

"Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for the delay in baggage delivery. Our ground crew is working diligently to ensure your luggage arrives as soon as possible. We appreciate your understanding," the announcement continued repeatedly as Oladayo waited for his baggage that had not shown up even though the flight arrived more than 40 minutes ago.

"As above, so below, I can't even be mad, MMA shege pass this one," he muttered to himself as he went back to his thoughts. Life back home wasn't that bad, but it had peaked. The economy had tanked, politics had drowned out the youth's energy, and nothing ran on merit anymore. He hissed again as he reminisced about the going-away party his family and friends had thrown him barely 48 hours ago. He might never see some of those guys again, or at least not together in the same place. Nigeria had made it impossible to maintain a long-lasting social circle. He had known those guys for over a decade; they were university friends. He had a good-paying job relative to the Nigerian economy, a car, and he supported his family in ways he could. Yet, here he was, in Europe, trying to get an MSc at 29.

He got distracted again, but this time because he could see his three "ghana must-go" bags and hand luggage on the conveyor belt. He sighed in relief.

He had to get to his hotel and call his family. He hadn't spoken to them since his first stopover in Addis Ababa 17

hours ago. "Taxi, Grand Hotel," he shouted as he pushed his bags out of the airport. "This had better be worth it," he said to himself. The European experience – not the taxi.

The exhaustion that clung to him was washed off under the cascade of showers, and he shed a few tears because even though he was a man in and of himself, he suddenly felt a little smaller. He was about to be at the mercy of others who were not exactly like him in looks and perhaps in deeds. Some of them may be fresh students off their BSc. He had not read a single educational book in five years, and now he was back to that life. He dried himself with his towel and mentally picked out an attire for tomorrow. It's the welcoming party for new international students, and he looked forward to making a long-lasting first impression.

The next day arrived quickly. Oladayo meticulously chose a sleek navy-blue suit, tailored to perfection, with a crisp white shirt underneath. The suit accentuated his tall, lean frame and the rich color brought out the warm undertones of his skin. It could only be described as dashing, thanks to the modern cut and subtle pinstripes that added a touch of sophistication. Completing his ensemble, he opted for a pair of classic brown leather oxfords. The shoes, well-polished and with just the right amount of shine, spoke of his refined fashion sense.

Even though the chilly evening air had him yearning for a warm embrace, Oladayo had made a valiant effort to immerse himself in the welcoming party from the moment

he arrived. He indulged in a delightful assortment of appetizers – mini quiches and bruschettas, savoring each bite. The flavors danced on his palate, and he found himself pleasantly surprised by the culinary prowess of the hosts.

He held a glass of velvety red wine, its aroma mingling with the sounds of laughter and chatter that filled the air. The venue was adorned with soft, ambient lighting, casting an inviting glow over the crowd. Oladayo had initially gravitated toward an open area near the bar, where he leaned casually against a high table. The time seemed to pass swiftly as he took in the vibrant atmosphere, and it was only after a glance at his watch that he decided to grant himself an additional hour and a half before retiring to his room.

The lively ambiance of the party was punctuated by the arrival of a captivating figure. Oladayo couldn't help but notice her even before she ventured toward him. Dressed in an elegant yet understated crimson dress that flowed gracefully around her, she stood out like a masterpiece in a sea of colors. Her attire was impeccably matched with a pair of sleek black heels that emphasized her height and poise.

As she approached, Oladayo observed her holding a crystal-clear wine glass, its contents catching the warm party lights. Her cellphone was tucked away discreetly, a hint that she was fully present in the moment. Her walk exuded confidence, with each step echoing grace and charm. Oladayo found himself subtly captivated by the sight of her,

and her approach carried with it an aura of both confidence and innocence.

"Hi, you must be Olanrewaju Oladayo," she said as she fumbled the pronunciation of his name. "E for Effort," he replied, "I am Oladayo. Dee for short, but how do you know that?"

"Oh, thank goodness. There are two ways this could have turned out apparently. I was either going to come off as a genius or a stereotypical racist," she blurted and then went on to explain how she checked the list of attending students in her faculty and found out only three people had a name not particularly Western, and two of them are female, so she assumed he was the male. But she also knew that it wouldn't be the strangest thing in the world if it wasn't him. "Oh interesting, I didn't quite catch your name, though," he said, to which she replied, " Rachel. Rachel Lloyd."

