

The rays of bright yellow sunlight intrude into my bedroom through the translucent blinds. My alarm clock buttresses this rude awakening with sonorous vibrations that jolt me up from another marathon episode of nightmares. My regular morning routine, I suppose.

A glance at my calendar reveals how much time has passed. Months have elapsed swiftly and quietly, camouflaged in hours and minutes of dull days. Days bearing memories of bittersweet yesterday's laden with the impulsiveness of youthful exuberance.

My phone rings, and the abrupt noise sends a shock wave to my system. I watch the phone ring till the end, twice. I couldn't bring myself to pick it up. Shortly after, a text lit my phone screen.

“Happy Birthday Ajifa. I know it's been a while since I reached out but I need you to stop blaming yourself for what happened that night. It's been 8 years and I'm still head over heels for you. I want to take you out to dinner tonight; Let's continue where we left off. Call me.

Love, Billiaminu (your Billy).”

Ughhhh. My eyeballs roll about their sockets in disgust.

I deleted the message immediately. I don't feel like seeing him tonight or any other night. That ship sailed a long time ago and I have moved on. Or I'd like to believe I have. I've forgotten how it felt before my world crumbled at my feet. Life was all fun and games till we all got hurt. A love triangle gone wrong. We all got hurt in unfathomable ways. *NO!* I have worked so hard to bury those memories and nothing, not even Billy, will change that.

You have to be strong for yourself Ajifa.

My eyes wander around my bedroom as I lift myself from my pillow. It is unkempt and void, a mirror of my soul. I pick up my journal beside my bed. My therapist suggested that I write down every episode of my recurring nightmares. She said it would help me understand the pattern. I'm in doubt. She doesn't voice it out but I know for sure that she's tired of giving me advice that I will never take. Tears cast down my cheeks as I scribble down the vicious experience, I encountered in the dream realm.

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Last night's episode was particularly different from the rest, so I began to write. It had the same theme, it reeked of undiluted fear. Fear of what was coming. As usual, I woke up abruptly, sweating like I slept in a sauna. For a minute or two I couldn't move but I could feel the presence of another entity in my house. I saw shadows, I heard footsteps. I developed instantaneous aphasia; it was as if both my lips were sewn together. Not a word, not a mumble nor a hum could find its way out of my oral cavity. At some point, I thought I had lost my tongue. As the footsteps of this stranger drew nearer, my heart beat louder and louder. I'm paralyzed on my bed; my eyes are open but of the 639 muscles in my body none has decided to function. Then I think to myself; this has to be paranoia, I'm the only one in this house. I try to remind myself that it's not real. It can't possibly be real. Then the footsteps end just outside my bedroom door. The air was filled with a putrid odor strong enough to kill all the roses in one garden. The door crept open and the vague appearance of something that seemed to be a man made his way in. He wore a swarm of flies as a crown and was limping, his feet were decayed and maggots were rummaging through his abdominal cavity. One by one, each drilling its hole. He held a bright red razor-sharp axe in his right hand. When he got to my bed, he smiled. Nothing but rotten gums and worms were in his mouth. Alas, I cried; the tears were my only means of communicating what it was my mouth couldn't. Fear, regret, paranoia and confusion slipped out of my tear duct one at a time. The look in his eyes, the same look he gave me 8 years ago, begging for help. My help. He raised his axe right above my head and screamed in a croaky voice, "RETRIBUTION HAS COME!"

My hand trembled as I put down the last full stop in my journal. The emotions getting too intense, too real for me to continue. I wonder how Dr Kate thought this would help. Each time I pen down my dreams I relive the dreadful moments over and over again. It's ridiculous.

The growling pangs of hunger give me something else to worry about. I drag myself up from bed and head to the kitchen. One after the other I ransack my cabinets in search of something edible but only to find spider webs and cockroaches. Finally, I find my last tin of coca and milk, enough for a warm cup of beverage.

I sit at the dining table, easing the hunger pangs one sip at a time. I catch a glance at one of the frames on the wall. One with me, Billy and Mark on our matriculation day. We were so thrilled to have gained admission into the university of our choice. From a roadless town in

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Emekutu, Kogi State to the University of Nigeria Nsukka, we were determined to take on the world. Look at us, beaming smiles from ear to ear. Life was going on smoothly until it didn't.

We were a tight-knit bunch. Mark and Billy were roommates off campus while I stayed in the hostel as per my father's wishes. But it didn't deter us from attending lectures together, studying together on weekdays and making time to have fun on weekends. You know, the worst part of grief's tyranny is that it deprives you of relishing in good memories.

Billy and I were fond of each other but when he never asked me to be his girlfriend, I took it as a sign that he didn't want more than friendship with me. I was hurt, but I got over it. I felt he was scared of my father's opinion of me being in a relationship with a Muslim. But then Mark on the other hand was blossoming into a handsome young man. His naturally toned body graced by his shiny melanin became more enticing to me in our third year of university. I noticed the feeling was mutual when he asked me to be his date at the faculty dinner. I didn't hesitate to respond. Billy couldn't attend the dinner because he had a carryover course to study for so he stayed in his room all night.

