

BATTLE SCARS

The first time it happened felt like a lucid dream because there was no way in hell that Wale, her loving husband would ever attempt to choke her. It was unfathomable. Renike's mind went numb for a few days after the incident as she desperately tried to rationalize what had happened. His phone had rung while he was in the shower and she casually picked it up from his side of the bed to tell the caller that he was unavailable when he charged out. He roughly grabbed the phone from her, while he loudly swore at her to never meddle in his affairs.

Naturally, she was taken aback by his unexpected outburst and opened her mouth to speak, then immediately found herself gasping for air as she felt a strong grip at the base of her throat. His eyes flashed with a sudden darkness as he dared her to speak another word. The musky smell of his masculine body wash overcoming her senses was the only thing she could remember before she started to feel the heaviness of the punches. They started slowly and a bit bearable at first. Her shoulders. Her chest. Her neck. The punches slowly worsened as they became full-on blows. The weight of his body held her down as he unleashed a new level of rage on her. Her body blacked out and she closed her eyes in anguish as she tried so hard not to capture this jarring image of him in her brain. She couldn't afford to replay this horrific memory of her husband so she shut her eyes tightly, trying desperately hard to erase any sort of visual evidence. This wasn't happening. It was a mirage, a reverie, an alternate reality. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. He stopped and she felt him get off the bed. Deafening silence.

She heard the soft padding of his footsteps on the tiles retreat to the walk-in closet. Her eyes remained shut, heart beating wildly, almost exploding out of her rib cage. She couldn't see him but felt every movement of his. He put on deodorant, got dressed in his nightwear and casually

settled in bed beside her. She froze. After a few minutes, she felt his skilled fingers snake around her shoulders but she vehemently shook him off. How dare he attempt to touch her? She held her breath as she heard him scramble up from the bed and saunter to her side of the bed, mentally preparing herself for another round of thrashing. Nothing could have ever prepared her for what happened next.

She opened her eyes to see a tearful Wale kneeling at the foot of the bed. For the two years she had been married to him, she had never seen him cry. Not when his favorite pilot cousin had died in a plane crash few months back, not last year when his father had lost complete sight in one eye due to chronic diabetes and not even when Amani was born despite the doctors stating that their baby's heartbeat was abnormally low and she had a 50.50 survival rate. No. Olawale Bode Johnson was not one to ever show the slightest sign of weakness.

"Forgive me, my love," he managed to say amidst muffled sobs.

She blinked in surprise at the incredible sight in front of her. Just minutes ago, this same man was throwing violent punches at her. It was perplexing. Unnerving. She was speechless and slightly afraid. She was supposed to be the one crying but tears didn't flow. She just stared at him, too stunned to speak. Surely, her husband wasn't a mad man.

"Baby-," he began again.

She shook her head, cutting him off. She wished he would just shut up and allow her process everything. She couldn't make sense of anything. She wished the last five minutes could go away. Five minutes. That was all it took to destroy a beautiful thing. The soreness in her body was still fresh. It wasn't an imagination. It had happened. Wale had really hit her. Her very own

“Wally Walex”. Her husband. The father of her baby. HER baby had hit her while their newborn was fast asleep in the adjacent room.

“I promise you that wasn’t me, I’m so sorry,” he muttered - his voice quavering; a penitent sinner.

His handsome face twisted into an ugly grimace and his eyes, now sullen, filled with tears. He covered his face with both hands and began to cry. Full-on bawling. Even Amani didn’t cry this loudly. A broken man. Heart-wrenching to see.

She reached out to stroke his face, her left arm still throbbing in pain. He looked up at her through long lashes and held her hands. He began to kiss her fingers fervently, whispering sweet nothings between each contact. He got up and kissed her deeply, their tongues intertwined as she granted him entrance into her mouth. What could she have done? He was still her husband and her body was his. He had made a mistake. No one was perfect. He was sorry and he loved her. That was what mattered.

He held onto her like his life depended on it. Offering words of apology with each kiss, promising never to repeat it with each touch, professing love with each thrust. She loved this man. She couldn’t leave him. He needed her. He was willing to change. She would help him. She wasn’t going to give up on him. With a puzzled mind and a hole in her heart, they made passionate love that night - on the same sheets he had hit her barely an hour ago.

