained calm.

'They will let him go because he did nothing wrong,’ he told me. ‘I believe that he did nothing wrong. These special forces people just always like to show their power. Just be strong, babygirl?’

‘Okay.’

‘Everything will be alright, love just remains positive, don't worry things will be fine. Don't think much you hear’

‘Yes, Williams.’ I said.

Days passed, then turned to weeks. Finally, it was 3 weeks since we last saw Papa, my mom visited as often as she could and each time she came. She lamented how headstrong he was refusing to pay the money necessary so they would release him. If discovered , all this was a ploy to extract money from him. He too knew that the plan became headstrong and set his mind that not a single naira would come out of his hands, he was stubborn and set in his ways. My mama complained and was vexed each time she visited.

She became insistent on going to get my things from the house in Lagos. I called it the landlady's scary house. I hoped Angela was still present. So I could see Mary's kittens.

We made plans, I called the landlady scary and told her that I would come the weekend of the coming week. She agreed.

LAGOS.

I reached landlady scary's house quite early with my mama, the journey was smooth already once she reached she inspected the environment, this was her first time of being here. It felt strange having her in the house. The place was very dusty, I was lucky I still had the keys. Everything was left in disarray, it looked like James came to the house at one point so I asked the landlady, she said she was not around but her son said she saw him come take three bags and leave. I figured that must have been when he went to morocco he came to carry the remnant of his clothes and other necessary things perhaps.

Angela no longer worked as a domestic staff for them, she said. She said she was tired of the job and wanted a change of environment. I made a mental note to call Angela later on once we were done with packing.

I knew some major areas in Lagos and so I ran the errands, I got all we needed, the bags, the liquid soap, I got us food also because we had no means to cook, I got bread, butter and canned food, which she loved. She managed the packing and before the day was over, my mama arranged the sitting room and the kitchen. It looked empty already.

We auctioned the bigger pieces of furniture like the chairs,bed cabinet, mirror stand, The big gas cylinder, these things were not easy to transport as the big van we wanted was unavailable so we were given a smaller van to come three days after our stay.

In three days we finished assembling everything, the van given to us was to come as early as 5:00am to move us and the things we had. The driver is a very friendly man. Came very early he was thoughtful as he brought with him his boys to help us move the properties and help us offload when we reach. I was tired and felt sad at the total goodbye to this place where everything went wrong.

I took the keys to the house and gave it to the landlady's son. Before we'd take off I called Angela, I told her I came to move my things out of the house as our rent was long due. I asked if she was around so I could come see the kittens and she said yes. So I told my mama that if they didn't mind I would love to go see Angela and my cat's kittens. She said okay, but wasn't too happy about it as she didn't want to be delayed.

I met Angela at the junction of her street and she took me to her home. I saw 3 cats at the back of her house. She said she sold one cat to her friend who wanted it as a pet. She showed me Igwe. They looked healthy and happy with her. She showed me where she laid Mary to rest in her garden where her little grave was. It made me cry, I quickly said my goodbyes to her. It was like a forever goodbye unless life brought our paths close again, I was sure this would be the last time I'll see Angela the kittens, and this whole city. Nothing I was sure would bring me here again so I told her I appreciated her friendship, and gave her a little money as upkeep for the kittens. I got her crackers. She always loved them. I got them for her when I went to get provisions for my mama. Angela was a very sweet woman. I was thankful to have met her in my trying times.

My phone started ringing and I knew it was my mama calling. So I left Angela's home and proceeded to the junction so they could pick me.

The journey home was smooth. My mama slept most of it. I stayed awake, memorizing everything I saw, so it sticks in my memory for the last time. We encountered some uniform men at checkpoints. They were not harsh, just asked my mama a few questions and allowed us to go. I sat at the back but could communicate and see what was going on in the front. The driver was good. He didn't rush, nor speed excessively. He made the ride very smooth and stopped when necessary for short breaks so we could eat and stretch our legs.

By 9:00 pm we reached Abuja and we drove straight to busayo's place. The boys the driver brought with him, helped us offload everything from the van, my mama had already given him his due payment previously. Seeing the work the guys did, I gave the one who looked like the eldest a tip so they could share amongst themselves. He saw the amount in his hands and smiled generously at me and it gladdened my heart.

FATHER

My papa was to be released soon, because of his stubbornness, the bill for his bail increased. He became terribly sick and needed adequate treatment.

No one had been the same since my papa went to prison, especially our mama. She worked twice as hard to keep her mind from venturing into negative thoughts concerning him. Everyone but me was waiting for his return. I was only filled with dread at what a man he would be once he came out. I hoped with everything in me that he would not have energy to fight or hit my mama anymore, because she really loved him and he maybe loved her in a way I didn't understand.

Our papa came home one morning, in January, the same day I was robbed in the market. I had gone to shop for baking ingredients and fresh fruits to make an order for a customer. I had started a small scale business, I made food trays, fresh cold-pressed juices, I baked cakes and small chops, it was all online but my stay in Busayo's place availed me the opportunity to work at my pace and begin it all. I told a few friends they were happy for me and they spread the word around. After my first and second customers has good reviews and then I was busy, every week I made fresh juices for family, I still didn't socialize much because alone, o had anxiety I could not even form words sometimes and going to the market was a task, I often saw it as an obstacle I must conquer in my head. Once I fixed it like a task to be done, the rest was easy. I was walking past the bus stop when I felt someone following me. Before I could turn to see who it was, someone came from the front and snatched the purse containing money for the market from my hands. I wanted to scream but the one coming behind me hit me and I fell inside the nearby gutter 'animals?' I shouted, pained. People stood and watched what happened, none, providing help of any kind to me . I had a big cut on my hand, and some of the dirt from the gutter wrapped itself around my arm, it was horrible. I screamed. The skin surrounding the wound, reddened immediately, and a shock of pain, like a raging fire, rose up my arm, itched and burned at the same time my entire body ached mercilessly and I was angry. I walked a bit and met some soldiers ahead with the two boys who just stole from me, 'Officer they're thieves they stole from me and did this to my hand a while ago sir' I said to the officer He turned and looked at the one he held by the collar of his red shirt

'You steal from this madam?' He asked ‘Are you deaf?’ repeated the officer.

``We were just walking, oh,’ the other one in black said.

'They are lying sir, check them, you'll see a pink purse with two of my ID cards inside, check sir, it's not long they robbed me' I said through tears, holding my arm.

The officer checked them, and also called his colleague to help him search the second one, not long after they saw the pink purse as I described fall off from the second one's jeans. They opened it and took out my ID.

'When they were born?' he asked me.

'1999 March 2 sir' I said.

He looked at the picture on the ID and looked at me. He said 'why you fat here and in front of me you are slim' I said nothing

He gave the purse to me and I left with my wounds, what they decided to do to the boys was not my business I just wanted to leave.

I hastened away from them and called the nearest cab to take me home. I called my sister to help me get the necessary things to prepare my customers order while I tended to my wound. I cleaned the wound up, dressed it and washed myself again. The whole ordeal of today made me feel very dirty. If I had the money I would have refunded my customer but I had just begun and rejecting a customer is not what I'd have loved to do. So I continued to go over what would be done in case my sister came in time. Luckily she arrived in time, we worked together, she took my directives and started working. We finished to look at what we had done, we had beautiful cupcakes, decorated sitting on the table.

I gave her the address the customer gave me so she could go make the delivery for me.

'ahh you'll pay me oh please this delivery work is not for free oh.' she said.

I laughed and answered 'okay.'

The customer received her order, she gave me an excellent review. My arm still aches but I had to go home as my mama called and said we should all come if we could.

I got to the house later that evening, I knocked and entered before anyone could answer because well it was my home as well but not living there for sometime made me knock, I entered and found Williams and Papa and My mama sitted, and I paused, held myself and looked ‘Welcome Papa,’ I said. 'thank you oh' he answered. He looked somber. Aged more and looked sickly as well.

I wondered how Williams came to be here without me knowing of his arrival. I looked at him, he felt my eyes and excused himself leaving my papa and mama to themselves. He came to the balcony, I followed.

'when did you come?' I asked.

'today, you mom asked me to come' he said

'oh okay concerning papa?' I asked

'Yes, she said that I should come and interpret a document for her as your father may not likely tell her how it is' he said.

'okay then, why didn't you tell her that you just arrived.'

'You know I don't like to refuse mommy.' he said.

'okay oh, okay.' I said.

'I heard about your new place, so you're staying at Busayo's place now with your sister.' he said like someone was teasing a child.

I couldn't help but laugh.

'Yes,' I said in between my laughs.

'big woman things oh, you've even put the culinary skills you learnt to use now have online business ahn ahn'

I chuckled.

'Please it's not much I said. Stop the hype abeg' I said.

He laughed beautifully, it was a quite pleasing sound.

Papa had hardly spoken since he returned, so said Mama, she said he barely said a word or two, he half the time seemed like he didn't care much for the world, she said he had worn a somber demeanor every day. But his face had come alive when she asked of his boss Mr.Ikeduru the one who was the main reason for the troubles he went through. He said the man paid some of the government officials to release him; it was never their intention for him to stay that long. He had played a big role in both his release and arrest. What it was he didn't know yet but he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

Papa said he was filing for retirement from The ministry. That he was tired of government work and wanted to retire early. He still had 4 years left of government service. My Mama was worried, but knew that once he set his mind to something he did it and the talk of retirement was not a joke.

ME

I was becoming known amongst the people of Abuja, they sorted my services and things I offered.

It was nice to have them acknowledge my work. But with that came more stressful Jobs. People came and asked me to work with them, they promised exposure but in the long run, I was just being used. I learnt on such jobs sometimes and sometimes I received insults.

There was this boss I had, she owned a restaurant and requested I manage it for her. She was one of the kindest people I had met. She made sure I was comfortable and well, each time she came.

We were in total 5 staff at the establishment. My favorite was a guy named Kid, he was so jovial, Kid was impeccably neat, he spoke and made gestures like a lady. He was very easy to talk to, he always had the juiciest gist about the neighbors and about our staff.

I liked Kid, in a week of knowing kid I felt I could trust him with tales about my life and journey. He was a good listener and was always eager to know who my boyfriend was. I showed him Williams and he always called Williams our husband, and I often found it funny. Kid was closest to me. We moved like a team because we both were often in the kitchen. I still had fear of mingling with people and I was happy my position was in the kitchen, for when I closed it was straight home, I resumed very early too and had zero to little interaction with people. My business was on side and for a moment things looked beautiful. It was calm and peaceful.

Williams came occasionally to see me, he was happy with the steps I was taking with my life and I saw he was proud of me. It made me happy. Moving on.

