

A WEIGHTED GAMBLE

Killing one's husband is a universal phenomenon that has taken primeval, it is usually a last expedient for those women. Some stories passed and some untold, dying with them. They had made that choice to turn their fate, and Jawe did not think she was any different. You see, she had been thinking. It didn't sound that hard in the books she read, jawe also did not understand how some of the women in the stories felt guilty or sad. If she got rid of Sola- her problem would be erased. She could not wait for her pain to become like her scars, after a time, dull and faded. This was all that encircled her brain that night in the center of the noise; her son Temi, wailing, his notes rified, yet strangely matched the church bellowing hymns on the other side of them, obscured only by a thin wall. They sang in soft, hushed tones that echoed as it rose in prevalent harmony. Jawe was oddly in the midst of this, seeing clearer, standing in the living room, faced with a picture of her wedding day. This was despite her husband in the business of dying right at her feet, in a struggle for air. Sola gurgled on the blood extracted from his flesh while grappling with the action of seizing her ankles unsuccessfully. It is perhaps morbid, but she stood enjoying the melody. It was the only good thing about the church really, the euphoric singing. Turning to the third contributor of the chaos, sat in the corner, still shrieking, his little face pale with terror, Jawe had not meant for the child to bear witness. If he'd awakened only a little later, instead of his spontaneous wandering from his room in a sleepy haze that ceased at the sight of his mother shifting her weight his father tried to hold onto as he collapsed to the ground, now stained with red liquid. There was a brief silence when Jawe noticed his form across the room as the child stared horrified, and she; sadly, before his cries began. And so he was an unknowing accomplice, drowning out his father's music with his own. Sola crawled at Jawe's feet, his own screams waning, as he begged for his life. Jawe thought the death itself rather casual, The anti-climaticism of it all was puzzling to her. If the crossroad was this uneventful after the turn that was her life, it gave little weight to her strife even after her conjured variations to his murder. She stilled at how it finally and easily eventuated.

The chain of events resulting this outcome was really from the day she'd been married- no given away to him, but also after meeting the Madam. Of course, she had wanted his demise, Jawe had no qualms about hurting herself for retribution. The desire to quench herself with the blood of whom she'd been slighted had always been present, but what had truly set her in

motion was Dalu. The day started as it did, with stirring awake and realizing her current reality. Trudging up to wash in the sink, she joined her palms together in offering and juttled them under the tap. Jawe gathered the water in her palms and splashed it to her face before her eyes drifted past the white sink with algae forming the outer edges, and the dull blue wall with stains. Jawe faced her reflection with a practiced smile. It was a hollow one, the scars on both cheeks stretched out, the work of art etched unto her skin. She was an artist you see; it was a quiet dream she'd once had and she was her best work. The piece was unnamed, but is intended to show the within, akin to if she turned her flesh inside out and bore her flawed self to the world. So, they would not be so...*inclined*. She could hardly wait for Sola and his friends to discover her created piece, and they did not disappoint, their naked horror at her inflicted mutilation emboldened her. Jawe knew this was not exactly normal per se, sometimes she scared herself. It unsettled her, the dormant, simmering brand of anger. She felt a harrowing oppressive rage for even the smallest of tells. Her learned discipline from the repressed umbrella over her life could not contain the sharp visceral fuse that had no reservations barreling everything in its path. It was so blinding that in those moments, jawe did not mind herself a casualty, so she learned to manage it. But when Sola's friend, Dalu looked at her the same way he had, she clung to it.

