

HOW I LOST YOUR MOTHER

The first time they had sex, it was right on some of the short steps at motion ground that led to Oduduwa hall. On that night, they were not the only ones battling rioting genitals and riddling in the sin of fornication. In fact, to a bystander, it might have looked like some low-budget campus version of an orgy. But why else was Motion Ground built other than to cater to the needs of lovers? Also, one could not entirely blame these young lovers for basking in the freedom that they had to be anywhere on campus at any time. This was exactly what Afrika had in mind in 1999 when he ran cultists out of the university so Great Ife students could move freely.

Halimah would have preferred somewhere more discreet, a place where she did not have to look over her shoulders constantly as Abdul-Hakeem thrust into her and made way for himself in between her legs. But she felt like they had no choice. Hakeem was tired of waiting, and Sophia, his classmate and “best friend,” had been sniffing around him these days. Halimah’s life as the daughter of civil servant parents fit snugly into Hakeem’s life. They had similar backgrounds. Their parents were all civil servants. Hakeem’s Dad was a worker at some ministry office, same with her dad, and their mothers were both teachers. They were both living out their parents’ aspirations of grooming professionals. Halimah was in 100L, her second year studying law, and Hakeem was in 400L, his sixth year as a medical student. They both stayed in the hostel, meaning that neither of them had the option of spending the night together.

In her room in Mozambique hall, all she had to herself was the upper part of a bunk, a cupboard and just enough floor space to lay out her prayer mat while her bunkmate lay on the bed unmoving until she was done and no privacy. In his room in Awolowo Hall, where he lived a second life as a notorious Awo boy, there were more people and even less privacy. And so it was only natural that they sought solace as lovers in the untelling darkness of Motion Ground. That night was not their first time at Motion Ground. They had spent many trysts together at that exact same spot. But it was the first time Hakeem would use that latex condom he always carried “just in case” on her. Halimah was never sure if it was the same condom, but she never asked either.

At their last rendezvous, he had walked away in anger, leaving her to hurry behind him as they walked back to their hostels angrily. When they got to the health center, and she was half-hoping he would turn and walk her to Moz, his determined steps towards Awo Cafe shattered her hope. As the tears pooled in her eyes, Halimah decided she would stop acting like a baby and just let him go all the way. So the next time they met, it was on the agreement that she would have sex with him. First, they tried while they were both

standing, and then she lay on the rough concrete steps while he tried to “open it” with his fingers first and then with his throbbing manhood. He grunted as he came. Hakeem always had his way.

She took it all in, hoping for it to be over. And it was, twenty-eight years later, in Michigan, USA.

There was a big lump in her throat; no matter how hard or how often she swallowed, the lump remained. She had a bottle of water in her hand and a clear bag holding all her life achievements, proof that she would one day return. She also had on her a look of determination. This time, she was ready. This time, she could not afford to fail. She had to get a visa. There were rumours that Hakeem was getting around with a white woman for the green card. A part of her wanted to believe that was all it was, but the doubts remained. You did not parade a green card woman all over social media the way he did. But he was also paying a lot of money for her to come to America. This was the fifth time she was trying, and each time, it cost a few millions of naira. Only a man who loved you would do that.

Halimah was hopeful as she walked towards the embassy. But five years of doing this had taught her to manage her expectations. it really is the hope that kills. She missed Hakeem. If anyone had told her that she would be in a long-distance marriage for the first five years of getting married, she would have called them a liar. And if anyone had told her that “joining him soon” would mean five years of late-night tears of frustration and unfilling phone sex, she would have called them a bigger liar. But here she was, slowly becoming the *Nigerian wife*. the women she pitied and prayed not to become, the women whose husbands lived abroad while they stayed back and had babies that were conceived during the once-every-two-to-three-years visits.

The first time Hakeem came home, he tried to get her pregnant. At the time, he had spent two years in the US, studying and working as a scholar. Thankfully, her friends had warned her against “getting herself ready” for him like he wanted. So, instead, she went on birth control right before he came home. The universe aligned with her even though it meant she gained a few pounds, and he would not let her hear the last of it till he left. He kept asking how she could she be in Nigeria, eating and doing nothing while he worked his ass off in the cold as though she was having a blast in Nigeria with his hard-earned money.

Neither of them ever thought it would take this long. They were supposed to leave together, and then they didn't. And she was supposed to join him after a year, and then she

didn't. And then came another year and another. In all their plans, there was room for so many contingencies, ifs and maybes, but one thing neither assumed was a five-year hiatus in their marriage and her life. Five years in which she could do nothing tangible or make any long-term plans because it could be anytime soon. She might have to leave Nigeria the next year, the next summer, the next school session or the next holidays. So, for five years, she only sailed, never really planting her feet anywhere.

She lived in a one-room apartment because it was just her, no one else, no husband, no kids and none of the fun of a single, untethered woman living alone in Lagos. Sparsely furnished because she didn't want to have to start making distress sales when the time came. No car because cars lose value, and the money was better utilized in proving she could read and write English. These micro-decisions individually all made sense, but put together, not so much. How could anyone pause their entire life on a probability?

Thank heavens, this time, it was finally a yes.