On a Sunday evening I and my sister were having dinner, she was laughing about her encounter with a customer who wanted to pay her to spend a night with her, when she went to make deliveries to him, she handled major aspect of the business we had on the side and it was easy, I laughed at her tales, it was that day, when things started to go wrong.

We had just finished eating rice and beans when my cell phone rang. I went to answer it. The frantic voice at the other end said 'Win please somebody have robbed the restaurant oh, and you and Wunmi were the last to leave the place, our boss is worried because they went away with everything', I sat first, listening keenly at what the female voice was saying, and then I jerked and shouted, ‘God forbid! What are you telling me, what are you saying, is this bimbo? What kind of nonsense are you saying now?’ I dropped the phone and rushed out of the house. My sister watched me, asking what went wrong, what happened. She knew that something bad had happened and that it had something to do with my workplace. I sat down and told her what was up, what Bimbo said. I was tired and I started crying. Another call came in, it was my boss. She said she needed to see me immediately. I said okay and dressed up. I met her at the restaurant. I expected to see Kid there. Out of all the staff that worked there, he was almost like our Boss's PA. He knew everything about her and so I expected to see him.

'Where's Kid?' I asked.

'His phone is switched off. I called you here in case you know his house or where he lived because the whole staff say you were the closest to him.' Said our boss.

'I have had my suspicions concerning him, I know you didn't lock the place up and this robbery seemed too planned to be an accident. They intentionally took the freezer, that freezer can't be moved easily. It took 5 days to install it and there's no way it could be gone overnight, someone must have been working on it beforehand.'

she kept saying as I stood quietly.

'I don't know where he lives.' I said

She looked me in the eyes for a long time and didn't say anything. She asked us to go and that there would be no work till further notice. When the month ends she would send our wages based on the weeks worked.

We all gloomily left the place.

I returned home after an hour or two and met my sister, sitting outside she was worried I could see.

'Kid stole and ran away Dear. Our work is on hold till further notice, but from the look of things I doubt we would ever resume.'

I said.

'hmm no one could have guessed Kid is like that oh, he looked innocent from the pictures you've shown me now.' she said.

'Is it by looking innocent?' I asked. I felt betrayed that a kid could do something like that to such a nice woman. What went wrong? My mind thought what would have happened to make him do that or was he just wicked for the sake of being wicked?

I didn't sleep well all night. The next morning I forgot to wake up early and went to check what I would wear, before I remembered that I had no work today. It was sickening.

'Why is all this happening to me now, am I not meant to smile for an extended period of time?' I asked the air while crying

I was happy with that job, it made me go beyond the four walls of my house and I liked that I saw people even though I barely mingled. I was content seeing them daily. I was happy with my friend Kid. 'Why does every friend I make eventually leave me, am I not a good judge of people?', I judged myself hard like I was the reason such a thing happened to that woman.

In the following days, I spent most of my time at home. I would wake up in the morning and loiter from room to room, or just stay in bed until past one or sometimes mid noon in the afternoon before I even tried to shower and eat.

Williams

'I told my family about you,' Williams told me one evening when he came to see me. I said 'okay.'

Looking at him like he too would soon leave or an uneasy truth would surface which would make him run away from me.

'Do you have anything I need to know?'

'what do you mean by that?'

He asked.

'I mean , are there any skeletons in your cupboard I'll know of one day that may ruin this relationship?' He looked at me uneasily. His eyes darted left and right.

'What have you heard?' he asked.

'heard as how I don't understand, am I supposed to hear things about you or you're to tell me.' I said.

'well there's no skeleton in my cupboard.' he said 'nothing at all' he repeated

That made me skeptical. I looked at Williams for a long time but decided to drop the topic. He told me to write a business plan, he would support it. I remembered how uneasy he used to be anytime I asked him for money. He brought stories and told me tales. I often said nothing. Williams now was telling me to write a business plan and he'll fund the business. Laughable. I just looked at him and said 'okay' and wished him goodnight on his way out. I looked at everyone with doubtful eyes. For my family I have known them for a while. I believed so to some extent what they were capable of didn't surprise me much. It was the people I met in life, online and strangers who said they meant well, I looked with doubts.

We barely talked. I and Williams. He reduced his visitations to our place, on calls he spoke briefly, on chats it became just hellos and what nots.

I didn't mind because that was his format, come on strong and go low for some while. I just cherished his presence, I liked him and I felt like I was in all the chaos and uncertainties in my life. His love for me was the greatest constant and that pleased me greatly.

My birthday came, Williams only sent a 'happy birthday Win' message so unlike him. So I called him, he was in a noisy place so I could not hear him, it sounded like he was on an occasion. 'I will call you later,' he said and ended the call.

That explained the short message I got from him then, at least he remembered I thought. A month had passed since I lost my job, I had yet to wrap my mind around the situation, Our boss paid us our wages, I asked her of any improvement on catching Kid she said none of the efforts had been fruitful, she went mute after that, I kept trying to reach Kid, I called his line, it rang but he never picked, I sent WhatsApp messages he read them and never responded either. My mama was not finding it easy with everything not going as she wanted.

MOTHER

'Are you happy?' my mama asked me one day when she came.

'i am peaceful for now mama'

' Do you ever wonder how life would have been if things had turned out well James?' she asked.

'No I don't, I feel like I wasted a part of my time on the wrong choice and I paid duly the prize for it.' I said.

'Ahh Mimi,' she called me Mimi when she wanted to say things she was sure I would not agree with.

'mimi love is not a mistake,'

'this love was a mistake oh, an error that would never have happened if I made the right choice.'

'life doesn't go that way' she said.

'People never show who they truly are till they're comfortable enough to know that they have you hook, line and sinker.'

'Well mama I don't want to be a fish for any reason please.' I said growing annoyed with the whole conversation.

' Just know that you'll always have my support, don't be weary of men, I see how daily you wallow in this house, doing nothing, meeting no one, your sister told me you get invited to dates but you never go, events you don't go, are you perfectly okay spending the rest of your life indoors.'

'Yes mom I am, I don't like people much and I think I am sincerely peopled out, I am exhausted and I want to see people, when I want to see them, not on their request but at my terms and time mama.'

'that is not right you're not well, I told your father to help me with some money so I would enroll you in something that'll, be easy for you to interact and see people but he didn't budge, it seems like I am losing you too daily with the moodiness that you both wear on your faces.' I didn't answer.

WILLIAMS

I was on WhatsApp as usual when an unknown number sent me pictures, I asked 'who's this?' first before downloading the pictures.

'its Cyprian oh, Williams friend'

'Oh Cyprian, it's nice to hear from you again. How are you doing? How have you been?'

' Did you see the pictures I sent at all?' He asked

I immediately went and downloaded these pictures. It was Williams In white suit with a woman in white gown beside him smiling.

'Ahh it's Williams, was he the best man for your wedding, he's wearing white suit himself, shey best men wear white suits.' I said

'hahaha, you're funny, that is Williams on his wedding day oh.' I figured you never knew.

I immediately went to Williams WhatsApp number and messaged him, 'Happy married life' I wrote. He immediately saw the message and started typing.

I came to Cyprian

'What made you send this to me?'

' I think you deserved to know, Williams doesn't know I got your number from his phone, he was never planning on telling you.'

'Wow, wow, wow,'

That was all I could say,

I went to Williams chat, and I saw a long explanation.

He said his family would never have agreed to him marrying me, that I was married before, in a divorce process and I had a child with congenital deformity, it was In my genes somewhere, so I was incapable of birthing healthy babies, and would possibly stress him during my pregnancy, he told me how he is the only son, and is required to have healthy children to continue the name of his family. He said I was too weak and sickly and had a chain of bad luck behind me. He said the family would never see his love for me so it was high time he married someone from their tribe who was healthy and had a clean slate. I looked at the message he sent, I felt nothing, no anger, I was just numb.

'wow' I said 'wow.'

I laughed out loud in my room and screamed so loud Francis came to ask me if everything was alright. I didn't answer him.

'I am happy for you. I truly wish you and your perfect wife all the best.'

'As you have left, never come back to me, even my mistake.' I said

' You are truly a good person, win no anger, nothing.'

'Lol' I typed 'Lol' again.

His profile picture became blank, I messaged the last one to confirm if it was what I thought, that I had been blocked. I messaged just one tick, it was obvious Williams blocked me.

' Williams have blocked me' I wrote to Cyprian

' that's so low of him.'

'lol is he not your friend again?'

'He is but this is not right now let's call a spade a spade.'

'Okay,'' I said.

'You should be livid, unless you never liked him.'

'what's the point?' I asked

'It won't change anything, thank you for telling me.' I said.

I went back to the picture and laughed again. I laughed so hard, I didn't know when my laughter turned to sobs and I cried to my heart's content.

Another blow given to me proudly sponsored by another man. I thought.

GRIEF

Grief visited me hard, I mourned for my daughter, I mourned for the failed marriage, I mourned my friendship with Joy, my cat Mary, for Kid, for my boss, for life, for how I kept losing people just when they became dear to my heart.

I never held Camilla and never got to see her eyes.

It was painful to feel that the cause of your grief was you, self-pity and self-blame. I wallowed in both, one after the other for a while after I heard that news from Cyprian.

Griefing they say is normal, unending, you never know when you put the lid on it permanently. it's a normal body process they said, so I felt I was just being human, crying and not being silly but at same time it incited numerous feelings and reactions. Feelings like depression, anger, not being understood, self-pity, guilt feelings of if I had done better.

I played over the words Williams said and wondered if truly, his people said that or that was what he always wanted to tell me but held back and now had the chance to. I understood that he might not marry me, but I didn't think he'd be this cruel about it, or say the mean things he said to me. I didn't deserve all the words he said. I knew I was selfish on my part as well, wishing his love for me was a constant. I knew at least I was not as enthusiastic about the relationship like he used to be but I thought him Kind. I thought Williams was kind.

It was like a part of me acknowledged all that he said and brought shameful feelings to me. His words sent me into a dark headspace.

I remember times with Camilla, my pretty one. If I had her, she would have loved me unconditionally and I would have loved her unconditionally as well. I imagined her as a pretty angel baby sending me warmth wherever she may be.

Sad songs became the order of my day, everything reminded me of that time. I thought if somehow somewhere I did somebody wrong and they laid a curse on me because I could not understand the kind of pain life brought to my tender heart. Sometimes I heard the song I heard on the radio in the car that brought us home. That day from the hospital, I listened to it often and sang it to her. Courage by Celine Dion.

Each time I heard that song.I thought that I would never entirely get over her. Was it selfish for being happy that I survived and she(they) didn't?.

Guilt was not a feeling I liked but it took me back to the days where I wished and prayed my baby was born dead and not alive, for if alive I wondered what I would have done. But when I gave birth, I knew I'd have totally loved it if she was alive or if for a moment she spent even 10 minutes looking at me, memorizing my face, the face of the woman who carried her. I wanted that time even for two minutes.

