

Lost Tales I

Act 1

It is late July in Lagos, the season of frequent rains. You could be having a sunny day at 11 am and you will be drenched while coming back from lunch at 2 pm. Today is such a day, Dan just had his regular Spaghetti Bolognese at his favourite bistro in Lekki. It is a regular Tuesday habit and nothing out of the ordinary was expected, but this is Lagos, expect the unexpected always.

On his way back to the consulting firm where he makes his daily 2k, the rain suddenly starts pouring. It comes with no warning, no threatening dark clouds, it is like the old age African superstition that a lion is being born.

He hides under the umbrella of an old woman selling roasted and boiled corn, the proud ambassador of the rainy season. He curses his luck, today of all days he decided to take a stroll instead of driving, then the rain starts just a few minutes after he leaves the bistro, what else could happen.

Adaora woke up feeling tired, dreading what this Tuesday would bring. She has woken up with this feeling almost every day for the past 3 years since she started this bank job; life has lost all the bit of colour she once thought it had.

Fresh out of NYSC, Adaora was ready to take on the world, with optimism and hope, that nothing was impossible. However, life has a way of playing its ruthless jokes on you, six months of job hunting, rejection emails, and zero callbacks had Adaora struggling to hope again.

The “big break” came, and she was contacted by a company offering to link her up with a bank job. The pay was terrible for a fresh new graduate but she was promised growth opportunities as long as she put in the work. Adaora was not a stranger to hard work, as the first and only daughter with 3 younger brothers, hard work was all she knew.

3 years had passed, and the fair and beautiful face no longer had smiles. There were occasional touches of laughter that brought a glimpse of the once happy and hopeful girl she was but now that seemed more like a past life.

Like all other days, this Tuesday started unsurprisingly with her boss Angela, yelling at her 5 mins after she clocked in. It had become their daily ritual. It involved the usual: deadlines, reports, faffing allegations, all of which were exaggerated but where else could Angela transfer her frustrations with life and a failing marriage.

At 1:50 pm, she was mentally done for the day, she was 20mins late into her break because Angela had decided that was the perfect time to discuss an “urgent” project. After several minutes of the project description and goals, it ended with a “do more research on this and get back to me tomorrow” all of which would have sufficed in an email.

With little under 10 minutes before the break would be over Adaora had to put something warm in her belly that would get her through the rest of the day, fully aware that Angela would resume another tirade if she wasn’t at her desk by 2 pm.

Adaora decided to go to Mama Glory’s kiosk which was a few blocks away from her office. Mama Glory sold hot roasted corn and pears and was always happy to include extras for her frequent customers. Apart from satisfying her hunger, Adaora enjoyed Mama Glory’s company, this was a brief break from the chaos she was coming from. Mama Glory was like the gentle mother that knew when your smile was forced and knew the right words to cheer you up.

Just a few minutes after making her preferred choices, Adaora’s day threatened to get worse with sudden rain. She’s now stranded under Mama Glory’s umbrella, dreading the onslaught awaiting her at the office when a man rushes in.

Dan draws close to the grill to keep himself warm and avoid splashes, he notices another lady taking cover under the umbrella. He looks up at her and freezes, entranced by her beauty and presence, his mind screaming at him to have her.

He recovers after a few seconds and tries to keep his charm and composure. He asks the old woman selling corn if he could stay underneath her umbrella while the rain continues but he can't help stealing a few glances at Adaora as he does.

An awkward silence reigns for two minutes, Adaora notices that the man sharing the umbrella with her and Mama Glory keeps looking and smiling at her. She tries her best to play it cool wondering why she even feels shy.

Mama Glory breaks the silence and asks Dan if he would like to purchase hot corn to avoid catching a cold. He looks at the grill carefully and sees a set of nicely looking corns set aside. He points at them and asks the price.

Adaora looks at where he is pointing and notices they are the corns she selected earlier, she quickly chips in saying he can't buy those as she has selected them already. She wonders why she even says that, berating herself not to sound too eager to start a conversation with him.

Dan smiles and her heart flutters, she tries to remember when she has ever felt this way on a first encounter, today doesn't seem too bad anymore.

He asks her to pick the next best since she has expertise in corn, she laughs it off and asks him how many he wants. Conversing with Dan felt like a breath of fresh air, incredibly relaxing yet so easy to participate in, he had a certain charm that made her feel safe and heard for the first time.

Just like the way it started, the rain ends abruptly after 20 mins, it is a sign that the real world awaits. Dan pays for both purchases and asks if he could walk her back to the bank, Adaora smiles and agrees not wanting the exchange to end.

A short walk to the bank and he collects her number, mission accomplished.

It is Saturday night, the middle of August in Lagos, but this is unlike the usual Saturday nights Adaora always had. The ones she spent alone in her cubicle of a house, lamenting how short the weekend was and dreading the Monday to come.

This time she is in a smaller space — a car trunk, unable to speak because of a gag in her mouth. She doesn't lament about how short this weekend is but about how God has forsaken her. She is not afraid of the coming Monday but of what could happen any moment from now.

She doesn't know how long the car has been moving, the drugs that made her pass out seem to be wearing off but they are yet to reach their destination. She hopes and prays for a police roadblock, anything, a miracle that can save her. But nothing happens, no angel shows up, no superheroes either, she should have known that nothing good ever happened to her.

The car starts bumping as it seems to have transitioned to a dirt road, this continues for an unknown period till it stops. Her heart starts pounding as she hears the car door open, with faint footsteps growing louder as it comes closer to her.

