

DANFO

The air was December.

It wasn't Christmas but it had that biting harmattan feel. It felt like leaving your house late, unaware of the cold hands outside just waiting to tear your unmoisturized skin apart. Wrong time to be dressed like a whore.

Nothing felt alright, but this was life. I'd steal out of my tiny self on Lagos island, take a bus to Obalende and then make my way to Admiralty road, Lekki.

There was no need to steal out of my room really. I lived alone. I'd been making my own way since my mother and stepfather threw me out. My story was quite the cliché. Father died early, mother married a scumbag with no self control.

Life has a funny way of rewarding tenacity because the exact thing I'd escaped by leaving my mother's house was what I did on Admiralty all week.

When I arrived at Obalende, my body had adjusted to the temperature of the night. I hopped off the bus and headed towards another without a word as did everyone else. No one paid, spoke, or made a single sound. We were all bound by the same distasteful contract.

KINDNESS

When I reached Admiralty, the place was bustling. Women of all shapes and sizes were sprawled on either side of the road waiting to get lucky. Not me though. I never waited. I got my pick every single night I came out. The girls hated me. They said I was a Mami water who came to steal their clients. Some said I used juju. Only one person treated me with kindness. Her name, surprisingly, was Kindness.

No one knew though. She told everyone that her name was Kay.

The first time Kindness showed up at Admiralty, everybody stared at her. It wasn't because of her small frame or her face that looked like it had never seen suffering, it was the fact that she was missing an arm.

Who would have thought they'd ever see a one-armed prostitute on Admiralty road? Definitely not me; not in the days when I really lived or the days after.

After a short while, everyone kind of forgot to stare at Kindness. It was difficult to treat her badly. She was so happy and beautiful that everyone liked her almost immediately. For some reason, she was drawn to me. I tried my best to shake her off for her own good, but she wouldn't budge. After all my unsuccessful attempts, I gave in. I looked out for her, loved her even.

If I sensed that a client was tender and gentle, I manipulated him into going with Kindness instead.

Kind people deserved to be around each other.

MONKEY

I was bored, so I started to harbour thoughts of rebellion.

I was tired of living like a ghost. I never got to enjoy life in the sun like a normal person. I didn't get to relish small mercies; savouring the taste of cold water on a hot day, a hot bath on a cold day, the taste of roadside food. I had nothing, just a nightly bus ride with faceless strangers who I could've sworn were dying on the inside. Like the first time wasn't enough.

What was the worst that could possibly happen if I didn't want to do it anymore? What would they do?

That night as I prepared for Obalende again, Monkey the Menace showed up in my house. Not at my door, inside my house.

"Do you remember who I am?" he asked, leaning against my kitchen door.

I took one look at his black robes that smelled of camphor and sweat, the rusted, oddly shaped staff in his hand and the boredom on his face that he tried to pass off as a menacing expression.

"Monkey the Menace?"

He nodded.

"Do you know why I'm here?" He asked.

I shook my head

"You think you're smart, abi?"

It was my turn to look bored.

"You think you're smart? See, you will never leave my oga oh. You go continue to pay your debt *foreva and reva*"

"Okay."

"You no even dey fear. Ashawo! I no blame you. Na Master just wan help you. Normally, e suppose leave you make you finish for hell faya kpata kpata!"

I stared blankly at him. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say to that. Everyone who mattered knew who Monkey was. We all met him in our last moments.

I wondered who he was underneath all this. Sometimes his pidgin sounded like he was from Warri. Other times he sounded like a Yoruba man. It was impossible to place, and I was convinced he mastered many accents to maintain his air of mystery.

"Ashawo oshi!" He yelled suddenly, startling me.

"Abeg I've heard you. Stop shouting," I snapped

He seemed slightly taken aback by my tone. He hissed and looked away, then he was gone as mysteriously as he came.

There was absolutely nothing grim about this reaper.

PHANTOM

That night on the bus, I wondered if anyone felt as exhausted as I did. It was impossible to tell from the glumness, but I was almost curious enough to break the sticky silence. I thought better of it.

Kindness was at Admiralty when I got there and she seemed like she was having a rough night. She scratched awkwardly at the stump of her left arm continuously and no matter how much she tried not to make it obvious, she just wouldn't stop.

"What's going on?" I asked her as soon as she was within earshot.
"My left elbow keeps itching. I think it's one skincare oil I bought"

I sighed.

I wanted to tell her that she had no left elbow because her arm stopped inches short of where an elbow should be. I'd heard of things like this before. Amputees felt sensation in limbs that were no longer there. It was called a phantom limb something-something.

Instead I said "Shey they keep telling you people not to buy skincare products on Instagram?"

She protested that "Lolade organic skincare glow beauty" was certified and she had clients in Dubai and Austria.

I laughed.

"Sha stop using whatever you bought from Lolade kini kan."

PHILIP

A car pulled up a few metres away from me.

Whoever the driver was, they seemed very undecided about what they wanted to do.

The car drove backwards and forward like they were trying to make a decision on whether to leave or stay. I knew the type. Probably never spoken to Admiralty girls before but was having a rough night and needed agreeable company.

The car drove forward again and eventually stopped in front of me. It was a Tesla.

The windows slid down and a nervous head poked out

"Hi, how are you doing?"

"I'm good. You?"

"I'm having a bit of a rough night"

I nodded. We both went silent as he decided on his next set of words. I felt sorry for him instantly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked finally.

Another few seconds passed. I shifted uncomfortably. I was losing interest as the seconds went.

"No, I don't want to talk. I want to fu..." He caught himself before the word came out.

I laughed. Poor baby.

"It's okay if that's what you want to do. It's kind of what I'm here for"

"I'm sorry. A gentleman should never... I didn't mean to be so crass."