"I am sorry" I said too many times. What was I apologizing for I didn't know.

I blamed my body for so long, for being inadequate, for failing us. I knew for a fact that my body tried. The hospital said I didn't take enough folic acid, which is the main cause of congenital deformities. Williams' comments are not a thing I wanted to forget in a hurry. He hurt me emotionally and mentally I could not comprehend why he chose to say what he said. I lost female friends, they used me as an example of one who was hungry to get married at a young age. And I entered and failed, only surviving with my life. It was exhausting having to say what happened with James, for I loved him loud and showcased him everywhere on social media.

My life is not near perfect for any child now so in a way I felt like all the things I lost were blessings in disguise.

At least I was the mother to an Angel baby. I hoped they brought me good tidings, and did whatever angel babies do for me, it comforted me to think they were in a peaceful place.

I understood that every grieving process is different from the other.. It was gradual and when completed you felt wholesome, so I took my time.

I decided to change things up which was a good thing that worked taking care of myself physically, I splurged into doing things for myself, I bought cheap fashion items, scarves, earrings, brooch, ate well, , stood in front of the mirror every morning, talking to myself, telling myself I was beautiful, powerful and deserved everything beautiful and I affirmed when I could that every good thing I deserve would find way to me, I was specific about the good things because I didn't want no bad anymore. My emotional self became better once I started putting in deliberate effort to take care of my physical self. It was sweet.

ME

One sunny afternoon, I was at home reading books and attending classes on how to be a successful writer with Amazon. I got bored for a while and decided to turn on the TV. The news was filled with series of kidnapping and cases of rape. I got tired of the news as they reported the same things and nothing was done to ensure that the victims got the law on their side by ensuring justice be served to the perpetrators. So I took up my cell phone a long time friend I last saw bauchi sent me a message on Facebook

Michael. He had not changed at all.

'Hello Win, long time oh, I hear you're a chef now' his message read. I decided to call him instead.

'Hello… Mike. What's up now for a long time' I said.

'Long time oh, you're more beautiful now even, I figure you did not get the admission to GADAU' he answered, 'Yes I didn't'

'how has life been now?'

'Well I'm alive am I not?' I said with a light laugh. 'Where are you now na' I asked. ' I'm in KD now.' he said

' I have a business proposal for you, I have a beautiful B and B in kaduna, I want to plan a weekend kind of buffet event. Where a person pays an amount of money, and is able to eat everything that's on the menu, Friday we'll have a different menu, Saturday a different menu, Sunday a different menu. At the end of the event for 3 days we'll calculate our profits, and share. It'll be more like a partnership business' he said. I didn't quite understand the dynamics of what he was proposing, so I asked if he could come down as Abuja was not that far from KD, he agreed.

He arrived in Abuja, the following morning. The nearer he got to my area where I lived, the more his calls increased because he needed directions and the more uncertain I became. Have I made a mistake asking him to come explain what it was, was he certain I'll agree, then what about the possibility that this turned out good and I made enough money to set up the breakfast cafe I had always wanted. So I called him, asking for us to meet outside of my place as it has been a long time since we saw each other and I was not comfortable with him coming to my home. He agreed and said he already got a room at a hotel close to my vicinity. He mentioned a popular restaurant and asked that we meet there. I agreed, I first placed a call to my mama,

'Hello, mama, I have to go meet a friend, he says he has a business proposition for me,'

'what business is that?' she asked,

'Mammi he said that it's like a weekend gig, we would cook on weekends and after every week we would share the profits. I don't understand the dynamics of the work yet but that's why I'm going to see him so he can tell me better.' I said.

'hmm okay then once you come back, come home let's talk better about it hmm'

'okay ma' I said

The Avalanche Experience restaurant was twenty minutes away from our house. My sister, who had already gone to her lesson, had said when I called her to ask because I barely went out, so knowing the new outlets in our area was not a thing I knew. I rarely even noticed a new thing on our street, but it took about 45 minutes to get there. The first cab I took had died along the interjection before we reached the main road, and so I had to take a bus. I was nervous and panicking, I took all that has happened before I reached the restaurant to be bad omen, at a point I felt I should just turn back home and say no to whatever Mike was proposing, but I wasn't one to just leave someone hanging that way, it would be rude to do that to a friend I hadn't seen in a long time. I had wondered what made Mike call me, doesn't he have other people close to him that could do the work he needed, I thought. The bus took a longer route but soon I was at the front of the avalanche experience, I called Mike. 'hello I'm outside the place'

'walk in you'll see me when you look at the third table by your right ' he said

I walked and immediately saw him on the table as he described, the restaurant was beautiful, decorated with a forest kind of theme. It felt homely. There were lots of dark green coloured items, I saw whites and dark green hues, the trays set on the table were crafted to look like big leaves though plastic. My sister always mentioned that restaurants in Abuja now mostly centered on the ambience, interior decor and space, even though their foods were bad, mocktails and cocktails too just colorful but tasteless. I could see from this one that indeed it was true, but was not sure of the food yet. Michael was eating already, rice and beef stew and coleslaw on the side. He had orange juice in his glass jug, he lifted up his head and saw me approaching his table. His eyes lit up, he smiled, then cleaned his mouth with the napkin on his table and drank from his orange juice cup.

'Winnnn' he said, dragging it. I smiled.

'Hello Michael'

'Ahn ahn see as you fresh fine, come set.'

I laughed, and sat down.

'How have you been now?' he asked

'i've been well oh, we thank God'

'I heard you did something in relation to culinary arts and skills in 2018, and I've been following your page on Instagram and Facebook. You cook well, the presentation of your food, is what even caught my fancy, you make food come alive in the artistic way you place them' he said.

'Food is art now, life itself is art self' I answered

'Ahbi oh'

'Well that's a beautiful thing for you to do, do you have any plans of owning a physical thing like a restaurant or working for one of these big hotels and restaurants in town you're really good you know.'

'Well, I want to own a breakfast cafe, working in a hotel not really, my body can't withstand that kind of stress, and I do well in limited spaces not in a big kitchen, I get panic attacks in such places so I know I won't do well there.'

' you can't know unless you've tried now.'

' I tried oh, but let's say I quit after the second day of work, let me be taking it one step at a time, don't tell me you came to Abuja because I asked you to.' I said

'haha anything for you now,' he said and I looked at him dubiously, he laughed again.

'Actually I have planned to be here today and this just came in line so I thought I would kill two birds with one stone. I'll be here for three days. I have meetings with some people,' he said.

I noticed how selective he was with the information of what he was doing here. So I wanted him to get on with what he said on the phone.

'So whatsup I asked.

'This is it, yeah, what I have planned is just for the weekends, we cook during weekends, once we're done for the weekends, you take your profit and I take mine. I'm looking at 70/30. I'll provide everything you need for the event to go smoothly, I'll pay other bills as well, your duty is to cook and direct the team on what to do. You can bring anybody you want, I'll pay the person for their labor.' he said

'how much will a person pay to eat for the weekend.' I asked

'I'm looking at one person paying 10k, but as we're just starting, it'll be 7k per head.'

'So what are you saying about profits?' I asked.

'I'm sorry, do you want something, like I should get you something to eat or as takeaway. '

'Okay then, I'll have yogurt and a pack of their cookies as takeaway, their cookies look fine, and I love cookies.' I said.

He called the waiter and gave him the order, he was almost done with his food.

'The profits I mean if the amount of money we used to get raw materials needed for the cooking and overall we spent like 50,000, at the end of the weekend we get like 150000 the profit for it would be 100k and I take 70, you take 30. '

He said.

'I'll cover your transport fare, your accommodation would be covered as well, you will have a team of workers with you too. Everything at your disposal, we only need you to cook tasty meals.' he said.

' That's nice, ' I said, 'but why come for me all the way?' I asked again

He said

'Honestly everybody I've called has been calling for a lot of money, none wants to work with the 70/30 profit sharing basis I mentioned, they want to work and I pay for each day they cook and that's expensive. They don't care if the food is sold or not. And I want someone who would buy into the idea and agree on the payment level I want.' he said.

'To be honest , the only reason I'll agree to this is because you said the only thing required of me to do will be to cook. I'll be in the kitchen, working with minimal to zero interaction with people and you would not in any way stress me beyond cooking.'

He laughed and said ' i won't na certainly'

'so we have a deal right.'

'Yes, when do you want to begin?'

'Next two weeks.'

'okay then'. I said.

The waiter brought my order and took the plates from Michael as he had finished eating. Michael paid with his card and we left. He told me he brought his car. So he could drop me if I wanted. I said okay and entered. His car was very fine. And I looked at Michael. He had grown so much till I last saw him.

Michael offered me accomodation when I went to bauchi. My friend and I were stranded when we got there as all the rooms were filled up. He offered us his room on campus and left us both, he went to sleep with his friends and let us be till we finished everything we came to do at the school.

He brought breakfast, lunch and dinner everyday for the three days of our stay at the place. Helped us know our way so we were not exploited as we already had information concerning what we needed to do. I guess he is doing well now after school. I never knew much about him, didn't even know he followed me on Instagram or Facebook, until the day he messaged. I only know they called him Mike, Michael, or bomboy at school and figured that was his name.

I felt whatever he presented would be nice at least a change of environment would do and traveling on Thursdays, working only on weekends, would be nice.

Michael dropped me at my junction as I wanted to walk a bit. He bade me goodbye and left.

I got home and met my mom and sis in the kitchen. I guess she could not wait for me to come home so I told her the news better.

'Your father is going to the village, she said, and wants the family to go with him. I refused, but he is still going in two weeks.' she said.

'ahh village, nice' I said I was holding myself from laughing because the look on her face was priceless.

'Nice as how, what's nice about this,' she said.

'Tell us about the news you had,' said my sister. I guess like me she was bothered about my dad going to the village, and didn't wish to dwell on the topic longer than necessary.

'I met with a long time friend, remember the guy I told you about in bauchi who helped us with accomodation and helped us find our way at the University?'

Yeah, said my sister.

'Okay he wants me to work part time for his establishment just weekends. And we share the profit on Monday. I come home that Monday and return back on Thursday to prepare for the task we had on weekends. He said it won't be every weekend like in a month 3 weekends only would do. That he told me when we were in the car.

'When are you starting?' asked my sister.

She seemed more interested in the job than my mom.

'In two weeks time' I said.

She smiled. My mama turned, looked at us and said. ' I am not comfortable with this. Something isn't right with this whole arrangement. Why come all the way here for you?'

'I asked that too. Oh, he explained that he didn't get someone who was comfortable with the 70/30 profit sharing he wanted, that they all wanted to be paid upfront.

