

Deadwater

Deji Williams is unconscious on your dorm room floor.

Amidst Ese's manic screams and the loud thud of the maintenance manager trying to break your lock, you come back to your senses. You slowly realize that you went too far but it is too late.

Deji drove around school in a burnt orange Audi. He was a direct entry student and sometimes had classes with Ese. When Ese happened to attend lectures, she brought back stories about him. *He is too lousy and thinks too highly of himself. What kind of stupid colour for a car is that anyway?*

You humoured her by calling him her boyfriend.

Ah Ese, see your man's Lucozade Boost car! You said to her when he drove past the two of you one day.

Mena, you're insane, she replied.

You both laughed till your eyes teared up.

The way you always call this Deji my husband or my boyfriend, let it not be that you're eyeing him and projecting it on me o, Ese remarked.

Did she know something? She couldn't possibly know. You looked at her and laughed nervously. *He's not even my type.*

Most of your Saturdays were spent in the Fine and Applied Arts gallery admiring charcoal portraits, vibrant oil paintings and terracotta sculptures. It was on one of such Saturdays that Deji walked up to you and introduced himself. What he lacked in looks, he made up for with his charming confidence and height. He told you that he had never met anyone so beautiful and you

giggled sheepishly. Five minutes later, he left with your number and a promise to call you later that evening.

Deji came into your life with the intensity of the Harmattan sun. You had been talking for a little over a week when he began to express his love for you with desperation. He wrote you detailed letters, poured his heart out in long texts and bought thoughtful gifts. To him, you were the sun and moon and stars, his source of inspiration, the love of his life. His determination made you giddy and you welcomed his affection with open arms.

On your first Valentine's Day together, he gave you a silver necklace with a heart shaped pendant. Not long after, the pendant broke. It was a foreshadowing of all that was to come but you did not know it yet.

When Deji broke your heart the first time, it was not a figure of speech. It was not poetic. It did not feel like a Sabrina Claudio song. It did not fuel your passion to excel in life or look your best. He held his index finger and thumb together in front of your face, a quarter of an inch between them, to show you how close he was to punching you. He didn't do it of course. He was not that kind of person. He simply wanted you to know how much you had provoked him, to warn you to never accuse him of cheating again. But Ese had seen him. She had been at Club Consequence with her favourite manfriend when she saw Deji kissing someone. She sent you a video from that night and you saw Deji's arms around a girl with red braids. You confronted him and he swore that he didn't do it. *I would never do anything to hurt you Mena*, he said. He looked at you with watery eyes.

You calmly brought up the video and his eyes grew dark. He called you heartless and insecure for believing the worst about him and asked if you were even sure you saw his face. His aggression dizzied you and made it difficult for you to articulate yourself. You fought back tears and said you didn't know. He walked up to you and brought his face to yours, lifting his index finger and thumb in front of you.

I am this close to punching you Mena, he let out a deep sigh. *I don't think you're ready to be in a relationship, we need a break, I need a break.*

He did not hit you but his words did. He took your heart with him and dragged it across the gravel pavement when he left.

To control the pain, you slept all day and drank cheap canned alcohol. Ese was worried about you and barged into your room to force you to move on with your life. She had always told you the truth and you loved her for it but when she said that your feelings for Deji were an unhealthy obsession and borderline dangerous, you called her a miserable prostitute who would never know real love because she slept with men for money. You knew you had slapped her in the face because she left your room without saying a word. You and Ese had bonded quickly when you met. She was attractive with wide hips, unnaturally fair skin and a vast knowledge of everything that was not part of the academic curriculum. She knew which celebrities were dating who, what fashion trends were in, where to find rich men in Lagos and how to spot the fake big boys.

For the two semesters that she was your roommate, she undid all your mothers efforts to instill fear in you about sex and boys and your body. She told you there was nothing strange about the wetness you felt when Chibuike kissed you and that you would certainly not go to hell for it. She gave you mini dresses and see through tops even though she knew you would not wear them. She braided your hair, shaped your eyebrows with Tiger razor blades and made mixtures of lemon and sugar to brighten your underarms. In return, you let her copy your assignments and sometimes changed her scores when lecturers instructed you to record class grades.

Ese was determined to make money and be the kind of big madam that she had always aspired to be. The opportunity to be a runs girl presented itself to her and she jumped at it. As her designer bag collection grew, so did her number of carryovers. She did not care about school but for some reason would not drop out. You were not interested in the same things that she was but Ese was, and had always been nothing short of perfect to you. Until you met Deji. He disliked her and was vocal about it. *She's ran through and doesn't even try to hide it. How can you be friends with her?* You had never been bothered by Ese's lifestyle. She was kind and consistent and you could rely on her. To Deji, you looked at Ese through rose tinted glasses. He did not want her to rub off on you because you were different from her, better than her. You had absorbed his opinions about Ese without realizing it. It wasn't just what you said to her that surprised you, it was the

way you said it — with condescension and scorn — like you had swallowed Deji and he was talking through you. Like you *were* Deji. It may have seemed dramatic to sacrifice your friendship with Ese for a boy but nobody understood what you and Deji had. You were destined to be together and no one, not even Ese, would get in the way of that.

Dramatic breakups and reconciliations became a staple in your relationship with Deji. Each heartbreak was worse than the previous one and you hoped they hurt Deji too. Your constant surveillance of his social media accounts revealed otherwise. From the fake pages you made, you watched his Instagram stories and tweets scrupulously. Deji was getting by fine without you. He still played basketball four times a week and partied every other day. He liked Kylie Jenner's pictures on Instagram and left fire emoji comments. He posted screenshots of music he was listening to; Drake, Kendrick Lamar, Future and sometimes Burna Boy. Whenever you received notifications on your phone, you hoped that Deji was reaching out to you and he always did eventually.

