

THE PRESENT

Dr. Lade sat back in her leather chair and fixed her eyes on the woman occupying the seat across from her. The quiet ambience in the room was complemented by the soothing sound of raindrops against glass. Given that the young lady always enjoyed the rain since it helped her feel calm, she exuded a sense of confidence and arrogance.

"I appreciate you coming here today, Ese," Dr. Lade said softly, as if she were frightened the woman in front of her would scream at any hint of annoyance. "Start at the beginning. Tell me what took place."

Ese kept silent as she gave the Doctor in front of her a careful gaze that was threatening. She took a big breath before saying, "Dr. Lade, I'm going to tell you a story. One that would cause you to question reality and one that would make you want to seriously consider many aspects of life and the people around you, a lesson to be learnt if you can call it that". As she said, a slow, sadistic smile gradually developed on her face.

Dr. Lade paid close attention, keeping a notepad nearby to record every detail. As Ese's tale developed, it became apparent that she was haunted by her past and that she had carried the burden of a dreadful secret for an excessive amount of time. Dr. Lade managed to maintain a strong front while undoubtedly being scarred by the woman who sat in front of her. She only needs to know how since she really wants to assist this woman she has always looked up to.

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THE PAST

My formative years in Lagos were the most exciting, and I consider myself a Lagos girl, albeit not a razz one. My sister Esosa, 11 years older, was my world as kids. Our hardworking parents often left us on our own due to their ambitions and responsibilities. They had differences and frequent evening conflicts, covering topics like infidelity and money, but still showered us with love. My parents, especially my mother, were very cautious about my asthma. They kept me away from cold things, made me drink room temperature water, and served ice cream in a cup so I could let it melt before consuming it like milk. If I ever had something cold, I had to follow it with something hot. They even made me cover my mouth and nose with a handkerchief when we passed strong fumes from trailers. It felt like I wasn't truly living.

I can't complain because my mother had it worse. She'd check on me at night, watching my breathing. My parents, Egyptian and Nigerian (Edo), provided a good life, mirroring their own well-educated backgrounds. However, things took a turn when a close family friend invited us to a Christmas gathering. The grandchildren my age weren't present that year. I was the youngest, around 6 or 7, and they let me watch cartoons alone. Many details of that day are blocked, but I remember someone entered the room, likely someone they knew. He sat near me to watch cartoons and got too close.

The next thing I felt were hands, one moment he was beside me the next he had my jeans down and had his privates out. I begged everything, I begged him to stop, I begged for someone to come, I begged God to let it end, but nothing. So, I blanked out, with nothing but tears, and his whispers telling me to be quiet.

By the time I came through it was the sound of someone knocking. He left me alone and I was able to run to the bathroom and lock myself in. I don't know how long I sat on the floor in the bathroom, but I stayed there, till my sister found me and said we had to go. I stayed silent about what happened. Surprisingly, nobody noticed when the talkative girl turned mute, and it became clear that no one cared.

Post-trauma, I clung to my sister, but she prioritized friends, making me feel like a burden. Eventually, I distanced myself and grew to despise her and others. Boarding school gave her space, and she included me more, she started sharing mundane details with me, which I appreciated, but I kept my emotional distance. In secondary school, I began struggling emotionally, particularly in SS1. He haunted my dreams, and my grades suffered, drawing attention from the guidance counsellor.

Sharing my troubles made things worse as sympathy from others irritated me, she had told almost everyone what had happened to me. And expected me to leave all things to God. Where was he when I was begging and crying and pleading to be heard. I was a fool believing in such a thing.

I started fights, lost interest in a lot of things, and held way too many grudges. I avoided the counsellor, striving to be likable for validation and sanity. This strategy helped me survive boarding school but led to manipulation and emotional exhaustion.

At 18, I hit a breaking point, tired of pretending and acting hostile. To deceive everyone, I hid my suffering behind a happy facade. Eventually, I found solace in reading romance novels, playing video games, and cooking. These became my only sources of true happiness. I withdrew from people at university, avoiding most, but my joy waned over time. People thought I was lazy, but I knew it was sadness, and I couldn't remember the last time I felt true happiness. How could I? I had my father barely even present in my life; he'd rather nurse a bottle of whiskey than pay attention to whatever was happening around him. He was there but he wasn't there. I had my mother belittling everything I did. Nothing was ever good to her; I could never be as good as her precious Esosa. I was the black sheep after all, and they'd never let me forget it. Even if they tried to be nice, the memories were already there, the words said had been permanently tattooed on my heart and in my head.

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Dr. Lade cleared her throat and inquired about Ese's love life during and after university to relieve the sad energy in the air. Ese admitted to having a few romantic experiences.

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THE PAST

In my third year of university, I met A on a rainy day after church. He charmed me with his jokes, and we exchanged numbers. A had a captivating personality, and I developed a crush on him. We sneaked kisses a lot, even though I knew he had a girlfriend, but he claimed to have a complicated long-distance relationship. He asked me out twice, but I didn't take it seriously. After Christmas break, he grew distant due to his "studies", so I gave up on things between us.

Later, I met C when I accompanied my roommate to do something. We started hanging out, and A returned when he found out about us. Looking back, I realize how foolish I was. There was a constant back-and-forth with A, especially when he saw me with C. This continued until they graduated, but A still claimed he wanted me. Ironically, I lost my virginity to him. C and I remained close friends, always there for each other. A however kept trying to

convince me he wanted us to be together and give it a try, but I didn't know if I could do that to myself anymore.