'Yes now, that's the only way this can make sense now, he saw that you're a mumu and now wants to exploit you, how sure are you that you would make profits.'

'He has an extensive network of friends' I said.

'haha extensive network ahbi, well someone from the family has to go with you, your sister will follow you. There's no way you're going to that place alone and you update me on everything happening, video the place and send me pictures of this person, after the first weekend if things

Still looks unclear to me that it's over.' she said.

She went to the room. My sister came to me.

'I am happy you got this job. I hate seeing you at home, it's not good.' she said.

'I know I am happy as well, but I don't understand how papa and mama watch me struggle with things and don't lift a single hand to help. I wonder what kind of thing this one is.' I said

My sister didn't respond. She barely said a word when it had to do with my parents. So I didn't expect any different.

JOY

A pretty baby on the dp, I saw. This friend commented on the picture I posted on Facebook, I looked at the name Ora Daniels. I looked at the pictures and it was Joy's baby's page. I laughed, I was full of joy, 'wow Joy's baby is so grown, oh' I said to myself. I showed my sister. We looked at their pictures, they looked beautiful, the baby was a beautiful girl and she looked smart. We scrolled downwards and saw the baby daddy. We knew him. I had seen him when I went to Joy's house for Christmas before my wedding that year. He even came with her for the wedding. That was wonderful, but when did it happen, when did she see him I thought. Maybe one of those trips she used to take was to visit him. Were they dating? I wondered. So many questions running through my mind, but it's been so long since I and Joy spoke. So I sent a hello to the page.

It responded immediately. 'Hiii, babe long time oh, she wrote, 'i missed you' she wrote. I didn't believe it, but I wrote

'I miss you too, how are you and your baby doing? She's so pretty.'

' Thank you so much, we're doing well, I'm happy to hear from you.' she said.

'How's your baby doing too?' she asked.

'I bore a stillborn daughter, she's an angel baby now.'

'Oh my God, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry to all those suffering for nothing oh, Kai God I'm so sorry.' she said.

'God will bring twins to you and your husband next time, just keep trying it'll be well soon. Ahh life is not equal, oh, see me I gave birth out of wedlock but see my fine baby, you were married legally but you gave birth to a stillborn, I'm so sorry babe.' she said.

I read what she wrote and I knew that now truly, I have nothing in common with joy anymore. I am not sure if she was ever a true friend to me. It didn't hurt me, I guess being without her for so long not hearing from her, out of sight became out of mind for me.

So I wrote. 'I wish you all the best and may your daughter always experience joy and have love in a bundance, especially true friendships.' she laughed and said 'thank you oh.. thank you.'

That was the end of our conversation. I remember I unfriended her main account, guess that's why she used her baby's account and sent me a friend request. It was nice seeing how beautiful her life was. I'm sure she had her own fair share of blows but she came out victorious. I was happy for her.

JAMES

'Tell your father to stop threatening me,' said James one day on WhatsApp.

"Threatening you as how?" I asked

He's threatening to come lock up my family, have you not told him I no longer have any business with you? He said.

I laughed and didn't respond. He messaged again. ' I'm serious here, please respond.'

' You know what to do when there's a threat to your life, your family and property. Go to the police and report, don't disturb me.'

He read it and didn't respond, guess he couldn't say anything. My papa indeed went to the village, and threatened James' family so we heard. He accused them of attempted murder and promised to drag them to court. I laughed when I heard the news. He behaved like all I went through was my fault why the sudden anger a year and two months since I gave birth. Why was he angry? I think he was bored. Is this what he decided to retire to pursue?

It was embarrassing because nobody sent him. He didn't even let his wife know that this was what he was going to the village for.

Watching his drama unfold was funny. With time we stopped hearing from the relatives. I guess James followed my advice and issued a restraining order against him because we knew how violent he could become, so for their sanity and well being I hoped that was what they did to keep him away from them.

His sister's never called me, I only spoke to them on the wedding day and after that everyone went back to their lives. I'm glad that on their part they were people who never remembered to find someone's trouble, they were a close knitted family, it was hard to penetrate. They treated me like an outsider from the very beginning and felt like everything I and James had would not last. I wondered how a child would have been received by them with how cold they were as a family.

MICHAEL

My social media pages grew.. I had an audience of almost 40k people,to be precise 38.9k people. I posted my foods, recipes and all but I think everything in life required you to have or belong to a clique, people saw me as a snub, a bore, some said I had big-dick energy. It was all their perception. That was what Michael saw and hoped I utilized it for his business. He wanted that I knew because over the time we spoke he mentioned it slightly that I create awareness of it on my page for free. He didn't want to pay for ads because he said I would share in the profits the way he emphasized on the profits he made it seem like he offered me gold on a plate. My time to travel to KD was close.

I prepared my sister. We informed our mama, she even reminded us daily now like a countdown of sorts guess she too was eager for us to go. Things had become terribly tight for the family. Every money I had from the online business was sent to my mama. My three siblings worked. Coupled with the inflation in the prices of foodstuffs, gas and other stuff, living was tough for a family of 7 now. As our Papa went to the village, he vowed to send nothing to us since we refused to follow him to the village. He wanted us to be as frustrated as possible in the city till we found our way to him. My mama said living in the village would not be beneficial to us as we were still young, and had chances of better opportunities in the city than village. She called our Papa a wicked man, for after enjoying himself in the city, he wanted us to move to the village and not have the chances he had. She said he had finally lost it. The prison he stayed in made him worse than he used to be.

We prepared for the trip, and waited for Michael to tell us what needed to be done.

He sent a driver for us early. He wanted us to come on a Tuesday so I became familiar with the environment. So we left for KD on Tuesday morning. We reached KD in two hours because it was not far from Abuja. We didn't see Michael on the day we arrived, but we called him, and he told us he'll be there in the evening. My sister spoke to my mom, informed her of our arrival and took pictures of the place for her. I went to the kitchen I was to use and cook, I inspected it, everything was really up to date. It made me happy.

That evening, Michael didn't show up, he could not come. He was having his master's degree exams that day and didn't finish on time to come see us. The next day my sister and I decided to take a stroll around to see the place.

We began to go on walks around the neighborhood. We would trek to the end of the Street and find ourselves at another turn. The whole neighborhood was classy and Beautiful, the predominant color we saw around was gray. Gray roofs, gray paints, black cats with tinted glasses. Sometimes we trekked to the road to linger at boutiques and cosmetic stores we saw on our way. I looked out for a bookshop because I forgot to bring my books thinking it would be busy all through. We did not find the trek easy because we did not know the city very well. All the roads and streets we kept to wear to the major ones; there weren’t many of them. The path from Michael's B and B led to a major Road that linked to katako market, a big central market and northwards to the junction linking Emir Street and government house Road – the route to the famous KD Hotel, a 5 star hotel.

On Thursday morning we had to go to the market as the guy who Michael got for some reasons could not go. My sister was excited about the market, but I wasn't. I hated markets, it made my skin crawl being among so many people, her joy was contagious and I found myself warming up to the trip to the market. The trip to the market, since we took a bus, should have been all of ten minutes, but it took an hour. The roadsides were littered with dirt and decay from sachet water packs, plastics, dirt from the gutter and wastes that had been emptied into the gutter, drainages uncovered and filled with muddy water, clogged with plastic bags, breeding mosquitoes. KD Barnawa market was a mess through and through.

I looked out of the window of the bus all through the trip to the market. Kaduna was a city of storey buildings, bungalows and complexes – two, three, four storey buildings, some modern ones had elevators but they were few, some no elevators at all and small fine bungalows equally spaced, unlike the houses in abuja, and most floors were taken up by businesses and each these buildings in their compounds had a small mosque for prayers, though they said kaduna is a Christian state, it didn't look much Christian. They dressed and ate and behaved like Muslims even Michael, each mosque had, their loudspeakers perching precariously on the walls, blaring out announcements of prayers, prayer times or whatever they sang in hausa. Kaduna was a city of noise unlike Abuja.

We shopped for what was necessary, the money was not enough based on the budget we made. Things were at a different price here in Kaduna, or was it the inflation that caused it. We bought things necessary for our cooking for 3 days. We got a lot of things that were not advisable. It would be stressful and using the cab the prices they called were so high. Michael did not make provision for transportation as he said his car would be available to convey us, he disappointed us, so far since we came we had not seen him. So we spoke mainly on the phone. He sent the money as agreed but seeing how the prices doubled and I could not even get all we needed. I managed and got things in line with the Friday menu and squeezed in some for the Saturday menu. The Sunday menu would be sorted out after I have seen how Friday goes. Going back to our venue was the challenge. I called Michael 5 times he didn't pick. Finally my sister was able to get a keke napep for us and we chatted about it to take us to our destination.

Michael did not tell us that only I and my sister would be doing this work to top it off; he was not picking his calls. We reached. Put what we got in the freezer and some in the fridge. We arranged it by ourselves, the team he promised were nowhere in sight. It started raining. We walked in the rain, quickly picking the things left by the gate to the kitchen hurriedly so they wouldn't get spoiled.

We returned to our room with our feet muddied, our toenails clumped with dirt, our back ached and we had no contact yet with Mike. By 8pm he called. He apologized profusely for everything that happened today. He said he was writing exams and hence the long silence. He finished not too long.

'You have exams, you now wanted to begin this thing this weekend, with no actual preparation in sight. You allowed us to come here and begin working and doing things outside of our agreement?' I said angrily.

'You should have sorted yourself out first, you're just starting this and your 100 percent would not be available here for this?, Or this was how you planned it all along, see your menu you want the event to start by 4pm tomorrow and if we begin cooking all these from 6 am we would have to begin preparations so the food be ready and fresh from 4pm, cooking takes time, especially the preparations, who would cut the vegetables, who would set up, who are the people that'll help in moving the drinks for the mocktails I'll do.'

I said.

He didn't answer for a while then he said.

' I am really sorry I didn't plan it to be this way please, by tomorrow everything you need will be available.'

I said nothing, I ended the call and prepared to wash myself properly. My sister had already showered. She too was tired and immediately went to lay on her bed and slept even without creaming herself, I covered her and went in to bathe.

Friday came we saw no one, and carried on my ourselves to the market again

The Power Line section of the market was occupied by hairstylists who made replicas of every latest hairstyle, braids and wigs they laid their eyes on or saw in magazines. The market had blossomed after the kaduna crisis, we learned. Those who survived the crisis rebuilt the ravaged market. They made hairs, everything feminine, to manufacture beads and beauty items like hats,scarves, wrappers with their hands and local tools near-copies of designer bags and shoes were also made with leather bought from tanneries in Kano. Looking at each piece, we could see the artistic finishing beautifully. These men and women were creating beautiful art pieces that looked like affordable luxuries as many residents could not afford the imported ones from big designers. I wondered how it would be if I bought one or two for my mama. I decided to buy a beautiful hair scarf of cerulean blue colour. It was nice seeing how these people made these things in their own designs, though some imitated foreign brands items but they did it with a touch of their own uniqueness and creativity. They remodeled them to fit the taste of the residents. My sister got a beautiful leather skinned purse. I got my scarf then we proceeded to shop for what brought us that morning. We wanted meat, so we went to the meat sellers. We also bought fresh tomatoes and peppers. Early mornings were when they brought them cheap straight from the farm. They said, So we got those things and decided to go back to our venue.