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She looked up in the bathroom mirror at her reflection and a feeble smile tugged at her bottom lip as she fingered the flesh-coloured material covering her head. She liked to think of them as

battle scars and she wore them proudly like badges of honor. An illustration of the haphazard stitches she had painstakingly hand-woven to quilt the fabric of her union over the years. They hurt less each time. Her pain threshold must have escalated in geometric progression over the course of her marriage. She made a mental note to refill the First-Aid Box the next time she was out shopping, as most of the content were already half empty. Wale had become unhinged.

He had thrown a saucer at her during breakfast that morning over a minor altercation and the shards had slashed her across the forehead, resulting in heavy bleeding. It was her favorite Fine China set with intricate Arabesque floral designs in royal blue which deeply contrasted with the pristine, porcelain white of the crockery. Her mother had bought it in preparation for her marriage to Wale. It had cost her a lot of money but the price of the silverware paled in comparison with the expected return of investment from this union. It was not every day that the son of a reputable oil magnate agreed to marry outside of his social strata.

Her baby girl had cried loudly in her feeding chair at all the ruckus that ensued from the breakfast table. Baby Amani. Her cute smile was like a sudden beam of sunlight illuminating the darkest corners of the room. She was her very own ray of sunshine that made trudging through the cloudy, dark days a little more bearable. Amani was a spitting image of Wale. The chocolate brown skin; thick, dark wooly hair and brown, almond shaped eyes that could melt even the coldest of hearts. Her father's daughter she was.

She heard the screech of the heavy sliding gate downstairs, which signaled that her husband had left for work. These days, he didn't even bother to stay behind to offer to help clean up her wounds as he repeatedly uttered words of apology and hung his head in shame. No. The honeymoon phase was truly coming to an end and this was a fact that she had slowly started to

come to terms with. Things may only go downhill from here. She shuddered at the thought of that even being a possibility.

Wale hadn't always been like this. In point of fact, he had been the ideal husband for the first year of the marriage. He was wickedly handsome and had the charisma too. His charming smile and good manners were impeccable. He generously lavished his wealth on her daily with the same intensity and intentionality he used in making passionate love to her at night. She was indeed living out her fairytale fantasies and her parents couldn't have been happier. A year later, Amani was born into a home filled with love. Life took a turn for worse the week her baby turned a month old.

She remembered the last time she had tried to leave. Her mother had been astounded to see her daughter arrive without calling first that morning. The look on her face and her slight limp told her there was trouble. She scooped her granddaughter from her arms and quickly ushered her into the house, away from the prying eyes of neighbors. When they were safely inside, she bursted into tears as she narrated everything that had happened that morning – and what a morning it had been.

It was a Sunday morning and she had just bade farewell to her two cousins that had spent the weekend at her house. She got upstairs to find her husband pacing back and forth in the hallway next to their bedroom. He pointed an accusing finger at her and asked her why she had brought guests in without his approval.

"I hope that's not how you bring in strange men into my home when I'm away at work," Wale hissed angrily, his words laced with vermin.

The comment was like a sharp prong to her chest. Infidelity wasn't something she was even remotely capable of doing. She loved him too much to even have eyes for other men.

"Are you now accusing me of cheating?" she whispered, a lump forming in her throat.

Like a bull seeing red, he charged towards her angrily slamming her into the wall. He slapped her loudly across the face, making her instantly feel lightheaded. She looked up tearfully at the monster she had married. He raised his left hand to hit her again but this time she caught it just before it landed. With all her might, she started to frantically throw her hands in the air to counter his attacks but Wale was relentless. How could her petite frame be a match for a man of his natural athletic build that was toned by intense weekly training at the gym?

In one calculated motion, he shoved her to the ground and began to use his clenched fists to pummel her as she screamed. She curled herself into a ball on the floor, conceding defeat as he kicked her repeatedly, hurling curses. She wished he would just kill her. At least, the humiliation would be less.