I completed my internship program over the summer before my final year. During that time, my mother and I had fought, and it led to a physical altercation, so I quickly left the house to be with my sister on the island because it was close to my workplace. Before that, I had recognized that I had sunk once more and was unable to maintain the constant façade of fake happiness. It was a contributing factor in my arguments with my mother and the short-term separation from my sister.

During that time at my sisters, it began to seem a bit like when I was younger and she used to treat me like a burden, once more putting her friends and relationships before me. I then requested that my father pick me up the following day because I had thoroughly embraced my depression at that time. Even though my mother started the dispute, everyone kept urging me to confess my wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness. They all tried to convince me that my sister would never treat me like a burden, no surprise there, she was always the golden child. In their eyes everything I did was wrong, or it was my fault. If she left anything out of place or did anything, I would be blamed for not picking up after her or not tending to her like a slave.

But as usual, no one even cared to listen to me explain why I stood up for myself or let me vent about how annoyed I was with them for ignoring my plea for help. Why no one was interested in finding out what was wrong with me. They were always so focused on themselves. They would chat to me for hours about their difficulties and problems, but no one would appear to pay attention when I even opened my mouth to say anything. No one even tried to save me as I was drowning. So, I tried to save myself. It didn't endure forever. Even if the outcomes are always the same, I'm not sure why I always find myself astonished. Once my mother and I's argument was settled. My neighbours got involved and virtually guilt-tripped me into apologizing, but I eventually gave in because I was sick of everyone making me feel guilty. My father also tried to settle my differences with my sister. I won't argue that they attempted to be kind, but they did. But since the harm had already been done, what could they truly do?

In my fourth year, I had some minor flings, but they weren't significant just one really. The major event happened not too long after I lost my virginity. I was getting close to a guy named D but wanted to take things slow. One night at a

party, I stayed with a crush from my second year while we were both a little intoxicated, and things escalated. Someone saw us, and told everyone it did not concern what happened, turning me into a gas lighter and manipulator in my final year just because I denied everything and didn't want anyone to know. Fortunately, my friends helped me through it, so I didn't exactly spiral into an episode.

I briefly had a discreet fling with my crush, but I quickly grew tired of his unpredictable attitude and ended things. After that, it seemed like every man I encountered was only interested in having a sexual relationship with me; they all seemed to view me as a body for them to enjoy. At some point

I therefore avoided men and focused all my efforts on making myself work harder. I earned a marketing master's degree and started my own marketing company from scratch. I increased my assets and business, founded charities, and made donations to groups that helped mothers and children who had experienced similar hardships to mine. I became the heartless, entrepreneur the media painted me as.

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"Why now, then? You are 40 years old, have achieved great success, and do not have any children to share it with. After all these years, why have you decided to let someone in?" Dr. Lade questioned, appearing to be attempting to comprehend what was happening inside the woman in front of her.

"Doctor Lade, have you ever given yourself that one item you've always longed to have? However, it never seems to be the proper moment each year. For me, the moment had come to treat myself to this present. I sincerely hope you get what I'm saying." Ese spoke quietly.

"You still want me to share your tale with the media, I guess," Dr. Lade sighed to her client.

As she stood up, Ese grinned and said, "I would appreciate that. Would you pardon me, Dr. I still owe myself one favour before my birthday is over." she said.

"That's no problem; hopefully we'll cross paths again, Ms. Ese." Dr. Lade exclaimed as Ese opened the door, "You really are an inspiration."

“Do forgive me, Lade; I hope you always consider me an inspiration rather than a coward.” Dr. Lade was perplexed as she gave her response and exited the office.

Ese was at home, alone in her bedroom's darkness, enjoying a cupcake with a single birthday candle. As she sang "happy birthday" to herself, tears were streaming down her face. She had spent the whole week getting ready for this moment—talking to her attorneys, meeting with Dr. Lade, and releasing her life narrative to the media the following day, among other things. She felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, and she was relieved at last.

"Ese, happy birthday. Well done. As she blew out the candle and ate her cupcake, she muttered to herself, through her tears, "And I'm so proud of the woman you have become." She was content as she lay in bed knowing that she would pass away the following day. She had succeeded in doing the one thing she had been so afraid to do her entire life. Finally, she committed suicide.

THE NEXT DAY

A door was being knocked on.

"Ese!" "Hello Ese, please open the door," yelled Lade. “Please let me help you, Ese; just open the door I beg you!” She was growing frustrated and desperate. Lade had tossed and turned all night long before she finally understood what Ese had meant.

“Can you guys break the door? She's not answering”. In the morning, Lade brought an ambulance and a police escort. The policemen had requested room so that they can pry open the door.

A couple vehicles of reporters pulled up in front of Ese's estate gate as that was happening. Her story had been made public.

Lade and the ambulance team rushed into the house in search of Ese after the officers were able to burst the door in response to the commotion the media were creating.

She was first discovered by Lade, who shouted.

"NO!!!!" "Ese, please wake up, please," she had cried. I'll be your outlet, I'll be here to listen. If you want to yell, go ahead, but wake up first”. It occurred as if in a dream. She was unable to feel when the police officers led her outside, hear when the paramedics pronounced Ese dead, or even hear the reporters questioning her about the entire incident. She had lost all feeling.

Ese had developed into the one patient she was unable to assist and the one who made a lasting impression on her. She had let herself down. What's worse, she had let Ese down.

THE END