For each menu we had dessert, appetizers, main course etc. For Friday our dessert included chocolate cake and vanilla cake and whipped cream, Michael didn't pay for the cake so we had to make it. I went to get the cake materials because I already took the event as my own. I needed just today to go well. I prayed for it to go well. Tomorrow being Saturday, my sister and I planned to return home. It was clear Michael would not keep his side of the deal and expected us to work by ourselves till the end of the weekend and that wasn't right. I had already told him, I could not handle intense stress, especially physical stress as my body's energy got low quickly. He refused to listen.

He came with some equipment, meant to serve and put the foods cooked inside, he was avoiding talking to me but I knew that till evening before he would come again. I went to meet him.

'This wasn't our agreement,' I said.

'I have not lived in KD before. Why bring me here to navigate my way all by myself. this is absolutely not fair and after today we would be returning tomorrow, as you didn't keep your side of the deal we would be going tomorrow I can't do this for Saturday and Sunday. ' I said.

'I'm so sorry please it's not my intention for it to be this way, that's why I am glad I got you because I knew that even if I'll not be present you will take this as your own and do well. I had faith in that. But honestly it's my exams. I had already put out the flier before I heard our exams would be this week, I have been advertising this since two months now, changing the date would have been disappointing as everybody is anticipating this I am sorry, deeply sorry.'

He said

' I heard you but I won't continue this way Saturday and Sunday. '

' I got somebody she's coming today, send her, anything you want her to get ask her she'll bring it for you, I brought two boys as well, they'll be here soon, they will help you, they'll stay till Sunday to help you if you need anything and for today they can start doing anything you need them to do.'

He said

``Okay,'' I said.

We cooked for the event. The guys Michael brought were so cool, they made the kitchen lively, we joked and worked. They helped a lot, brought their 100% to the table and team work was easy with people who were willing to work.

We cooked Jellof rice, Chinese stir fried rice, Singaporean noodles, we made pepper soup, and fresh fish pepper soup. Goat meat soups, boiled plantains, our proteins consisted of fish, chicken, turkey and Beef. I baked vanilla cake and chocolate cake. I decorated them with whipped cream, cherry and sprinkles.

Everything looked beautiful for the event. We were ready by 4:30 pm, truly his friends turned up, the hall was full, he brought some guys who decorated the whole place in purple and pink curtains, music was playing and the waiters for the event had already put on their white and black to help direct people on how they'll follow to dish their foods. They answered questions on the menus and asked which they tried first. The feedback from the food was refreshing. I always looked forward to what people had to say for my foods, we had chocolate milk cooling in the freezer for the kids. A lot of people showed up for the event. It made me happy and hopeful that yes definitely our efforts were not wasted. I looked forward to continuing the partnership with Michael, his cousin Robiu came too, his cousin, a very fine man, he was young, tall and looked like he played basketball. He interacted well with my sister and I could see that they got along pretty quickly. Being exhausted was an understatement, I told Michael that I had to go rest again tomorrow since the people he brought were still available. I'd leave everything in their care as I was done cooking. He agreed. I was outside the gate waiting for him, my sister was still talking with Robiu, they were outside with me. I looked at the sky and it looked like it would rain any moment from now.

ACCIDENT

I woke from a deep sleep. The room was wide, the walls painted blue, and the low-hanging ceiling was a blinding white. My body felt sore, tired and strange at the same time. The window was wide open, but I could not tell what time of the day it was, my sight was blurry, I looked to my left I saw my mama, she sat beside me, in front of me sat Michael, what are they doing in the room I was sleeping in, why is my mama here I thought, they looked like they were sleeping on chairs but why? I thought. I stared outside at the sky that wore the darkest color of blue I have ever seen. I was confused if it was dawn or dusk or was it midnight? I didn't know which. I coughed and immediately my mama woke up.

'Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord oh praise the Lord my prayers were not in vain.' she said.

'Why are you here, where's this?' I asked.

I wanted to stand up but my head ached and a bandage was placed round my head. My left hand was bandaged, my chin bandaged, my sides hurt badly and my right knee was painful to move. My left leg had bandages on the feet. It was wrapped. My knuckles had wounds on them.

'what happened?' I asked again.

'you don't remember?' my mama asked "no I don't" I answered.

'You were involved in an accident, hit and run, they said.'

'How? I have no memory of any car accident.'

I said. 'Last thing I remember was I was waiting for Michael to drop us off so we could prepare for the next day. What's today's date?' I asked.

'It's been a month since your accident,' said Michael. 'You've been in a coma for 4 weeks'.

He said.

'So I had an accident, how?'

Michael said he didn't know how, my sister just ran to him, crying, she called him to come quickly that I was bleeding and had been hit.

He said he came and brought me to this hospital. It was the police hospital. His uncle worked here as a doctor and has been the one administering treatment to me.

' I thought you'll never wake up again, I was so scared, I thought I had lost you, your eyes when I came were all white. I heard the news and the next day I came here, Michael provided us with a place to sleep, I stay at the house during the daytime sometimes and your sister stayed during the night, sometimes we alternated, she's at the house today for the night I am here, you'll see her when she comes tomorrow morning.' she said.'

'Wow,' I said and my mouth hurt too.

'Why so many wounds?' I thought. 'You lost so much blood' said my mama.

Nothing made sense, I was thirsty and I asked for water. I drank the little she brought. Then she went and called a nurse.

A nurse came in to check me. She smiled warmly at me. You look better, she said. I imagined if I had possibly looked lost. She took notes and said she was happy I had regained consciousness. I slept with my mama watching me.

At 2 P.M another nurse came to examine me. Her notes stated that I lost consciousness immediately upon being hit on the head, and that I was brought in unconscious. A subsequent note stated that I lost consciousness “immediately after the accident” Another note stated that, “Patient is always drowsy,” I was often drowsy and I fell in and out of sleep all through the day. My sister came by 4pm. She was happy to see me return to consciousness. She started crying saying I looked terrible and it was like I had no life left in me.

From then on I relied on the versions of myself told from everyone's perspective. The truth remains that I had no recollection of how the accident happened. How I moved from my last memory to being on a hospital bed for a month and waking up like I just went to sleep last night only to wake in the morning on a hospital bed.

I was stitched 4 times on my chin. I had stitches on my elbow, my right knee still aches and so I limped slightly when I stood up to talk. I had an injury close to my right breast and it was said that the shirt I wore and the bra had a hole in that particular spot, the shirt was tattered and torn like it was dragged on the main road. It was torn out of my body. My left ankle was twisted. Two wounds on my head, one at the back of my head, the second close to my left ear, I bled from my ear for a while, they said. My inner ear's skin peeled, behind my left ear was a shallow wound. My jaw kind of shifted. I could not clench my teeth. Till date I still can't clench my teeth. My knuckles were bruised, every wound looked like I was dragged for a while on the rough main road. Only two people could explain accurately what happened to me. My sister and Robiu, but both of them versions of the story had elements the other's story didn't have, the stories also had similarities.

ROBIU's STORY

He said He didn't know when I was on the road, but he saw me arrange our flask which contained food we were to eat that evening at our hotel. So I adjusted the bags and took them out of the road because Michael was coming with his car and the flask was at the entrance of the venue. He was backing the road, when he heard a car's tyre screech and next thing they heard a loud sound like it hit another car or hit a drum and the car spinned. Next thing they saw was me, far away past the fence of Michael's BandB.

They ran to go get me and my eyes were not open but I was breathing and My sis after seeing me then ran to go call Michael. He said I vomited the watermelons I had eaten earlier after I made the fruit salad on his body. He kept telling me to open my eyes and stay with him. Till Michael came, and they brought me to the central police hospital.

MY SISTER's VERSION

She said, she saw me bend and by the time she looked to see if I had stood back up, and immediately she heard a sound like a car crashed she didn't see me again, she said she saw the car drag me till my shirt slipped from the place it was hooked on the car's front, she saw blood coming out from my ears and my shirt was covered with blood and my eyes, the white were up, when she came back with Michael and I was brought to the hospital.

MY MAMA

'You got all of us worried. You didn't move, didn't do anything, could not open your eyes either. I am so sorry you have to grow through all this.' said my mama. 'If I could take all these pains away I would, I am so sorry Win baby.'

I cried with my mom as well.

After a week I was to be discharged, the hospital Michael brought me to did not have an orthopedic specialist who could help me correct the injury around my right knee. It ached badly. They recommended the university of ilorin specialist hospital for me and the doctor in my case wrote a note needed to give to the doctor he referred us to. He had already emailed him, my medical records and all that was necessary. He also spoke with him already via email but the note was to make seeing him easy, when we reached the hospital as he was always busy but if the people on duty saw the note they would know that this was the people he was waiting for and attend to us he said.

We had relatives in Ilorin, my aunty married a Muslim and they lived in Ilorin since she got married. Michael decided to help us. He paid for the flight from KD to Ilorin. Our trip was very short, in like 30 minutes. When we arrived, we went straight to my Aunt's place. He could not come with us as he had things to do. He finished his master's degree exams in the period where I was in coma, he had other engagements and only promised to keep in touch. My mama thanked him for his help, before we left for ilorin. But I knew deep down that she blamed him for this accident, sooner or later she would say that this was the reason she had a bad feeling concerning the whole Job then, but she said nothing, did nothing. I guess she was worried about my knee.

My body began to fail me the day we reached our Aunty's home. Just as we entered the flat, we saw my aunty with her son nestled in her arms. I became terribly dizzy and felt the ground had shifted under my feet. My mama caught me before I slumped to the ground and my Aunty took the baby in her arms, gave him to my sister to hold while she and my mom carried me inside, to the room.

‘I think she is tired,’ My Aunty said. ‘She lost so much blood and water. Please carry her to her room so she can rest.’ said my mama.

I shivered under the blanket. I could not go out of the room, and later, could not even sit in the same space with them even though I wanted to. I shivered when my mama came close to touching me, she wanted to check my temperature, she felt my neck and placed her hands on my forehead to see, but she felt how cool my body was. Why was I still shivering? she thought out loud. 'Your body is not hot now, why are you shivering like this.?' she asked. 'Do you not feel okay.?'

