

Word count: 2750

It won't take long.

I'll tell my story quickly. You'll probably hate me by the end of it but not because what I did was wrong.

It'll be because I was naive. I didn't run when I should have. Instead I walked and held the devil in hand until he clawed his way into my skin and gnawed out my soul.

But you should be proud of me because in a country where there's no justice, I got one for the man who deserved my love.

One thing I guarantee?

You'd feel the sharp spiky pain of every thorn that tears through my flesh and you'd hear my shrill screams in your mind.

"Mom?"

I turned to meet the hazel eyes of my Amanda. The sight of her makes my anger dissipate.

"What are you drawing?"

I clutched my notepad to my chest and smiled.

I looked out the window. Who would have thought that the peace in a rehabilitation home could feel this surreal?.

"The fountain is my favorite thing here"

She smiled but I know she doesn't believe me and it breaks me because despite having a steel-hard heart, I can't bear the thought of my own daughter thinking I'm insane. The look in her eyes sickens me.

It's mild and warm but It's not love. It's not even sympathy. It's pity.

She mentioned something about checking with the nurse then walked away without looking back.

I looked at my notepad. A vivid representation and literal proof of me being responsible for the devil's last breath.

Have you ever really made love?

Not mere orgasmic mind blowing sex but the kind that pauses your breath and sends electric spasms down your legs.

One that ceases your vision, and weakens your soul until it detaches and escapes your body then travels with lightning speed to the center between heaven and hell.

One that gropes your heart, until you're floating with the clear white clouds and nothing else matters except you and the one person in the universe who can take you to those outworldly places.

I've felt all of those things but I had forgotten all about it. Including his burning stare and tormentful touch. All memories of it stashed under mounds of what I thought was a happy marriage. Gone and forgotten until his first letter to me 15 years after.

It arrived on my 35th birthday.

TJ and I were celebrating our 10th wedding anniversary. With a boxful of notes that come with flowers from fans of my art and admirers, I didn't think much of it when the gateman brought it in.

"It says to treat it as urgent", Samuel said when I asked him to drop it with the rest of the notes.

I beckoned him to bring it to me.

My heart skipped when I saw who it was addressed to.

"*My beloved Mary,*" it read.

The world froze and I almost choked on the cocktail that was halfway down my throat. I looked over my shoulders at the unsuspecting guests. Everyone was either laughing, conversing, stuffing their face with food and small chops or gripping their wine glass. I scanned the room. He wasn't there. He couldn't have been.

I looked at TJ. He was at the far end of the room. He hated big parties but he'd do anything to please me. Even pretend to like his colleagues and his secretary. His eyes met mine and he found the perfect excuse to leave their circle again and just once I wish he wouldn't be so observant. I wish he'd be the kind of man who enjoyed attention and would sway around the room not caring for his significant other until it was time to trap her under him at the end of the night.

But I enjoyed how he trampled over everyone and walked over them like carpets for my sake.

I tried to hide my discomfort as he walked up to me with a boyish grin.

His smile always lit the room.

I forced a smile back as he bent over to kiss my cheek and whisper sweet nothings.

"What's wrong?", I hate how well he knows me.

"Nothing. My dress has gotten a little tight" I lied. My head is spinning and thinking of how I'd get him out of the room because if *he* is around, then TJ would be his target or so I thought.

"Wanna go upstairs and change?"

Yes. I screamed mentally but only gave a nod.

"TJ!", one of his colleagues approached us. Dan.

"The pals are going over Monday's presentation. Gotta take a look?"

"No work talk at my party", I tried to sound like my heart wasn't pounding heavily against my chest.

"Ten minutes, Vivian. Promise", he winked and dragged TJ away.

I stood staring hopelessly into the crowd.

I had 2 options.

Watch TJ for the rest of the night and hope that I can save him from a bullet or search endlessly until I find *him* lurking around then kill him first.

"Happy birthday my love. As promised, I'll always find you"

The picture of a beach house was attached to the letter. Something that held meaning to just the two of us. We talked about how I wanted to spend my 35th birthday in a beach house on one of those nights when we'd lay with intertwined fingers on the cold balcony floor of his apartment in Maitama after making love and not caring if anyone could spot us while talking about a future that neither of us knew would never exist.

My eyes went over the name *Mary* again.

Only he called me that. Not even my parents who gave me the baptismal name ever remembered to call me that. Vivian Oluchi Peters was the name I used everywhere. He was fond of calling me Mary whenever he wanted to annoy me because he knew I disliked it.

He'd tease me until my frown easily gave in to a big smile.

A smile as big as the love I had for him.

A love that cocooned my heart.

A heart I didn't know was capable of betrayal.

If anyone had told me that a love so sweet and sultry could turn sour, I would have struck and cursed them.

Nothing happened that night.

I waited for a gunshot. Or the sharp twist of a knife. I peeled my eyes open every second to ensure TJ was still alive beside me. But everything was normal. He didn't show up.

I forgot all about it days later until his second letter came seven days after my birthday at the art gallery.

This time attached to it was a picture of me in his bed wrapped in white sheets which I remember smelled like a mix of sweat and poisonous passion.