You were nursing yet another heart break when Deji sent you a text. *Can we meet? I'm outside*, he said. Your throat was suddenly parched and your mouth was dry. You drank some water from an almost empty bottle on your study table and went to meet him outside.

From afar, you could make out his tall frame leaning on the bonnet of his car. You had imagined how you would react to seeing him again. You wanted to tell him that you had stopped talking to Ese, that you would stop accusing him of cheating, that you would complain less and accept him for who he was. For every break up, you had learnt something new and would adjust. Now, as you stood in front of him, the words tumbled back in your throat and you swallowed them. Your knees ached and sweat gathered at your temples, under your armpits, on your palms. You folded your arms and unfolded them.

How are you?

You looked at him with a frown. Was he really asking you that?

He let out a long breath. *I know you don't want to see me or even have anything to do with me and I understand it.*

You looked straight ahead. A hen was rounding up her chicks and leading them to an open dumpsite. Deji continued talking.

Efemena, we can't keep going back and forth like this.

Your eyes met his and you felt the sting of tears.

There's no other way to say this and I promised myself to keep it short and simple.

Your ears were ringing. You wanted to reach into your head and still the bells that had set off.

What I'm trying to say is that I want to move on and I think you need to do the same. Things are never going to work out between us.

The tears began to flow freely. If anyone happened to pass by at that moment, all they would have seen was a girl crying in the dark.

The next day, you knocked on Ese's room door with a pack of shortbread biscuits; a small peace offering. She had something you needed and making up with her was the only way to get it. One of her roommates, a rude girl with large haughty eyes, opened the door. She barely responded to your customary "hi" and wore the displeasure that your visit had caused all over her face like Maybelline foundation. A Korean film played on her laptop while she painted her toenails a dull red. You sat on Ese's bed in silence, the smell of nail polish hanging densely around you. After staring at the ceiling for a while, you asked her if she knew where Ese was. She took too long to respond and when she did you could barely hear her over the rise and fall of Korean conversation coming from her laptop. You asked her three times to repeat herself before she paused her film begrudgingly and repeated that Ese was not around and that she did not know where she went or when she would be back. She clearly wanted to be alone. You left Ese's room and stood in the corridor, looking into space. Your plan hadn't worked. From the balcony, you saw Deji's infamous car.

What is he doing here? You thought to yourself.

He got out of his car and walked up the flight of stairs that led to the side of the building where you were standing. You wondered if he was coming to apologize for the previous night and ask to get back together. Your room was on the opposite wing so it was not likely.

Why on earth is he not coming to my block? You said to yourself. You heard footsteps and hid in a dark corner of the corridor. Deji knocked on Ese's door and her roommate opened.

Deji hiiii, she said. Her voice taking on a softer, high pitched quality.

Hello, is Ese in? He responded.

No, she went out but you can wait for her if you want, the roommate said.

She never is. You know what, I'll just give her a call, he turned to leave and fished his phone from his pocket.

Never is? He had been coming to see her? Ese of all people?

You needed to think fast.

When he made for the stairs, you went after him.

Hi Deji, you said from behind.

Hi? He looked confused. Like he did not know you.

I heard you were looking for Ese, she's in my room. She came to visit me and fell asleep. Let me take you to her.

He looked puzzled but he followed you. *He must really want to see her*, you thought.

You opened your room door and he peered in.

Before he could look at you to ask where Ese was, you hit him on the head with a frying pan.

Deji's phone would not stop ringing. Ese called four times before finally sending a text.

Deji where are you? My roommate said you were here. We need to finish this group work and email it to Prof. Ogunlola tonight, you replied to her text.

I'm in Mena's room.

Before you could send anything else, you heard a rapid knock on your door.

Efemena!

You opened the door, pulled Ese in and locked it.

She tripped over Deji's body sprawled on the floor and in typical Ese fashion began to scream. She was going to draw attention but you did not care. You stood in front of her. *Ese, why is Deji coming to your room at night? Why is he coming to your room at all?*

What are you talking about? We were put in the same group for a course and—

She looked past you at the almost empty bottle labeled "Deadwater" on your study table.

Mena where did you get that from? Her voice was calm but there was sheer terror written all over her face.

Mena did you drink this? Have you been drinking this?

You looked at her blankly.

Yes I have, you said.

You had stolen it from her weeks ago. Ese sometimes used charms and potions for her men. "Money attraction waist beads" here and "do as I say oil" there. A long time ago, she brought up Deadwater, a new product that could make men fall madly in love and lead to obsession and hallucinations if not handled properly. *I haven't found anyone that is worth it yet so I don't use it,* she had said. As she kept the bottle back in the corner of her drawer she retrieved it from, you took note of its placement. You stole it and took a small sip the morning you met Deji. Deji never spoke to you at the Fine and Applied Arts gallery but you had imagined he did. With every

increased dose of Deadwater you took, your hallucinations intensified. Because Ese administered all her special products on herself, you did not think that the deadwater would be any different. What you did not know was that if you wanted it to work correctly, Deji had to be the one taking it, not the other way around. The letters, long texts, broken necklace and heartbreaks never happened. The conversation with Deji the previous day never happened. When Ese sent you the video, she was showing you her new wig but you zoomed in on Deji in the corner of the video. When she came to your room to console you after Deji broke your heart, she had come to advise you to stop trying to get his attention by obsessing over him. The things you said to Ese that day were thoughts you had always had but never admitted.

Mena, he's not breathing, Ese said as she put her ear to his nose.

You were becoming dizzy.

Do you have any idea what you've done? Mena! Mena!