"Rachel," he said, his voice laced with warmth. "You make this party come alive."

"Oh, I'm just adding to the background noise," she replied, her smile like a curtain drawn over the depth of her emotions.

After the brief introduction, they shared quite a few other pieces of information. He found out although she's white, she's been to a lot more African countries than he has, and that eased the whole conversation and made the night even better.

Nights turned into days, and days into weeks. It's now been three weeks since their first interaction, and it's been an interesting experience for him. They shared the same view on most controversial topics, and even for the few topics they disagreed on, it was always a lengthy but interesting and respectful dialogue.

They went out to eat often times but it was not categorically a date. They shared wines and even joined other friends at board games night, but more often than not, they were the stars of the show, and everyone around them were supporting casts. He had found a genuine friend in her but he then wanted more, as did everyone around them, for them.

They rooted for them to be a couple since the ingredients seemed to be complete, but Rachel wanted something else. She liked him, a lot, but it was always platonic. Partly because she has had her fair share of dating West Africans, and it had never ended well, or at least that's usually how the story went when she tells them. But mainly because "there was obviously no future with Oladayo." she often said, in different phrases, without explaining further.

Oladayo, on the other hand, always has his savior complex kick in whenever she tells the sob stories because he could correctly identify patterns as to why her previous relationships, specifically African ones, always ended badly. He knew he could not only atone for the "sins" of his fellow African people but also he was sure he was a perfect fit for

her just as he had been for a couple of people back home.

His goal was to live in the present and primarily cure loneliness, but hers was to build a future, and she really just couldn't see any with him.

On one of the few nights where Oladayo was overwhelmed with assignments that Rachel had already completed, he stayed back at home and missed board game night with friends. It was on this night, on Albert Avenue, that Rachel met Sam, a Nigerian who had arrived in Europe around the same time as Oladayo but to a different school in the same city. Like Oladayo, Sam was thoughtful and funny, and they got along quite well.

The next morning, Rachel couldn't wait to share the details of the lively evening with Oladayo, knowing he had missed out on what had been an unforgettable night. She recounted the spirited atmosphere at the board games night, where she and Sam had engaged in friendly competition and laughter that left them both feeling exhilarated. They'd then moved on to a charming jazz club, where the music had filled the air with soulful melodies, and they'd swayed to the rhythm under the soft glow of dimmed lights. Rachel's words painted a vibrant picture of the connection she and Sam had formed, their shared joy, and the warmth of the evening. As she spoke, she couldn't help but notice a subtle twinge of jealousy in Oladayo's eyes, a hint of longing for the experience he had missed.

And even though he was indeed jealous, he was somewhat willing not to get in the way if a relationship ever formed between them because Sam was a fellow Nigerian, and he ought to do right by him.

They – Sam and Oladayo – finally met after 5 weeks of Sam and Rachel seeing each other, and things went really great, except that when Oladayo got drunk, he had blurted out that Sam stole Rachel from him. So it was only right for Rachel to give him someone to replace her; a request which surprisingly made sense to her, so she promised to hook him up with Adora, an old friend of hers.

"I honestly have no idea I did all that nor said any of those things. I hope it wasn't so embarrassing," he said after Rachel narrated the last night and while she gave him Adora's contact. Rachel understood Oladayo's bafflement, realizing that Adora hadn't come up earlier in any of their conversations. "And why am I just hearing of this friend?", he asked to which she replied, "Well, you know what they say about people, time and chance. She just didn't come to mind and then suddenly she did perhaps because she's the right profile and more importantly, she's in the city."

Meanwhile, Sam couldn't help but feel a sense of relief wash over him. He had known of the admiration that Oladayo and Rachel once shared, and while their friendship was genuine, he'd sensed a lingering connection between them. Now, with Oladayo seemingly interested in Adora, it was a welcome development. It was as if a weight had been lifted, allowing

him to fully embrace his relationship with Rachel.