It was after one of those nights where they gathered in the open space of the church, sitting on the plastic chairs, a table in their midst on the gray cement floors covered in white sand and dust, with the moonlight reflecting the room, imitating their forms in dancing shadows. While the men spoke, Jawe would sit outside right at the entrance, propped on stacked cement blocks, her back eased on the wall staring out in the open air at the dark and quiet night under the stars, and bask in the sharp cool breeze that caressed her skin. Sola would sit at the table head as always, postured in that arrogant assured way, smile and stare indulging, like an adult amongst children. He truly thought himself distinct from them altogether, his own separate entity. His fellow "men of the church" sat down to distribute "Heaven's money" amongst themselves after luring vulnerable people and giving them shards of hope. Her jailer in particular had developed a heightened sense of self, truly believing himself as superior as he was raised. Sola absorbed the skin he wore to deceive those people. Together on that table, they laughed and shared the fragments of those broken people, they would unbreak only to break again. They would chorus the money count

and erupt in jests. One of them would say variants of “Omo! we don cash out this week o! We go ball again this weekend!” and they would all cheer. It was a scene Jawe had seen all too well, she filtered their voices until she was mentioned. “See this small thing you carry for here na ... O boy, let’s wash this thing well, call that your fine wife for us”. Summoned to serve more beer, usually Jawe barely ever paid attention, did not care to know or remember any of them. They were all matchsticks, arranged in a box, their figures distorted, blurring into one and when they formed they were all Sola. Until that day she made the mistake of really making one of them his own thing. Dalu, a bald dark-skinned man, with little frays of hair here and there and a white stranded beard had leaned back trying to catch her attention with an already-formed smile on his face when Jawe 's gaze met his. He came into her line of vision in the same way Sola had.

Looking back, Jawe could so vividly recreate the memory of the early days with Father’s sickness; the palpable desperation, The denial at losing his sight after his accident. She could still remember a number of silhouettes floating in and out of the house. Different people with disparate religions and beliefs, integrated by their many “treatments” and “cures”. Father traveled far and wide before meeting Sola, whom he cherished with renewed fervor; a hope inspired in him the others could not. Jawe at first had only heard about him, she’d had that bit of grace until it ran out. It was a Tuesday she remembered, he was sitting uninhibited in her father’s parlor, and she forgot to greet in her haste. “Jawe ahan, won’t you greet?” Mother called, “This is your father’s pastor oh”. She mumbled an incoherent greeting in return and escaped to the room. Jawe closed the door behind her to the figure who laid comfortably on her bed, arms crossed behind her head. The two girls met each other’s eyes in amused silence. “This girl, so you’ll not greet me?” Bolu asked playfully, breaking it with her light musical timbre that always seemed to tease. Jawe looked at her smiling “abeg move” she hissed, proceeding to leap on the bed right next to her where they stared at each other wordlessly before drifting into slumber. Jawe did not remember the first time she met her, the same way she did not remember her before. Only that she’d been there, with the Akintola’s and transitioned from their house girl to something else. In hindsight, not quite their daughter...but *something*. Perhaps in the same way they once kept their late neighbour’s dog before selling it for its value. Yes, Jawe was more like their pet.

In the days that crept, Sola collected from them little by little, remedy by remedy. His presence in their home became a settled weight that left Jawe uneasy. The Akintola's were sucked dry of their money, and when they had nothing left, they gave her away. She remembered her first encounters with Sola, the way he'd always smiled in an assured sort of way, a mild twinkle in his lingering gaze while humbly saying, "Good morning my sister" but Jawe was not fooled. She'd heard the desire inflected in his tone, as if he was in on a joke she was not privy. She hated his eyes from the start, the shift in them, the calculated good-willed indifference. He'd flit his eyes sparingly but when it landed on Jawe, her skin would prick. He was a man, so it was nothing new to her, but in Sola, she saw her damning and her powerlessness, though it already clouded most parts of her life. Sola started appearing on mornings before she'd go to school, and when he began to stay late, she in response, hung back under the guise of junior WAEC lessons. His unraveling was slow, piece by piece, planting little seeds. So, when she was sat after school for Mother to say, "we found a good husband for you", she gave them to silence. In turn, Mother began to rationalize, "you are lucky it's a pastor, a whole man of God " and as she looked on "we know you are young, but many girls where you are from get married even earlier anyway!". At her continued silence, Father boomed "we've been taking care of you since you were little, not anyone can do that. you know I am sick Jawe, don't be like that. Don't you want to help your father?" as if deeply offended. She'd tampered her anger then.