After the event, Mark and I stayed in a hotel room for the night. We talked about our dreams and aspirations after school. We talked about our expectations for the final year in the coming session. I realized we had so much in common. And we just fit like pieces of a puzzle. He asked me to be his girlfriend and I said yes. I didn't just find his physique attractive; his confidence and overall gentlemanly demeanor gave me butterflies in my tummy. We spent the whole night talking and doing what lovers do. It was the best day of my young adult life.

Sometimes I wish my life had continued in that upward trajectory of glee. But good times are often short-lived. Halfway into the first semester of my final year, I discovered I was pregnant. Mark was the only man I had been with so I didn't have to guess who the father was. But I didn't tell him. I wasn't ready to be a mother. I had dreams and plans of my own. I knew had to step up to his responsibilities but I wasn't ready for that.

Tears well up in my eyes as I recall how it all went down. I can't stand to remember. There were days I wished to be struck by amnesia or dementia. Just something to make the memories go away. But no, they stuck with me like stubborn stretchmarks.

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A week after I discovered I was with child I went to the clinic for an abortifacient but I was informed that my pregnancy was too advanced for a pill. They said I needed to have the surgical procedure instead. I had to make an impromptu exit from the *ajo* contributions that my roommates had going on to fund the procedure. Thinking back now, I realize how selfish I was. I could have informed Mark about my decision, he could have come with me to the hospital, and we would have gone through that phase together. I don't know whether it was shame anger or disappointment that fueled my decision but I was as determined as ever to get rid of the being growing inside me.

The procedure was successful and I was free to go. My phone kept buzzing with calls from Mark. He was trying to invite me to come hang out with him and some of our classmates. Since it was my birthday, he had organized a small get-together. When I finally picked up his call, I could sense the drunkenness over the phone. Though strong and muscular, Mark didn't have the capacity to contain alcohol. As little as one bottle of beer could knock him off.

"I can't come out Mark. I'm feeling unwell." I had tried to mask my groans but my insides were still cramping from the procedure. He said he was going to come see me. I tried to talk him out of it because I knew that I couldn't bear to break the news to him. He insisted.

I was waiting for him on the roof of the Abuja building because I needed a private space for us to speak. I was agitated. Cold sweat poured from the crown of my head, my legs trembled, and in the silence of the moment, there was an absence of solitude. My heart beat faster than the talking drums of Abeokuta. With each percussion, this fast-paced rhythm exuded anguish and regret. And for some strange reason, I can't seem to catch my breath. Billy and Mark arrived at the rooftop about 6 p.m. Mark was inebriated, but Billy was not.

"Ajifa, why are you crying?" Mark began in a drunken voice. He cradled my face in his hands, brushing away the endless torrent of tears that streamed down my cheeks.

“Mark, I’m so sorry.” The outpouring of tears didn’t cease to wet my cheeks. It was as though rivers of fire engulfed my body and each time I try to say something the words glide back. Mark and Billy glared at me in confusion.

“I just had an abortion. I’m so sorry Mark. I have dreams and aspirations. I’m not ready to become a mother...” I broke down weeping.

"Please tell me you're joking, Ajifa." For a brief while, he regained his sobriety, his voice revealing a torrent of tears behind his crackling speech.

Billy attempted to console him, but Mark thrashed himself free of his friend’s embrace, charging towards me with a fearsome wrath burning in his eyes.

"How could you make such a decision without informing me?" Do you have no fear of God, lady? You will pay for this, Ajifa! I'll kill you with my bare hands!" As he staggered towards me, he trips and falls through the roof. Billy tried to catch up to him, but he was too slow. I stood there watching him fall. The thump of his body on the floor sent undercurrents through my veins.

I should have called for help. If I had done something maybe, just maybe Mark would still be alive. But in my cowardice, I did nothing. Billy and I ran away. We just left him there and swore never to disclose the incident to anyone.

I can still feel the gut-wrenching impact my comments had on him. I had tried for so long to put the past behind me, but every year, in the days leading up to my birthday, I am overcome by malignant nostalgia. Anxiety has dug a devastating hole in my life, and despair weighs so heavily over me that I can feel the weight crushing me.

Knock! Knock!! Knock!!!

The knock on my door interrupted my nostalgia. I knew Billy would not take No for an answer but I didn’t expect that he would show up at my door. I refused to get the door but the knocking didn’t cease. As I walked to the door, I a housefly flew past me. It was accompanied by one housefly who later invited another housefly who invited three other housefly friends of theirs. A few buzzed around my ears and some tried to enter my nose, they were all over me. It seemed they were teasing me. A rotten stench pressed in like a

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suffocating fog. *I probably need to take out the trash, it's been piled up in the kitchen for days now.*

On getting to the door I found nobody. *Darn, these little street boys trying to prank--.*
Down on the ground, just in front of my doormat. A bright red razor-sharp axe. The room temperature dropped to 18 degrees almost instantaneously, the air turned to glue and it was almost impossible to breathe. I was hyperventilating like a wild dog in Serengeti. My body lost every sense of sensation. Every part of my body except my neck. Where his cold smelly breath rested and he hoarsely whispered again and again, "RETRIBUTION HAS COME."

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