

It's a dry, windy morning in Lagos in February 1966, exactly a month after the first military takeover in Nigeria. Nkemdilim is in her room with a view of trees. Leaning by the panes, she gazes at the chirping birds flying between trees. The soft rustles of dried leaves and Ewelike; the gateman's singing fill the air. There's a smell of dust in the air, a subtle reminder that the harmattan season is still very much around. The house has been tense for days now. This began when their father informed her elder sister, Adaora, about Chief Usman's proposal. Chief Usman, a wealthy businessman, is a regular guest at the Uzodinma's. When their father told Adaora, she protested, and their father roared, his voice like thunder, insisting that she must marry him. "I need to take another chieftaincy title and revive my ailing company." Nkemdilim vividly recalls his words, flowing like a river without obstruction, when she eavesdropped with her younger brother, Obinna. Their mother, the typical olabisi, stayed silent during and after the conversation. Chief Uzodinma is a twice-a-year churchgoing Catholic who makes large donations and a firm traditionalist. He owns a construction company that is ailing and a palm nut plantation that is still in infancy. Nkemdilim wasn't surprised; their father has always treated them like marriage commodities. "You girls will engage in practices that will make you unmarriageable," he yelled when they told him they wanted to study abroad.

He only sent Obinna abroad, saying that he's male. Nkemdilim also recalls how Adaora angrily stomped her feet all the way to her room after the conversation. On that day, Nkemdilim tried to advise Adaora to stand up to their father, but she yelled and asked her out of her room. Initially, Nkemdilim hesitated, longing for their past sisterhood bond, but eventually left when the yells intensified. Adaora and Nkemdilim's bond has faltered over time, in stark contrast to Nkemdilim and Obinna's. Physically, Adaora and Nkemdilim are glaring opposites. Adaora is very beautiful, just like their mother. Nkemdilim is aware that her face isn't as delightful as her mother's and sisters; even their father says it inadvertently. Nkemdilim's face is always compared with her sister's, making her delve deeper into the pool of self-loathing.

Nkemdilim hasn't been fortunate with love. Her first boyfriend while in medical school left her, saying she wasn't 'exciting'. The second did the same thing. The recent one, Abuchi, whom she once adored, has been causing her pain. Abuchi, the only son of chief Maduka, her father's closest wealthy friend, is Nkemdilim's childhood friend. He hits her, then apologises with empty promises, only to repeat the cycle. Nkemdilim has not told anyone about this, as she's been hoping he'll change. Anytime Nkemdilim thinks about how he treats her, her chest tightens in pain..

The last time they met, a minor misunderstanding resulted in a slap in public. Since then, he's not come to apologise, and honestly, Nkemdilim doesn't want him to. Without Abuchi, Nkemdilim's life has revolved around home and the hospital.

Some days after the second coup, at the hospital, people cluster together in different groups, discussing it. The smell of chemically enforced cleanliness in hospitals lingers in the air. This smell used to make Nkemdilim feel so sick growing up, but her love for the medical profession wouldn't let her stay away from hospitals. In a corner, Nkemdilim stares vacantly, wondering why Adaora accepted the proposal. She knows her father is rigid, but she could never marry an old man, let alone one with three wives already.

As she imagines Alhaji Usman getting close to her sister, her stomach knots in disgust, fueling resentment towards her father.

Some weeks later, an unconscious man is wheeled into the hospital with bloodied welts all over. After examining him, Nkemdilim realises that the welts resulted from horse whip lashings. The man doesn't wake up until the next day. "Hello, I'm Nkemdilim, what's yours?" she says with a smile as he wakes. His dim eyes flicker, and he whispers, "Anozie." "Mr. Anozie, you'll be fine," she assures, and he nods.

Some days later, Nkemdilim runs into Anozie exiting the ward. "Hey, Mr. Anozie, I see you're about to leave," Nkemdilim says, scrutinising him. He flickers a smile and

says, "I'm better; I'll recover fully at home. Thanks for caring for me. His captivating smile makes him even more handsome than she thought. I was beaten by those simpletons because of an article I published last week," Anozie says, his rage brewing. "simp.. who?" Nkemdilim asks, looking lost. "Don't mind me, soldiers," Anozie replies and extends his hand. "My name is Anozie, and I'm a writer," he says, beaming with pride for his profession.

As Nkemdilim takes his palm in hers, their eyes lock and whisper, prompting them to extend the handshake beyond the clinical walls of the hospital.

After that day, Anozie becomes a regular visitor at the hospital.

Anozie becomes so fixated on Nkemdilim that he invites her to his house several weeks later, and she readily accepts. On getting to his apartment, she's impressed by its exquisite furnishings. The aroma of chicken curry perfumes her nostrils, welcoming her. The lights in his sitting room cast a warm glow on the blue and white mosaic tiles, making the ambiance homely.