She laid there motionless on the cold marble tiles, just beside their bedroom door, too weak to even move a muscle. She could vaguely hear the jingle of car keys as he picked it up from the dresser. She heard brisk footsteps walk past her and down the stairs as she floated in and out of consciousness. She could feel herself black out once more as she slowly got engulfed by the overwhelming darkness. It was in that fleeting moment that she made up her mind to leave.

"Olorun ma je!" her mother interjected while snapping her fingers repeatedly.

Renike stared at her mother in disbelief.

“Morenikeji, marriage is complicated but leaving is never an option, be patient and make it work,” she mumbled while wiping her tear-stained face.

‘But ma-,’ she began before her mother cut her off.

“My daughter will not bring shame to this family,” her mother snapped.

The memories dissolved and she was jolted back to the present by Amani’s loud giggle from downstairs. Shit. She had left her toddler by herself to tend to this darn head injury. What sort of reckless parenting was this? She quickly shut the First Aid box and scrambled for the staircase.

Amani was missing from her feeding chair in the dining room. She froze. She remembered she had left her there. Could she have crawled out by herself? No, she remembered activating the double child safety locks. Her mind had been fuzzy lately. She heard sounds in the kitchen – adult footsteps, so she inched towards the kitchen, half-afraid of what she might see.

To her greatest relief, she saw Edem rocking Amani in her baby carrier while putting away the shards of ceramic pieces away in the trash. The pieces that had seamlessly managed to inflict harrowing pain on her.

“Good morning ma,” Edem chirruped. “Ma! What happened?” Edem exclaimed, studying her face. *The darn bandage.*

“I fell down in the bathroom,” she said quickly, avoiding Edem’s gaze.

She collected her baby and allowed Edem to work. Edem had always found her boss a little peculiar. She noticed that she was always jumpy and on edge. She sought her husband’s opinion on the most mundane issues, but not in the usual flirtatious manner in which couples did. She spoke about him with great reverence but cowered in his presence. Anyone could easily tell that

there was something horribly wrong with the marriage but she couldn't be bothered, as long as her monthly payment came through.

It was 4pm - Edem's closing time. Renike walked her to the door and just as she was about to close it, Edem raised her hand to speak, hesitating while awkwardly playing with her fingers. Edem was never known to be timid so she was interested in what she had to say.

"Madam, one day he go kill you, carry your pikin, run away!" Edem blurted out, briskly walking away before she could respond.

That night, as Wale heaved and panted on top of her, Edem's words came back to haunt her.

"One day he go kill you,"

I'm already dead inside, she thought to herself bitterly, as he rolled off her. The intimacy was so bland now and she just lay underneath as he did all the work. Truth be told, the entire marriage seemed to be running on autopilot. She no longer felt any spark. She was dutiful in her marital roles but that was all her marriage had been reduced to - *role playing*. Pretending everything was fine in her household. Wearing longer clothing to conceal new bruises and feigning clumsiness to explain the ones that couldn't be covered became the norm. Her hurt was hidden behind placid smiles and hollow laughter.

The sheer brutality in which he had thrown the saucer at her kept replaying in her mind. What if he had blinded her? To do all of that in front their baby was a new low. Even for him. He had unleashed a new level of violence and she was certain that more levels were to be unlocked. Edem's words weren't so farfetched after all!

By 6pm the following day, she was staring at the ceiling of her former bedroom at her parent's house with her baby napping beside her. She could hear the brouhaha erupt from the living room. Wale's parents had come to plead on his behalf. She had gotten several missed calls from him along with two text messages. His manipulative ways no longer swayed her. Her parents had pleaded with her to return but she was adamant. She was done.

The next morning, she got up in high spirits and did something she hadn't done in years. She put on some highlife music and danced. She loved to dance. It felt good to be home amidst everything. She felt like she had been holding her breath for so long and now she could finally exhale. She picked a giggling Amani up and waltzed around her bedroom. She didn't know what the future held for them but she was hopeful - and that was enough.

She stood in front of her bathroom mirror, ready to bath. Her body was evidently tainted by several bruises and markings. She still regarded them as battle scars but now they were also survival scars. A symbol of what she had left behind. A reminder that she had chosen to live. For her daughter. *For herself.*