I laughed again. Worried about being crass on Admiralty?

"Why are you laughing?" he asked.

"Well, sir..."

He waved my "sir" away with his hand

"Philip, please."

"Philip, there's nothing you need that someone here can't give you."

"Wait, aren't you cold? It's really chilly here."

He seemed genuinely concerned.

"Come in, let's talk."

An hour later, I was coming out of his Tesla, with cash in my small bag and his undying gratitude.

As soon as I resumed my position on the side of the road, I saw Kindness making her way towards me. I discreetly reached into my bag and divided the wad of cash into two.

"It's really cold today oh. Who was that?"

"Some guy. He needed to talk."

"Talk ke? You met one of those"

"Yeah. You see them a lot?"

"Yep. Most of them that take me home end up wanting to talk about me, how I lost my arm, where my family is, stuff like that."

"And what do you tell them?"

I was genuinely curious. No one knew what had really happened to her and it irked me that some schmuck had the full story and I didn't.

"Well, I tell them that everyone that matters in my story is dead"

"Oh..."

"...well, except you," she said through a small smile.

Funny. Very funny.

I pulled her close and handed her half of the cash I'd just received. She looked at the money in her hand and was just about to scream.

"Don't draw attention!" I hushed

"Where did you see this money?" She replied in a matching hushed tone. I laughed. She really was the most dramatic, most innocently beautiful thing I ever saw.

"The talking man gave it to me."

"Oh, I thought he left."

"Oh, no. He asked me to get in the car and then parked somewhere."

"But I saw you standing here the whole time. You didn't go anywhere, barely moved sef"

I cursed Monkey under my breath. This was his doing. He played tricks with my likeness to entertain himself sometimes.

I scrambled for an excuse.

"I wasn't gone for very long"

She bought it.

AGAIN

Another night three months later found me again on Admiralty leaving the Tesla with another wad of cash. Just like before, he had just wanted me to listen to him talk, nothing else. But I knew that one day, perhaps soon, he'd want me for the same reason other men wanted us. I suspected he'd be gentle, maybe even loving, and eventually trick himself into believing he was in love.

When that day came, I'd pass him on to Kindness. It was easy to see that he was a kind man. He'd latch onto Kindness, the bright light that she was. Maybe he'd even take her off the streets for good. I had no qualms if the reason I never saw her again was because she'd caught the eye of a loaded man who wanted to give her a better life. At least all this would be for something.

All the times he came, I started to whisper about Kindness in his ear. I told him everything I knew about her and that she was the kindest person I'd ever met. I'd never met anyone with a more fitting name. It worked.

He started to ask about her more often and give me extra cash for her. Then one warm night when he came around, I introduced them. I'd never mentioned that she was an amputee, but if he seemed startled by her missing arm, he never let on.

MYSTERY

I'd begun to see less and less of Kindness.

I was worried at first but when she assured me that Philip did not like her being on Admiralty, I was glad. She'd also hinted at getting fitted for a prosthetic arm.

When she did show up, she'd only stay half an hour at best. Then he'd show up in his Tesla and take her away. I understood. No respectable man wanted his lady on the streets.

But on a fateful Wednesday, I knew in my gut that something was wrong.

No one on Admiralty had heard from her in a while. Too long a while, even for her new life. Maybe she was off the streets for good.

As much as I wanted that, I would've appreciated a heads up. I would have tried texting her but phones and whatever made them work didn't acknowledge people like me- people who have a leg in this world and another in the next.

Days turned into weeks and into months after that Wednesday. No word. Sometimes I imagined that she was somewhere in a touristy country, having a good time. The thought made me smile, but I went back to worrying immediately after.

TRANSITION

One evening, I opened my door and there she was.

Instantly, my heart broke to a million little pieces.

"What have I done?"

My legs gave way. I saw her reach out for me, but I did not fall.

"It's not your fault" she said quietly

She looked different. She had gained weight and there was a bulge in her midsection. She'd been pregnant.
That cursed bastard.

I sobbed even harder when she waddled into my house. I'd condemned her to a fate worse than death.

Immediately she sat down, she said "He already knew who I was. He targeted me"

"What?"

"You know how we said it was strange that he didn't seem surprised by my arm?"

I nodded.

"He was looking for me. Or at least someone like me"

By the time she was done with the whole story, everything made sense. All of it was calculated. He needed a pregnant one-armed woman, so he found a one-armed woman and made her pregnant.

Just then, my alarm clock sounded off.

I started to explain to her that we had to go, but she put a hand up. No need to explain. She'd met Monkey.

OBALENDE, FINALLY

We sat.

In utter silence, the bus glided over the road. It wasn't really on wheels, it just floated.

Kindness held on to my fingers. My free hand tapped noiselessly on my thigh.

I wanted to weep but I couldn't find my voice. What was the point? Everyone else on the ride had their own sob story, each their own violent death and restless soul. Cursed to roam the streets of Lagos endlessly; some as mechanics, night guards, some like me, as women of Admiralty. We were owed justice by the world we used to live in and so we were bound to it in perpetuity.

We spread misfortune everywhere, hiding in plain sight. The men I touched, their lives took terrifying turns for the worse after.

I couldn't help it. All I could do was choose my victims, people who I sensed darkness in their souls. That was why I avoided Philip. I found

no hint of wrongdoing with him. I made a mistake and now Kindness was here with me, on the bus to Obalende.

I should've let him take me home on that first night and fucked him into oblivion. Bastard.

Kindness loosened her grip on my fingers suddenly and did something no one else had done in my 79 years of riding on the bus. She broke the silence, and with five chilling words.

"He used me for rituals."

For a fraction of a second, nothing happened. Then the dead eyes, all fourteen pairs of them, turned to look at us.