"Welcome to my home," Anozie says in Igbo, grinning. "Nice home," Nkemdilim says, smiling at the tuneful sound of his Igbo. "What are you cooking? You smell of curry?" Nkemdilim asks, suppressing a mirth. "We'll see when it's ready," Anozie replies and winks.

Nkemdilim's gaze meets a framed picture on an etagere of Anozie and a white lady wearing big smiles. "That's Nancy,

my colleague at work," Anozie says as he notices her staring. Nkemdilim quickly looks away as if embarrassed that he caught her staring, but is happy he clarified it.

While eating, they discuss the pogroms against the Igbos and other southerners. "Our people are being killed," Anozie says somberly, followed by a long, quiet pause, riddled occasionally by the soft clinking of spoons on plates. "Nigeria should be safe for us all," he finally says with a lighter tone. 'I agree,' Nkemdilim replies. 'Our leaders need to listen to our cry for justice,' he adds, eyes fixed on the newsletter titled 'A CRY FOR JUSTICE' on the table. "This is the article I almost got killed for," Anozie says. Nkemdilim looks at him and whispers, "'Ndo." After eating, Anozie starts stealing glances at Nkemdilim, making her jittery. "You're so pretty," Anozie tells her; she smiles shyly and looks away.

Nkemdilim is so bubbly, a sharp contrast to how Abuchi makes her feel: "undeserving". They start talking cheerily about so many things. "You have an even more beautiful mind," Anozie says, looking impressed, making Nkemdilim feel renewed. His words have the effect of a cymbal, each sound pierces every string of her heart. As Anozie leans in for a kiss, her heart dances in joy to the rhythmic tune of his heart, but she retreats quickly so as not to seem overly eager. To her, the kiss is a revelation of their shared connection. Finally, the light she's always wanted has come.

Anozie is adding colour to her life, like a rainbow emerging in the bleak sky after a downpour, she thinks to herself. A smile curves on her lips as she thinks about how serendipity has brought her the man of her dreams. "He's so different!" she whispers to herself.

In October 1966, Adaora's wine-carrying ceremony takes place in her father's compound. Nkemdilim isn't happy about the wedding but can't stop marvelling at the scenic beauty. The beautiful outfits of the Yorubas; her mother's people, the Igbos; her father's people, the Hausas; Chief Usman and his kinsmen, all intertwine beautifully to form a colourful tapestry of culture. As everyone laughs heartily, her vision for a united Nigeria engulfs her. The aromas of the three cultural cuisines delight the taste buds of the guests. "Cultures are like colourful threads woven onto a single spindle; we can be united if we choose to be," Nkemdilim concludes. Just then, she sees Anozie walking towards her. Nkemdilim moves closer: "You came." She says, tapping him playfully, "I had to," he replies, smiling. Just as they're conversing, Abuchi walks in, anger crumpling his face. "okay!! This is what you've been doing, going out with different men! Abuchi roars. "Oh no!" Nkemdilim exclaims, wincing at the sight of Abuchi because she's never mentioned him to Anozie. Stunned, Anozie makes an attempt to talk, but before he can, Abuchi drags Nkemdilim to the back of the house. The piercing screams from the back of the house had Anozie rushing to the scene.

In November 1967, some weeks after the wedding, Obinna makes a shocking revelation to Nkemdilim. Obinna enters Nkemdilim's room with a suitcase in hand and says, "I need to go see my lover." Nkemdilim smiles upon hearing 'lover, as she's never seen Obinna with any girl. Her mind briefly darts to Anozie, her 'lover', and she's grateful he forgave what happened at Adaora's wedding. "But why the rush eh?" she asks. "The relationship is on the rocks right now; I need to see him immediately," Obinna replies. "him?" Nkemdilim asks, surprised, and Obinna hesitantly nods. Nkemdilim's jaw drops in shock. "It's a secret," Obinna says as he makes a dash for the door. "where..?" Nkemdilim manages to find her voice. "Kano," he replies and scoots off. Nkemdilim mutters, "So Obinna is gay," in a manner that suggests she's displeased. She is baffled; she never expected his reticence. "Kano isn't the safest place right now," she whispers, silently praying for his safety. Still wondering, memories of their shared bond flood her mind. Obinna never says "I love you" to her, but his actions show it. It showed in how he stood up against her bullies in secondary school. It showed in how he used to hide her slippers, only to laugh and watch her look for them. It shows in how he steals her meat, prompting chases, among other things. It also clearly shows, in how he treats her. She concludes to keep his secret safe because, no matter what, it is she and her Obinna against the world.

Weeks pass by, and Obinna hasn't reached out. Their parents are agitated about his whereabouts. Nkemdilim is also very worried but tries to reassure them by saying "He'll be back; he told me he was going to visit a friend". By December, Nkemdilim calls Obinna's partner after finding his telephone number among Obinna's belongings, only to receive a flippant 'I haven't seen Obinna in months!'. "He hung up!" she screams when the line goes silent.