'i don't know what I said with my teeth chattering.'

'Maybe her stitches are infected, boil water, let us clean it and give her soup to eat to regain her strength.' said my aunty to my mama.

'Okay.' She said,

My sister was to come by road with some of my siblings. So she had to go fix things and prepare with the necessary things we needed. If it were not possible for them to come, my mama asked that she send the things I needed and stay back as she was kind of scared of the road and didn't want any of her child to have to go through such pains I was going through.

In the morning Aunty Doo brought a nurse called Faith, to check my wounds, especially the one on my arm and chin. When she touched my chin to open the plaster there I screamed. She opened it and a foul smell filled the room. It was very bad that both my mama and Aunty Doo left the room. ‘Your body is hot,’ she said. ‘We have to take you to the hospital, this wound looks infected.’

‘I am fine,’ I said. I swiped at the sweat that beaded my face, and then requested the nurse take a look at my chin properly, she did, she brought her forceps and the other things necessary to remove stitches out of the wound. She was able to take out two stitches. She cleaned the wounds too, the one on my elbow was cleaned thoroughly and let open. She said it was best to let it open so it healed now, as it was no longer necessary to place a second bandage on it. My Aunty held her crying son, she held him to her chest dutifully. Being a mother looked so good on her, she was plump and she looked like she enjoyed her new body size. I was happy for her.

I rested and with time the fever left me. I got strength enough to move around. I looked better too. So we decided to go for the appointment.

My Aunt's husband drove us to the hospital the fourth day after our arrival. My Aunty's baby Muhammad turned three months old. I kept my gaze fixed on the windscreen as he drove us to the hospital. We reached the hospital, we gave to them at the medical records department, the note given to us by the doctor at the hospital in kaduna. They immediately directed us to wait for doctor Balogun. So that was his name, I thought, doctor Balogun. Doctor Balogun came, he took a look at me and checked my legs, he checked my knee. He asked us to do a scan on the right knee and return. He sent us to another doctor who would remove the rest of my stitches.

The doctor told me he would have to inject my chin, because pulling out the remaining stitches would hurt and it would cause me discomfort. He was with a nurse and the nurse held a stainless plate. Where everything he needed was in. He broke the glass bottle containing what he would inject me. He put it in the injection and I lifted my chin and he injected it, it stung a little bit. He said with time I would not feel a thing on my chin. After 2 minutes he tried to pull out the stitches, he pulled the first one, it didn't hurt, but I felt him struggle a bit before it was out. The second one hurt a little also and it started bleeding. The last one came out smoothly. He applied pressure on where it was bleeding and it stopped.

He checked the stitches on my elbow, he removed them too leaving the place looking pink. He gave me some injections for the pains on my head and they made me drowsy, so drowsy, my mama said we should go home, we would come for a scan another time. We went home. I was already sleeping in the car. I slept the rest of my day.

Woke up in the evening to an empty house, I called my mom and she said, she and my aunty went to church. That my Aunty said all that has happened to me was not normal. That it was a spiritual problem so she took her to her church to pray. I laughed and said okay. "Pray well mama" I said. I was hungry and I had little money on me so I decided to go get some food. I was hungry for meat pie and yogurt. On my way there I phoned Michael but he didn't pick, I called my sister she said they were fine at home, 'how are you doing Winn, how so you feel?" She asked. ' I feel fine, truly even going to go and buy meat pie, mommy went to church with aunty doo.' I said.

'Okay then, be careful, please look well, oh,' she said.

I was walking by the side of the road. I avoided any incoming car, I was walking but once I saw a car coming towards me, I paused and my whole body stopped, my breath ceased and I started panicking. Was this a fear of cars or moving vehicles? I didn't know, it made no sense at all.

My head had been examined at the police hospital. I had no damage to any part of my brain. But it was possible that how I got into the accident would never be known. My last memory was that of me waiting for Michael at the gate, waiting for him to come take us back to where we stayed.

So after cars passed, I walked slowly to the pie xpress across the junction. The place was crowded. People stood in long queues. The two ladies in front of me were arguing over a topic, they said that they thought people who worked online, remotely were scammers just disguising saying they worked from home. A man stood well away from them, looking into his phone held with both his hands. The ladies would not stop arguing and laughing, speaking ignorantly and from the way the man twisted his face, I could tell that he was very much disgusted with what they were saying and I bet he would interrupt them sooner or later. ‘ A lot of people actually legally work online you know, I for one I work online and I am a virtual assistant and I own no business online, I work on hours like normal people, for people and companies out of my location, my friend who went to get rice is an IT support specialist, My Sister is customer success analyst and we all work online. Not all online workers are scammers, please get your facts right.’ he said.

The ladies began to mutter apologies then I spoke up.

‘It's okay, I said to them, you didn't know better now you do and I also learnt from what he said let's do well not to judge what we don't know or can't understand,’ I said.

They looked at me, and then at him. And moved on the queue to go collect what they came to buy. And he looked at me.

' Hi I'm Mu' he said

'Oh, nice, my cousin's name is Muhammad, I call him Mu, and he's 3 months old.' I said

'nice to meet you, I can see you're new to ilorin.' he said

He didn’t extend his hand and I flushed with relief. I was not ready for the touch of a stranger; though my mind was running in circles as my gaze hovered over him. He carried himself well without effort. He started to talk, and I watched his lips move. It had been a while since I observed a man like this, since my head got filled with silly thoughts about a man. And this amused as well as irritated.

'how do you know that please?'

'Well you don't look like them indigenous people, you look like a northerner.' he said in a matter of fact way.

'okay, I'm from Abuja,'

'What brought you here then?' he asked.

'I came for medical treatment, I had an accident so I came to see the orthopedic specialist.'

'Wow I'm so sorry about that' he said.

Mu talked on and on, and I listened; he could not read her mind anyway, and that thought comforted me. Then he said he visited this spot often and had never seen her before hence why he was sure and guessed I was not from here; he would have noticed me before if I was a regular to this spot plus there's a way the girls here aren't polite, always ready for a fight but he said I could never hide in a crowd. He smiled as he said this, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He was flirting but he was careful with it too not to appear too straightforward.

``Here's my card, please call or WhatsApp me. My partner will soon come and we would have to go.' he said 'nice meeting you, I really do hope you call me.'

I stared at the card in my hand, and smiled. Bought my meat pie and yogurt, then headed home. When I reached home I met with Aunty Doo and my mama, they just arrived, I'm sure they didn't know yet that I had stepped out, so when they saw me coming from the gate they rushed saying, what happened, I laughed a little and they looked at me like the worse had happened. My mom asked, `` Are you feeling well, dear?'

'Yes ' I said

Amused and tired I was.

`` I'm not mentally unstable mama " I said, giggling a little.

'Like I am okay, I only went to get meatpie and yogurt ma.' She looked at me doubtfully, but didn't say anything. So we all went inside the house. My mama told Aunty Doo what the orthopedic specialist said. Aunty Doo said it'll be best if we did the scan early, so we would know how early the treatments would begin.

Later when we all settled in bed.

I took out the card given to me by that guy named Mu and dialed the number on the card. It rang for a while but he didn't pick up on whether he slept or would possibly be working, so I didn't try again. I kept my phone aside and slept.

We went for the knee CT scan the next day. By 9am we arrived at the hospital. I was asked not to eat any solid food that morning. We didn't know how it would go, so I didn't eat.

I was asked to remove all my jewelry and change into a hospital gown before the Scan. I removed the bandaging worn over my affected knee.

The CT scan machine was very big. The rest of the process went in a haze. I could not quite understand what it was they were doing, but the technician said my results would be ready in 45 minutes. So after I was done with the scan. I was outside waiting with my Uncle. My mama and Aunty Doo had gone to church today too and they didn't want my uncle to possibly know that they were going to church so they asked him to take me to the hospital that they had somewhere to go to. He was the calm man that said he was okay.

'How about school now?' my uncle asked.

'School is fine' I answered. I don't know if he was a poor conversationalist or he was just selectively unaware of all that has happened to me or he was just insensitive, whichever one, I didn't care. I guess he saw that I was not happy with his question but didn't say anything further. He waited with me till our 45 minutes was up. The Technician was a bit busy so he didn't give us the result till it was an hour.

He gave us a sealed envelope to take to Doctor Balogun.

We went to the doctor , Balogun, to submit the scan results but he was not available at that minute so my uncle said he would come back later as he had to quickly go attend to his business.

He sold Apple Gadgets and his boys had been calling him for a while, before he left me there. I said okay and watched him as he left.

Doctor Balogun did not come to the hospital at all, they said he was carrying out surgery on a patient and the surgery was not finished yet. That he wasn't through and so I could return to come back tomorrow. I sat down after that information waiting for my Uncle but when it was evening and he showed no signs of coming back to get me, I decided to go home by myself. Ilorin was a pretty simple place, nothing much to confuse you. The same route one followed to the market, the same route they followed back home. Nothing extra.

When I reached home, I saw my aunty and mama together, talking. It's been so long I saw my mom this carefree with no worries. It was beautiful. I approached them, they lifted their heads up from where they were seated and smiled at me.

Your mommy will be going tomorrow. Your other siblings have missed her and are now complaining saying they're also children too oh. No, only you are pikin she said. I laughed and understood.

'Doctor Balogun was not available today, oh mammi, they said he was performing surgery on a patient and it would take a long time before he finishes.' I said.

'Well you're with me now, I'll make sure we see him, for the meantime your mom would be traveling tomorrow back to meet the rest of your siblings, you'll be here with me till you feel better, once you're strong enough you can travel back to abuja.' My Aunty said.

'Okay, I understand then. Mammi when will you be leaving tomorrow, what time?' I asked.

'early Morning motor oh,' she said,

'Don't worry I'll come see you before I leave. Oh, be out of danger. Oh, I'll be praying for you this day and everyday of my life until I leave this world. I'll keep praying for my children.' She said,

I smiled 'okay Mammi go well' I said. She called us immediately. She arrived in Abuja and told us her journey was an easy one, very smooth too. I spoke to all my siblings, they were happy to hear I was doing alright with less pains, all said the change of environment would do well for me and hopefully things went in my favor. They missed me and I missed them as well.

I was happy my Mama reached well, Aunty Doo was not a troublesome woman, she only ever meant well, even though her methods sometimes were not what i liked. Her husband was an easy man, peaceful and calm, he rarely spoke, he was not much of a talker and when he tried he asked the strangest questions which made things awkward. I loved my cousin, he was a sweet boy, He barely cried, ate often and played rather than sleep.

One Sunday evening, I went to get what we would eat, as Aunty Doo had resumed work, because her three months of maternity leave were up. So she could not cook as often as she wanted. I wished I could help them, but my elbow was still stiff, I could not move it with the ease I used to use before the accident. More so my Aunty would not let me cook till I finished my medications and the treatment on my knee.