It was the same that night except it could not be boxed in. so when that dizzying anger coiled around her leaving her without air, Jawe did what she'd always done. She twisted herself to accommodate that rage, but when it bellowed out, it manifested unto her skin. Sola avoided her like a plague after and did not bother her altogether. She saw his fear but she was left there, in his cult of desperate fanatics, tied to him still. Every night she would prepare a table for him wishfully, but he never touched the food which is why, when he ate it and died, Jawe was a mix of delight and shock. Sola did not let her go, not even after he'd lost the Akintola's, when their only child was killed. Bolu, whom she'd last seen on her wedding day, with downcast eyes and the words "he might not be so bad, Jawe.... you can help daddy and like marriage too". Jawe only stared, thinking of how Bolu always made space on the bed, but she would wake up to find herself pushed off. Bolu, who slid her shorts off and rubbed her breasts and kissed her tenderly, tasting of the sweet she bought every other day, whom she imagined living with

forever when they grew up. Bolu whom she still loved and wished to relive the time when she all but centered her life around. She grieved after her gruesome death but was also glad for it. In the end, she was the daughter of her parents. The Akintola's took her life and paid for it with their daughter's. It was her *eleda*, Jawe thought when she heard the news, the day before she killed Sola. Now the Final piece, Madam, she had met by chance.

On a cool autumn evening, with the sun partially hidden behind the clouds, Jawe walked through the market past the sellers before seeing from the corner of her eyes, *boli*. The plantains were being roasted as the trader blew it with a hand fan. "Ki le fe ma?" she asked as Jawe stood eyeing the plantains then decided for dinner. On her way back, she saw a group of women in the same customized purple t-shirt, making announcements with their microphones. She did not listen to them, only assumed they were one of those church people who preached about God, danced on the road and shared flyers. It was by chance, their eyes meeting, an eventual corroded fate. The madam approached her "Good day oh my sister!" Jawe only nodded but still found herself after a few words trailing behind her to the canopy nearby. She was unsure of the why still, although she had wanted to elude sola, it did not have to be through that means. She did not talk to her then, only eyed curiously, her brown skin and bright childlike eyes despite her age, jawe comes to find and vaguely heard her say something about their organization helping girls. "You get husband?" She prodded, smiling sadly at her. Jawe tilted her head slightly even though she'd already somehow known as the madam's eyes roamed her face, a silent acknowledgment of her age and the hand she'd been dealt. She walked Jawe home and the sound of the fallen yellowed leaves from the trees that flanked the side of the road crunched beneath their feet, amplified in the awkward silence "you go school?" she asked, breaking the quiet. Jawe was starting to nod but shook her head when she added "secondary school? university?" The madam nodded as if she understood before fumbling with her bag for a card "take this" she'd said, pushing into her hands. Jawe saw it was purple and smelled like powder. "Whenever you call me, I go help you" the madam declared, after a pause. "with anything" she added. Jawe was glad for it, for she has now contacted that stranger who has told her many things after their initial meeting, in a gamble with only hope she would.

And so, in the dead of the night, when the world was still and after the church had induced themselves in sleep, a tradition after their vigil, a “connecting” of the pastor’s grace to change their own fate, they had been led to believe they needed to bind themselves via proximity, with someone as almighty as their leader so blessings and salvation would come, the incentive to her actuality. Jawe dragged Sola’s body where the members lay in the space of the church, scattered on the cold hard floors forming little rainbows with their colorful wrappers, hoisted his body on the high altar tapered with a dull blue carpet. Jawe spread his arms and legs on the floor in a spectacle. Returning to the house and back with Temi whom she sedated, laid on the other end of the church and patted his little head in slow strokes, she looked at him and only felt sad that she could not love him as she was and at their eventual separation. In that moment, her victory seemed like a pyrrhic one. Jawe went over her plan for the last time, anticipating when daylight came and the specs of freedom that would come with it, before smiling as she slept.