For the first time ever, she despises what Obinna loves. The levity in his voice—she despises him so much. With a crumpled tissue in one hand and a portrait of Obinna in the other, she gives in to loud sobs. The next day, her father calls her for a discussion with their mother present, and Nkemdilim contemplates revealing Obinna's secret. "Nkemdilim, Abuchi says there's no relationship anymore!" their father queries with a sulky pout. Taken aback, Nkemdilim replies, "Didn't you see what happened at Adaora's wedding?". "But you invited another man to the wedding and had him beat Abuchi," their father accuses, and Nkemdilim stays silent. "The relationship must continue; Chief Okonkwo has promised years of unlimited fertiliser supply for my farm," he insists. Appalled, Nkemdilim retorts, 'You're willing to trade me for material gains, even though you've seen the bruises he inflicted on me at Adaora's wedding before Anozie intervened". Their father interrupts, "You should talk to Abuchi now!". Furious,

Nkemdilim yells, "You're a sexist! Do you want me dead? Seeing how you sold Adaora off, one would think you'd never lack!". He attempts to hit her, and she screams, "Your son is gay! Chief Uzodinma, shocked, sinks in his chair. Their mother, who has not said anything since the discussion began, is wide-eyed. "He went to Kano to visit his partner. I called his partner, and he said they hadn't seen each other in months! Nkemdilim spits, crying. Nkemdilim turns to her now sobbing mother and says, "This isn't marriage! You're scared to speak because you want to avoid the physical abuse you once endured. You've silenced yourself to stay married and left yourself in fetters''. Her parents are dumbfounded. She points at her father and screams, "I've chosen Anozie. He doesn't objectify me, like you and Abuchi. grappling with Nkemdilim's words and Obinna's situation, their mother falls to the ground and wails bitterly, muttering "The Pogroms in the north". Nkemdilim feels sorry for her mother but dashes inside to get her bags. She leaves muttering, "You'd support Abuchi, wouldn't you? birds of a feather!".

Nkemdilim goes to Anozie's house feeling devastated. She loathes herself for divulging Obinna's secret in such a manner. She craves Anozie's soothing words as her world seems to be falling apart. Upon getting to his apartment, she's greeted by an ominous silence. She calls his name, but no one responds. His neighbour later comes to inform

Nkemdilim that soldiers came to take him away, saying he's a "dissident". Upon hearing this, she sits on the floor and cries her eyes out, fearing he won't come back alive. Her heart wrenches as she realises her two favourite people are "missing". Just as she's crying, a familiar voice calls her name, "Nkemdilim." She raises her head and sees Anozie standing by the door. "Is that you?" Nkemdilim says, springing up in excitement and hugs him. "I need to leave for Nsukka right now," Anozie says with a sense of urgency in his voice. "why?" Nkemdilim asks. "It's not safe here," Anozie replies. Nkemdilim moves close to him and whispers "I'll come with you". Later, Anozie narrates how he was freed by a kind soldier without the notice of the rest. Nkemdilim doesn't stop thanking God for sparing his life.

They get to Nsukka, Enugu. In a matter of weeks, Anozie gets a teaching job at the state's university, and they move into the university staff quarters. They settle in quickly. She refrains from telling him about her own issues because she doesn't want her wounds to continue to fester. No day goes by without Nkemdilim silently praying for Obinna's safe return. In April 1967, when she sees Ewelike, the looming presence of a civil war in the air is almost palpable. Ewelike tells her that Nsukka is his hometown. He tells her that her mother ran away to Ghana. He adds, "Obinna still hasn't returned as of my departure in February. Your father has gone abroad, and Chief Usman sent Aunty

Adaora abroad shortly after you left, saying the country isn't safe". Upon hearing all that Ewelike told her, she feels alone. Strangely, she's happy her mom has left her father but very sad that Obinna has not returned. In early May, on the day Nkemdilim discovers she's pregnant, Nancy shows up in Nsukka. Nkemdilim is surprised to see her, but Anozie tells her that they have something they're working on together. Anozie and Nancy fall silent whenever she enters the room. So one day, she gets uncomfortable and tells Anozie, "I want her out!" with a slightly raised voice. Anozie says in a cold manner, "She'll leave tomorrow". The next day, Nkemdilim wakes up to an empty house; the silence highlighting Anozie's absence. She finds a letter on the sofa, and as she opens it, her trembling hands reveal a painful truth. She wipes her eyes with shaky hands to ensure she's seeing clearly, then falls to the ground, wailing. Anozie has left her in a country teetering on the brink of civil war with no one to turn to. "So Nancy is his wife, and they have a son together! She screams. blood coursing through her veins, heart thumping, she cries, "He's gone to London. Who do I turn to?" placing both hands on her head, she envisions two pills: one symbolising her family, causing her prolonged pain and the other, Anozie, offering brief love and a sudden brutal end. It's moments like this that make her miss her Obinna the most. All she ever wanted was for her life to brighten for good, whether like the radiant sunshine or the warm, dim light of a sunset. While others

left her heartbroken, Anozie left her with an open sore, one that will continue to fester for years.