The car trunk opens and she sees his face, still as charming as the first time she saw him under Mama Glory's umbrella. But there was a sinister side to it now, he smiles as he notices her awake.

Dan bends closer to her face and starts choking her, she hears him whisper as death inches closer "it's always better when they are awake".

Act 2

Have you ever felt euphoria, that special feeling when you are walking on air and everything seems to be going your way, Ada felt that every day since she met Dan.

She had never felt she could feel this way since her first crush but something about Dan captivates her soul. She often wonders if it's his charms, his tall dark build with a devilish smile, or his thoughtfulness, the little texts he sends while she's at work to let her know she's on his mind, the flowers, the gifts or his ability to put a smile on her face at every thought of him.

She knows it's only been a week but she can't stop fantasizing about growing old with Dan, random thoughts like "*many kids will they have*" plague her every waking moment. Dan is way too perfect and she can't stop thanking the heavens for directing him her way.

He was a gentle lover, they had gone on 3 dates and he didn't start with the regular "*come to my house*" card that Lagos men are widely known for. When they finally kissed on the third date it felt like electricity was passing through her body, she was ready for him to take her then and there but he drove her home instead. He told her he didn't want it like that, he wanted it to be special and that made her want him more.

The presence of Dan in her life was visible from her forehead, she no longer looked depressed at work. She moved around with a smile always anticipating the next text or call from him, she knew she was "*finished*" when people kept asking who was making her smile.

She was gripped with anticipation when Dan finally invited her over to his place, he planned to make her homecooked dinner and binge movies after. Everything seemed to be going in the right direction or so she thought.

It was 7:05 pm on a Friday, it was mid august so the weather was cool with rain threatening to fall at any given second. Dan is sitting in his car, muttering to himself "you can do this, you can do this...", this goes on for 10 minutes till he recovers his composure.

Tonight is the big night, after weeks of contrasting thoughts and indecisions, he is finally inviting Ada over to his house. Parked outside her house, he gives her a call to come down, he is nervous as it has been a long time since he hunted, but Ada was not meant to be game.

He couldn't explain what drew her to him, she was different, different from the others, the games. Seeing her happy always made him happy, he wanted to protect her, protect her from himself yet he wanted to be around her always.

These were the contrasting thoughts that plagued him these past weeks, it had been beautiful, getting to know her, watching her smile and laugh. Yet his fears arose, he didn't want her too close, he was afraid of what he might do.

After much thought, he had conquered his demons, he wanted her, and he deserved to be happy with her. He sat in the car waiting for her to come down while muttering under his breath "you can do this, you can do this...".

The second before you think you'll die is always the longest, your whole life flashes before your eyes as you ask yourself "how did I end up like this".

Ada wondered where it had all gone wrong, it was meant to be dinner, movies, and hot sex and yes it was all that, better than she hoped for. She woke up on Saturday morning feeling like life could not get much better than this. Dan made her breakfast in bed and then told her they were going to the beach later, everything seemed cut from a rom-com.

The weather was good, they took a picnic box and spent the whole day on the sand, in each other's arms, wondering if they could be like that forever. It was perfect, better than perfect, till curiosity made her fall from heaven.

They had just pulled over from the beach, her first mistake was she offered to help Dan return the picnic box and other items to the basement. He gave her a look and told her to be careful and she shrugged it off, this was her second mistake.

The basement was not cluttered, everything was well arranged just like every other thing in Dan's house, he was always meticulous. She dropped the box where she was meant to and could not help but noticed a huge wardrobe in the corner of the room. It was bright red, looked well taken care of, and was out of place in the basement, this was her third mistake.

She should not have looked, she should not have been curious about what was stored in it, and she should not have screamed when she saw horrifying human taxidermies, this was her final mistake.

"It's always better when they are awake.....", this was the last thing she remembered as she awoke in great pain. She was unable to scream as her mouth was gagged. As her eyes finally drew focus, she saw Dan seated on the floor looking distraught, muttering to him.

She could not hear the words entirely, but she made out him repeating "why". She was in a dark room, tied to a wooden bench with clamps holding her legs and arms in place.

Dan raised his head and looked at her struggling to break free, the distraught was gone from his face and replaced with coldness. He walked up to her slowly saying "Why did you have to search my things, I trusted you"

She wondered about that too but it was too late, now she knew his dark secrets and he was never going to let her go. She tried to beg for mercy but nothing audible came out from her gagged mouth except whimpers.

Dan stroked his hand across her face, admiring her soft skin saying "I thought we were meant to be but you chose to be game. I would preserve your beauty in my art and your memories in my heart. You would be my most prized collection, don't worry it will all be over soon."

He moved to another table that had a tool kit on it, he drew upon the tool kit and she noticed strange tools and different types of knives. His face lit up as he traced his fingers around them.

He picked up a strange tool built like the letter “T” but with blades in the intersection, “This is called a shaving knife, darling. I use it to thin the skin, most people use a fleshing machine but that takes away the joy in the art. You see darling, taxidermy is an ancient art. The ancient Egyptians captured the eternal beauty of their pharaohs”.

He removed syringes and a bottle of fluid from the toolkit and hummed joyfully as he extracted the content.

Then he walked over to her holding the syringe and smiles “Don’t cry darling, I don't want wrinkles spoiling my masterpiece”

She feels the syringe piercing her skin, and in a few seconds, she is struggling to breathe. He strokes her head like a loving partner saying “hush now darling, it will all be over soon”.

As her consciousness fades away she sees the care in his eyes and wonders if this is love.