I was given different medications, some ear drops for my ear, Lots of medicines for different purposes, they always made me dizzy and tired.

I reached the pie xpress so I could be directed to where I could get Jellof rice, plantains and turkey for my aunty. Her husband said he would eat out before coming home, he would bring something for her. But it was possible he would come back very late and she could not wait till then.

I sat waiting for my order, when I saw Mu walk in with his friend. He went straight and got what they needed. I think moi moi because that was what was ready. As he was heading out he saw me off the place he saw me.

Karim showed up, carrying a plate of jollof rice.

‘May I sit with you?’ He pointed to the empty chair before her.

She began to say no but her old manners, which constantly crept into her daily relations with people, begged her to be nice.

I waved him over and he sat, settling right in front of me. The table was short and round and there wasn’t enough space, meaning that their hands would touch if we had to eat at the same time, but we weren't eating and I kept my arms around my body, and that became least unsettling: he looked directly in my eyes, watching my every move, from the way I turned my head to how I scratched my neck l, even how I drank water from the bottled water I got earlier. The unexpected way he looked at me made me self-conscious; I, who had only wanted to say hello to him and make him aware that I was here, became self-conscious.

'hi Mu,' I said.

'hello girlie' he said smiling, 'you did not call me again you see.'.

'I called it rang but you didn't pick it.' I said.

'oh I'm so sorry about that.' he said

'You came to get food, I guess, let me pay for it.' he offered.

I didn't refuse because I was amused. 'Go ahead , here's the slip for my order.' I said.

For a moment he was shocked like he didn't expect me to agree. I laughed.

'I thought you'd say no, and I'll say no I got this and insist you know. You just said yes like you were expecting it.' he said amused.

I laughed amused at what he said. ' Well at least you didn't offer me a blank cheque to fill, so don't be too surprised I said yes, you offered I accepted. That's it.' I said.

' I like you,' He said.

'It's mutual' I said. I have never been this brazen before, maybe it was the accident, maybe it changed something in me, seeing how fickle life was, with the way the accident changed me, I was just happy to have been given the opportunity to love again. I wrote haphazardly, my writings changed. My elbows were stiff, my jaws uneven. How I even chewed was terrible, my smile became crooked because my teeth were not aligned as they should. I always hoped to find a connection with a person in a crowd full of people and here I found one, I wasn't willing to play games. I looked at Mu and saw that I could learn a lot from him. I wanted him to teach me things he knew. What he did, how he came to do it. How he survived and how he lived. I wanted to hear the stories of his childhood told. I wanted a lot from him but I was also open to things not working out as I planned. I wished people were truthful with me, but also not harsh as Williams was with his truth. I wished that James spoke to me even once and told me he would support me through the pregnancy but after it he would leave that would have been understandable because I knew when it would end. I like knowing when it would all end, not seeing it end and one day everything just broke like everything they said was lies from the start.

Mu paid for my food, and we left the place. He walked me to my house and asked for my number this time. I gave it to him. He promised to text. He said he was not much of a call person so he can't promise he'll call. I said 'okay' and I went into the compound of my Aunty's house.

I and Mu continued our communication on phone as I did nothing, I chatted with him. I cleaned the house, moved myself around. I walked sometimes exercising my knee. I could not put weight on the joint without pains, it was often stiff. The doctor said if was more like a sprain on the ligament. That it would take 6-9 months for me to go back to my usual activities. He suggested I move around.

My mama called everyday and she was worried and I told her. Often that I was fine to make her happy and calm. My mama and my siblings are the support I had all through my low moments. They always trusted that through each ache I would come back better than before.

Michael too called sometimes to check up on me. We didn't speak with the ease we had before. It was almost like I could sense him blaming himself for everything that happened. We never spoke about the business. I never did ask, for a moment I forgot about it totally till one evening I remembered that I had gone to work for Michael and I didn't get the money. I never spoke about it because he really tried doing things voluntarily. I thanked him always for helping in saving my life. I doubt if I'll ever see him again.

I had a date with Mu. One evening, he said it was a casual date so I should be in comfortable clothes as we were just going to an outdoor place and doing outdoor activities that were not stressful but refreshing. I told my Aunty. She was happy that I had made a new friend in a short while. She said I needed it. She had seen Mu and they spoke. She often predicted people and predicted that Mu was a lover. She said he was a soft boy and soft boys are good, they don't do bad things to girls, they leave you when they're tired of your bullshit. She said her husband was a soft boy.

That's how he doesn't give her stress, he was just loving and calm and though a poor conversationalist, he conversed well in the other room. I laughed because I understood what she meant. She said she understood her husband and I needed to understand Mu too and take it little by little.

You should change your dress,’ Aunty Doo said, as she stood up to go inside.

I rubbed my sweaty palms on the dress I wore, my stomach suddenly queasy. I was panicking about what I would wear to go on a casual date with Mu. I stood up too, following her Inside.

I was suddenly unsure of my choice of clothing, and I thought of putting on something simple. But Aunty Doo said, ‘This Jeans and shirt you are wearing is very beautiful, the blue color of the top makes your face glow.’

'Thank you I wanted to wear Joggers and t-shirts. Oh, he said the outing is a simple thing, I should not over-dress. He repeated that severally to Aunty.' I said.

'Ahh if that's the case then, you can dress as simple as you want, maybe on another date you can dress as chic as I want you to.' she said.

Another date? I thought, well let me be as optimistic as my Aunty.

I wore black joggers and gray t-shirts, packed my braids and carried a jacket in case it became cold. I wore my sandals and was ready. I wore makeup only on special occasions, so no makeup just wore a perfume given to me by my Aunty.

Mu came and we left for the destination he has in mind. We arrived at a garden. The garden faced a lake, it had a canteen too, so we sat to eat they were roasting plantains and making sauce on the side. The roasted plantains can also be eaten with peanut butter but I preferred the spicy peppery sauce. Mu wanted fried yams and eggs. It barely took 5 minutes, they brought our food. In that time, I called my Aunty and told her the address of place we were at. She said she knew the place, I should remain safe and remember to come back early, she said once it was 10pm the estates gates were closed. I took note and said okay and thanked her.

I wiped my fork with a napkin and began to eat.

‘So, what do you do aside from working online as a hobby of sorts?’ I asked, picking through my roasted plantains and peppery sauce, forking medium sized pieces so I could chew without making how I chew obvious as it took time to open my mouth and also to chew, it always looked like I was deliberately chewing slow, before the accident, I ate quickly but now I ate very slow.

‘I paint in my spare time and photography is my hobby.’

‘Nice.’

He shrugged.

‘I used to draw when I was little, I was also very good at drawing things in biology class, my classmates used to bring theirs for me to complete or draw for them,’ I said, and I felt I had said something

uninteresting. ‘I like art a lot, life's art itself,’ I added slowly.

He lifted a brow. ‘Awesome. So do you have something you're doing on the side or you're just focusing on getting well’

‘Not yet. I am living with my Aunty as you know, I haven't found what I'll love to do yet, but I know I'll love to work remotely like you. You could be a teacher , you know, teach me what you do.’

‘I don’t think I can be a good teacher, oh.’ He laughed. 'but there are lots of courses you can take online. You apply for them and use this time to learn the skills I have. I'll send them to you later on.'

‘So do you have a girlfriend, a wife, baby mama, someone you're talking to, fiancee or someone you're seeing, a significant female in your life?’ I asked.

‘I don’t have a girlfriend or a wife, or any female in my life, no baby mama nothing, the only female I have is my mother.'

We watched each other for a while , what he said sitting heavily between us, taunting. He had put the first foot forward, and his eyes urged me to declare my status too.

‘I am processing my divorce, I've been married before, I bore a stillborn daughter, she was anencephalic,’ I said, then held his eyes, examined his face to see how he took what I had just said. Our family lawyer had informed me the week before that they had sent papers to James and my father had returned the bride price James paid, though she fought hard against it,that he got me virgin, would he bring back the virginity and all the hurts and pains I went through. She felt he didn't deserve the money back, she cursed it because my papa said culturally to nullify the marriage, he had to return it. The news had brought me so much relief; I was no longer bound to James in any way which made me feel very free. But now, as I watched Mu lean back in his seat, his face folding in, ‘You don't like women on the verge of divorce or have any problem of sorts with divorced women?’ I asked Mu.

‘No, not at all. I don’t.’ he said

He had finished eating his fried yams and egg sauce had begun to look around. And for a moment, I was worried that he would in a haste end our date, that I had scared him with my declaration, but that was the truth and I didn't see any need to lie to him. I was scared that I should have waited a little before telling him the truth in that manner, I was still thinking before he suddenly turned to me, he looked at me deeply like trying to match what he just heard with what he saw in front of him. 'You look so young.' he said

'I guess I am young, I'm 23.' I said.

'You don't look 23, but your eyes seem like you're older than 23, but your body looks like you're 21.'

``Well I'm 23" I said. 'And I think I'm growing at my own pace.'

'You interest me so much.' he said

'I really like you'

I smiled. 'I like you too. Now where's all the fun you promised me.' I asked.

It had gotten darker than it was when we arrived. I checked that it was 6:45pm. I told him I would love to be home by 8 pm. He said okay, and asked me to stand up. We were going towards where people were dancing to what the DJ played. Mu said that they brought a DJ every evening to give the place the perfect ambience for fun. Sometimes the DJs messed up and played terrible songs. He told me of the story when one DJ was beaten because he ruined the proposal of a guy by playing reggae mistakenly. Those people were angry and went to beat the DJ but the man's girlfriend laughed and thought it was funny but she eventually said yes. Though chaotic it was funny to watch. It seemed like he favored this place so I asked why?

He said ' sometimes I stare at the computer all day long and when I come out to the real world, my vision becomes blurry for a while, like my eyes adjusting to people and moving things. So when I find time, I love to find myself outdoors because I'm barely outside. This place seems to be the only decent garden in this city and I come as often as my work allows' he said.

His work intrigued me and I could not wait to ask him questions about it. But this was a date so I kept work related questions away.

The place where they danced to the music the DJ played was right across the place we ate and crowded with people even though it was just seven in the evening. Maybe it was so because it was mainly youths and one of the most decent gardens as Mu said, many of them dressed casually, in jeans, flared gowns, joggers like me, most probably people looking forward to a chill time, finally getting what they came for, the opportunity to mingle. Mu led us to a table at the far end of the dance ground, a booth which opened directly into a large space lit with lights and occupied by couples who wanted to stay away from the glare of roving eyes while they made out.

‘This is cool, an outdoor club-like atmosphere,’ I said after I sat down.

‘Yes.’ He raised his voice because the music was loud and the chattering from the couples around were loud, so people huddled close, talking face to face, almost meeting each other.