As the weeks turned into months, their friendships interwove in intricate patterns. Oladayo's connection with Adora remained steadfast, their conversations ranging from philosophy to shared laughter over inside jokes. Meanwhile, Rachel and Sam found common ground in their love for art and music, often attending exhibitions and concerts together. At times, the four of them gathered for game nights or evenings filled with lively debates and storytelling. The chemistry among them was undeniable, yet beneath the surface simmered a complex web of unspoken desires and the gentle tensions of unfulfilled hopes. Despite their connections, each of them held secrets, dreams, and emotions close to their hearts, creating a captivating blend of camaraderie and unexplored possibilities.

Months turned into even longer months, and everything about both relationships was going great. The frequency of communication between Oladayo and Rachel dwindled noticeably, partly due to the fact that they were both immersed in relationships with others who shared profound personal connections or cultural heritage. It became evident that maintaining the same level of closeness they once shared would have been considered impolite in the context of their new partnerships.

Oladayo and Rachel had just done the final reviews of their theses and would be defending in a few weeks. The new four-friends-two-partners had planned to meet at the city

centre for drinks and to unwind but a few nights before that, Rachel and Sam had split because over the course of their relationship, she began to notice a subtle but recurring pattern. Every time she suggested taking a specific route through the city or casually mentioned certain topics like immigration, school, or future plans, Sam exhibited a noticeable change in behavior. He would either dodge the conversation skillfully, diverting her attention with a well-timed joke or a change of subject, or he would subtly steer them away from the intended route.

And then, on a Saturday afternoon, as they strolled through the vibrant streets, she suggested a scenic route that passed by a local immigration office. Instantly, his demeanor shifted, and he suggested an alternative path with an excuse about wanting to explore a different neighborhood. This wasn't the first time she had seen this avoidance behavior, and her curiosity was piqued.

Later that evening, during a casual discussion about their educational journeys, she gently asked him about his experiences in school. As the conversation veered toward the specifics of his enrollment, he skillfully deflected her questions, speaking in vague terms. Her intuition sharpened with each dodge, and she began to piece together the puzzle on her own, long before confronting him. He revealed amidst tears and frightfulness that he was neither a student as he had claimed, and he also didn't arrive in Europe legally.

Feeling overwhelmed and extremely sad, she had found

herself yearning for comfort in the arms of Oladayo. He was right, she thought as she cried, she does have an attraction to broken and condemned souls. Her legs carried her to his doorstep, knowing what she was about to do to Oladayo's and Adora's relationship but hoping that Oladayo was strong enough to turn her down. But he wasn't. She should have known.

Adora found out about the affair, and it led to a fracas among them – her and Oladayo as well as her and Rachel – but not because Oladayo slept with her. It was because Rachel had slept with the one type of person she had sworn never to.

The defence happened and Rachel left the city immediately afterward, and no one knew anything about where she went or why. Although they had already received their degrees, it still wasn't the way things were supposed to end. It wasn't exactly how they had planned it.

After some months in the new city, she had an interview with one of the leading companies in the city. While in the building, she met Elaine, an old acquaintance they seldomly played board games with while in school. Elaine was the company's HR, so naturally, the interview went well. After the interview, Elaine scheduled an appointment with Rachel so she could fill in on all the details since they last met. It was at this time Rachel explained that she didn't leave because of the affair, nor because she had betrayed her friend. "In fact," she said, "it wasn't betrayal of any sort because

Oladayo actually belonged to someone else." She left because she had been an accomplice to breaking a vow Oladayo must have made to his wife. She then divulged the whole story about how Oladayo never outrightly told her he was married back in Nigeria with kids. But because she had dated a couple of other Nigerian men both in Africa and Europe, they had a "tell". She could see it in his contextualized words when he says "family" as if he meant parents instead of "wife and kids." She could sense it because when they had first met, he wore his ring around his chain, but after some weeks, he changed the pendant. She could see it in context on his Instagram post that he had immediately archived.

He was never single. He is a married man who wants to simply have a good time until his wife and kids come around. And that wasn't what she ever wanted, even though she eventually did sleep with him.

Olanrewaju Oladayo. Dee for short!