"Identity is fluid. It is not something set in stone. We have to give room for expression." and so the woman on the radio went. Abdul Hakeem was so irritated by what she was saying that he almost blamed her for his present predicament. In actual fact, he did. After all, it was people like her who were putting ideas into Aisha's head. Abdul Hakeem decided to get it over with. There was never a good time to tell a bad story. This was something he was slowly realising as his daughter continued to question him about her mother. He had tried all he could to create an amazing life for Aisha, miles away from home. He had made sacrifices and, if he was allowed to say so himself, suffered tremendously to get her a great education and a life away from all the heartbreak that was Nigeria. Yet, she could not let go. This was the thing about all that liberal shit about identity. What has the fact that Aisha is doing badly in school got to do with the fact that she does not really know where she is from? He blamed himself for letting her start this whole counseling business in the first place. Now she is seeking answers and poking a long stick at all that he had successfully stored away for years.

As he drove through the traffic to the airport to pick her up from her first trip to Nigeria since she was born, Abdul-Hakeem dreaded the tough conversation that was to follow. How was he going to tell her about her mother without her realizing that he was just as flawed and selfish as the next person? The drive to the airport took longer than it could because there had been an accident. As he drove past the mangled car and saw the ambulance, the police, the fire service and all the paramedics attending to the victim, he was

reminded of why he did it in the first place. At that moment, he almost felt justified, like it was all worth it. But he just couldn't be sure. Has coming to America really given him all that he wanted out of life?

As he approached the airport, he called Aisha to come out and stand at the car park close to Terminal C. He was not about to spend precious minutes driving around the airport and waiting for her. As he drove into the park, he saw her waving at him. Within minutes, they were both driving out of the airport.

"How was your trip?"

"Cool" *Silence*

"Did you have fun with your cousins?"

"They are cool." *Silence*

Aisha had the time of her life in Lagos. It was nothing like all the summers she spent with her dad, attending endless coaching classes and lessons. Her cousins had taken her to see a lot of the galleries in Lagos. She also finally got to meet Mr. Waduud, an art curator and multi-dimensional artist she had been stalking since she discovered his page on Instagram. He put together the best itinerary for her, and she had a blast traveling from Lagos to Abuja to see a few shows. While Lagos was the chaotic, fun aunt, she thought Abuja was her more accomplished, understated older sister. She moved in circles she could only dream of in the US. Here, her dollars and general unforced IJGB vibe got her a lot of things. She was rich in Nigeria. She could move with the cool kids without feeling like some outcast. She could book a local flight and go somewhere without having to ask her Daddy for money.

Aisha lulled the idea of moving home to Nigeria. It was lonely here, living with just her Dad and having to pretend to be who she wasn't. She also knew that she would never be able to work as an artist under his watch. First, he considered her sculptures demonic channels through which jinns could manifest. She was Muslim too, but she struggled with the idea that God, who had given her this talent and abilities, also did not want her to express it, and somehow that was her own test.

She had also met her mother. She was not the woman her father had made her out to be. She did not lack ambition or "what it took". Hell! the woman was a rich millionaire gold merchant in Nigeria, yet it was he who had what it took who barely got by in America. They were not welfare poor, but they were not rich either. Her Dad worked at the

community health clinic while trying to get a residency in oncology at the university hospital. He had been trying since she could remember. But that was the American dream. *Hope.*

She would break her decision to her Dad after dinner. She wants to go to university in Nigeria. She checked, and Obafemi Awolowo University had a great fine and applied arts program. They produced many great artists year after year. She could enroll in an internship with Dotun Popoola at the scrap art museum while she studied.

“Do you like the spaghetti?” She didn’t. It tasted nothing like the jollof spaghetti she always had in Nigeria.

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“I would like to go to college in Nigeria.”

“Whaaaaaat?”

“I loved Nigeria.”

“And so? You were only there for the holidays. Of course, you loved it. It was a vacation. Living in Nigeria is not a vacation, Aisha. You cannot use that as a yardstick to make such a life-changing decision. Living in Nigeria is hell.”

“Maybe for you. But I really think I would love it, Dad. Living in America is your dream. Living in Nigeria is mine, Dad. I really think it could be good for me. I could stay with Mum.”

“She has influenced you too, abi. She has sold you that Nigeria can be great nonsense story, abi. Your mother could not make it in America. She kept failing the bar exams. Failing! Now, she wants you to follow in her footsteps. The woman could not make it in a sane society. But she is parading herself as a business model in Nigeria after cutting corners. Rubbish!

“Did you try to marry a white woman for the green card? Does that not count as cutting corners?”

Silence

“Who told you that?”

“Dad, I know things. You always make it seem like Mum was some lazy woman who didn’t try as hard as you did. Dad, the only reason you hate Mum so much is that she finally stood up to you and refused to live as your mistress while you were married to some white woman. Dad! Hell, even when you were found out, she tried to move us all to Qatar. An employer was willing to sponsor her and her family moving over, but you were too proud and stuck in your American dream to even give it a try. Why does everyone have to live out your own dreams? Why, Dad? Why?”

Why? He kept wondering as Aisha walked away from him. What was this dream anyway when no one was there to live it with him?

Hakeem sat at the table long after Aisha had left. He took stock of his life if he packed up his life and returned to Nigeria. He had enough money to start a small clinic while he worked his way up at a teaching hospital. What was he doing here anyway? The only reason why he had convinced himself to wait it out all these years was because he thought his daughter would finally become some child prodigy. An embodiment of Nigerian excellence. But she was a disappointment, just like her mother.