Do you club?’

‘No I don't. When I was doing my A levels studies I once followed a man to the club. He told me to prepare my mind that I would see things at the club that my shy self should not be shy about. I thought only bad girls go to clubs. When we reached the club, I saw beautiful girls, couples. It was a classy club by the look of it.

Because people didn't press themselves like I saw them do in the movies. This one everyone was polite even when dancing and they served expensive alcoholic drinks. Some were sweet, some burned my throat, some made me feel like a bad girl. I liked the feeling.’ He looked at me amused.

'I love your stories, I wonder how many you have, you look like someone with stories I could pick a lesson or two from. My philosopher' he said.

'What's philosophical about my only club experience?' I laughed and said,

He leaned close. I could smell his cologne. My heart raced with something new, a feeling that was so fresh, so strange and kind of comforting at the same time. I wanted to kiss him. It felt reckless but like the right thing to do. I thought back to years back when I had sat demurely in a club with that man and his friends, a politician he was and his friend then was contesting for the seat of a governor in their state. I listened to them talk about politics and power and about their girlfriends; how I blended with the background rather than talk or make them notice I was there.

I was comfortable being in the background. Now, I didn’t need to lurk in the shadows anymore nor be shy about wanting somebody, I used to be comfortable being given anything, any advice anything at all I was grateful for it, maybe that's why life gave me what it gave me because I didn't actively seek what I deserved or desired intentionally. Now, I could tell a man what I wanted, needed or sought from him, it was a different confidence not hiding your story, saying it with your heart as it is. I was happy and indeed thought that ilorin was doing me good.

‘This place will fill up in a few hours.’ He said leaning closer, our faces were inches apart. ‘I like it here but I have never been here long enough to have people filled up. I mean, I come here to relax and chill sometimes, eat and play games but I never stay long enough for the music and dance. Let's be going home it'll soon be 8, I have also got work to do by 9’ He said.

I reached across the table and touched his hand and I realized that what I felt with him was: confidence. With him I was comfortable in the very essence that made me comfortable in my skin, myself and my stories; I was not ashamed of being silly or doing whatever I wanted to do and that pleased me very much. With James. I felt inadequate, with Williams I felt like he managed me, and saw me as a thing to be dashed love because maybe my eyes or some part of me screamed it to people to give it to me.

I was already feeling the buzz of the atmosphere as Mu promised that it would be full it was becoming full and the noise increased, on our way to his car he talked about his works he had created in his lone time, he told me of his transition from being a banker to being a virtual assistant and a technical support engineer. He said he got robbed one day on his way to work, his laptop was stolen, he was beaten, then he decided to look for other ways he could work remotely, he discovered the tech industry. He felt all one needed to do was code, be a programmer, someone who created apps or built websites to be able to be in tech. ‘I couldn’t go back to work. I just didn't understand how people would labor all day sitting in one place called an office listening to others talk for hours and begin to stress back home. I almost went mad,’ he said.

‘I'm glad you are happy doing what gives you fulfillment and meets all your requirements, that’s the most important thing and I want that freedom for myself as well. I want to be able to work without any physical interaction with people anymore or anything that would require me to leave my house and say I am going to work or to cook for an event.’ I said, I was happy, for being able to see someone who in a way understood what I craved for.

'Are you a caterer?’

'No I'm a chef, or I used to be, not sure anymore if I could still do it, after my accident, I've been skeptic a lot about working with people physically.'

‘I hope I finally reach the point where I get all I want and deserve.’ I said, staring at him, I reached out and ran a finger along the bridge of his nose. Although I was thought it stupid and silly, there was a certain warmth that came with knowing that he choose me as much as I choose him, we met ourselves halfway not Jim coming to me and me yielding and just letting it happen. I wanted him on my own terms and I decided the pace. ‘I want to kiss you.’ I said. I leaned forward and pecked him on his lips, I pulled back, he held my hands, pulled me back to him, then I kissed him this time with my tongue I prodded his lips open and his tongue and mine started a dance. His eyes were closed shut. He held me against him and it was peaceful with no self consciousness of any kind. We kissed.

MU

Mu's relationship with me was refreshing. He didn't see me in bits and parts, he saw me whole even in parts I was not comfortable with. He didn't like others to love me for the parts of me that fit him best. Even though when he said 'I love you' I knew it would pass but for the time being he meant it. It showed in his eyes. Sincerity in his voice. I prayed that when it was time for this love to leave it would leave with no drama as silently as it registered itself.

I learnt a lot from Mu. He taught me that if there was nothing to take from him at the end of the relationship, like what I hoped for, marriage, children or living together forever. I should learn to give myself all the kindness I think I was undeserving of. Especially times when I felt I was most undeserving of kindness. He offered peace and comfort. We had passion built up and summer beneath it all. It grew and made itself comfortable in our hearts. I didn't expect it.

Healing was not a thing that came to me immediately. But with Mu. I recognized that I took bold steps in walking away from blocks that no longer served me. Healing is a process and it took me a while to heal from shame, regrets most especially because for a long time I regret every decision I came to make. I started unlearning shame even before I met Mu.

I remembered the time I caught one of James' girls with my wig and bag. Wig that James knew I had been looking for. How it reached her hands I didn't know. He was away then. He said I should kneel and beg him for acting out because I told the girl that he was a married man yet to sign his divorce papers and I had proof that the exact things she wore were mine through and through. Do kind people do that? For a long time I felt like I myself was unkind hence why I attracted these kinds of people in my life. I'm never the one who had it all. I learnt the truth the hard way and I've always needed people but now I know that most times all you have is yourself and you have to do right by yourself by being kind to it first even when others behave differently. I have always been the one who apologized. Reached out first. Spoke first. Address the elephant sitting on the table first. But now. I know when to dust my feet and leave the room where I'm not needed.

Mu taught me ways I could apply for courses online. He urged me to get a laptop, he opened my eyes to possibilities and opportunities in IT. I learnt to be comfortable in my company a long time ago. Now I wanted to be on my journey to contentment and getting all I set my mind to. Regardless of my circumstances I wanted to practice how to be happy.

I told my Aunty about the laptop, she often said she would do something about it. My uncle, though he sold gadgets, never thought of giving one to me. I understood that they gave me time. They allowed me to be. They provided my basic needs for the time and made it always feel like it was vacation but when it came to actually helping me towards things that I wanted they couldn't for reasons known to them or didn't want to which was okay.

One day I was watching YouTube and I stumbled on this woman's story. She was shot 11 times but survived. She didn't get her happily ever after until she was 40. Pregnancy was not a walk in the park for her either. I could relate to her story because she was humble, looked kind and said that anyone with a story similar to hers could reach out to her and she'll give a listening ear. I searched for her on Instagram. I got to talk with her. I told her how I came across her vlog and I could relate with her story. I may have not been shot 11 times but I have had my own fair share of life's blows. She asked what I was doing at the moment. I honestly told her that I had nothing to do. I learned how to be a virtual assistant on some courses I take on Coursera and udemy. I told her that due to my legs I would be unable to work physically as any little strain on my right knee made it swell.

The doctor had to perform corrective surgery on my leg so I could not travel by road back home. My leg aches badly sometimes and it was hard and painful moving around.

She asked for proof. I sent her scam results of my anencephalic pregnancy, my knee where surgery was done. How far I recovered. Those were enough. She said she would do something to help me soon. I thanked her for giving me an audience and left her chatbox.

Over the week different people called me speaking to me asking me what I wanted in a way. Like they wanted to help me. I found it weird but always said my most sincere wish then was to get a laptop. The following week she asked for my account number and transferred the exact amount of money needed to get me a new laptop. I screamed, threw my phone away and jumped on one leg. I cried. It was unbelievable. I didn't believe things till they happened and when it happened I was overwhelmed with Joy. I felt so happy and showed my sincere gratitude to her.

She told me to go make a life for myself and do it proudly.

I told Mu. I got a system. He was happy for me. He asked me to enroll for the IT class next as the next one was coming up in August. The fee was 50k.

There was this girl in our hostel then, Her name was Chi. I contacted her. To see if she could help me with that amount as a loan of sorts that I would pay once I finished learning and got a job, I would pay her back. She trusted me. And gave me the amount. I was so happy to have the support of these people and promised not to disappoint.

I enrolled for the class, it was online, it was held thrice a week. Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays. It was to go on for a month. I brought my best to these classes. I listened, I asked questions and after I researched, I watched YouTube videos to understand aspects I didn't understand while in class. We held live sessions on zoom. They lasted for 3 - 4 hours. We had assignments after each course. I was excited for my future.

Last week our classes came, all who registered had zero to little knowledge about IT but we were going to leave the class with different people. The evening of the last Saturday classes came. That evening after our class I wanted to log into my Facebook account and make a post concerning my transition into IT. I discovered that my account had been hacked and I no longer had access to it. It was linked to my Instagram account. My Instagram account too was hacked. What in heaven's name was this? I thought.

My happiness was suddenly cut short. Where will I start from now? I thought. For a week I felt like I was logged out of my house and was not allowed to carry anything at all, not even allowed to say goodbye to my friends. It was hard. My online friends were my support, I was in many support groups on Facebook as that was my best feature of the platform. I liked how one was able to connect on some level with people who understood you and had experiences close to what you went through. I told Mu, we tried with other people to get the account back but it was futile. It was of no use at all. I was heartbroken. What more could I now lose.

I saw this as a total opportunity to begin afresh. On that hacked account lies memories of my past, memories of James, memories with Joy, memories with Williams. Memories of school, I had my classmates posting daily of their achievements and accomplishments, though I was forever happy for them. It didn't stop the feelings of inadequacy that often came to me when I saw them. Feelings of being a failure too crept in now and then. I consoled myself sorely that this marked a new beginning in my life and it won't ruin my joy.

The next morning I created a new Facebook account and sent friend requests to my new friends I had made. Few of them, just 47 of them. People started sending friend requests to the new account but I didn't accept them. I was selective of those I put on my cyberspace. I created a new Instagram account too. It felt fresh. I missed the progress of the previous account but I took it that I needed this break off social media for a while and in a way it helped. Many people forgot about me. Some remembered to call and say hello. It touched my heart. I told them thank you sincerely meaning it. I took note of them and it seemed like I had my own little family from social media.

At the end of it all I was not alone. That for sure I knew. I now know I had the love and support of total strangers, family, friends and the powers that be that watched over us.

Growth is continuous and so I would keep growing, keep challenging my boundaries, coming out of my comfort zones a step at a time. Understanding my inner child. Shredding all the layers I put on to protect myself. I looked into myself, continuously searching my soul for the answers I seeked. Surviving and looking for ways to thrive also, above all mastering the art of not dying.