I had a cheeky smile and anyone could tell I was stupidly in love.

The third letter came after another seven days and attached to it was another picture of me. My hands were cupping my breasts and my virgin hair was in a messy bun. I looked like I was staring into space but I was fully aware of the photo being taken.

That was the first time he asked me to be his muse.

The night of our first dinner date when we exchanged our first I love yous.

"That night I finally understood what the fuss about love was. I wanted to bottle you up and keep you in a safe ;so I could have you to myself. So I did. But I took too much. I finally found the love I wanted and I overdosed daily on it until I emptied the bottle"

Reading those words engulfed my conscience in guilt. He had always taken up blame despite my betrayal. And sometimes I believed I didn't deserve such pureness of heart.

There were no notes or photos attached to the fourth letter. It had the address of his apartment in Maitama and the key.

"It's ours", he had smiled with the key dangling in my face.

He took me to dinner that evening and I fell asleep on the drive home only to wake up to see his love-sunken eyes watching me sleep while we were parked in front of a new duplex in one of Abuja's most luxurious areas.

His smile grew wider as he told me it was our home and mentioned how he yearned for us to spend our lives together always. Then he held the key to my face.

Words failed me. I wanted to speak. Say something. Anything. But no words would form.

I couldn't decide the bigger surprise...

The house or the diamond ring hanging and reflecting conspicuously beside the key.

My heart broke again as I held the key and ring for the first time in 15 years. I suppressed my sobs wishing I could scream into a void but TJ was in the next room so I bawled my eyes out instead.

I should have said yes.

Of course there was a fifth letter.

I had gotten used to receiving them so I waited every seven days for one more.

Was it torture? Yes.

I was afraid he would show up any second and kill TJ.

But I knew I deserved the torment.

Glued to the fifth letter was a withered rose.

"Drained of life and color. That has been the state of heart since you left"

My episodes started after the sixth letter.

At first, I thought I was stressed and paranoid until it became more frequent.

They came like I was in a trance watching objects move like they were mocking me.

It drove me crazy. Literally.

I began seeing things that weren't really there. Like him standing behind me while I had my makeup done and creepy creatures crawling out my skin in the shower.

But it wasn't until I had a mental breakdown during a board meeting that I knew I needed to find him.

There was no trace of him anywhere.

Without letting TJ suspect, I had his body exhumed and dental records of him examined. He was confirmed dead.

I had 3 private investigators dig up every information they could find and it was the same report. He died in prison 5 years ago.

The detective insisted he wrote the letters before he died but his seventh letter suggested otherwise.

I was by the indoor pool when Samuel brought it. Samuel knew the drill so he only delivered the letters to me when he was sure TJ wasn't there.

It had a photo and a note:

"My beloved Mary. Still divine"

It was a picture of me in my leopard print swimsuit. The exact one I was wearing at that moment in the pool.

I rushed out of the pool and searched fervently through the glass windows. The neighborhood was quiet and deserted. No sign of a soul lurking. But of course he wouldn't let me see him until he wanted me to.

No one was home when I returned that fateful evening everything unraveled unexpectedly.

TJ was out probably burying his head in work and Amanda was out with friends.

The sound of my ringtone made me jolt as I laid in bed waiting for the eighth letter that never came even after twelve days.

"your husband visited Preye while he was in prison", Michael the third PI announced the second I picked.

"TJ?", at this point the racing thoughts in my head paused.

"Yes. Apparently he had paid to be taken off the record but he visited him at least thrice before he died"

How?. TJ knew nothing of my past with Preye. It was the only secret I hid, locked up in a box and burned to ashes.

I had too many questions but I hadn't asked the most important one...

Who was the man I married?

"You shouldn't have married him".

I stared at him in disbelief.

It was the last day I visited him in prison. 3 weeks after my honeymoon.

If I could go back in time, I would have held his hands, reassured him of my love and promised to fight for justice. I didn't. Instead the first thing I did was make him an afterthought then walk down the aisle with another man.

"Don't you dare try to villainize me".

"So you believe them?"

"I'm not sure what to believe anymore. One minute you're a struggling car dealer and the next minute you're successful enough to afford a duplex in Maitama and an expensive diamond ring"

He smirked like he always did when he didn't want to argue.

"God was finally opening doors for me so I could give you the life I know you deserve"

"Don't bring God into this. I can't believe you're so selfish that you'd want me to wait for you considering all this"

"It's not about me. It's about him"

And it was.

Tijani.

Nothing about him was real. Everything was orchestrated. From the moment he visited the gallery and bought one of my most expensive pieces to the moment we met again at the mall and exchanged numbers.

"Preye was innocent all along", Michael confirmed.

For 15 years, Preye was never brought in for trial for alleged drug trafficking and illegal arm possession.

He was tortured and abused and left to rot in prison for a crime he was never capable of committing.

I was a pawn. And my life was a movie. Everything was a lie.

I began gaining recognition as a visual artist when I was twenty-four.
I was traveling to different countries creating book covers for NYC bestselling authors.

But that kind of fame and recognition blinds you so much that you only see a room full of smiley faces. Surrounded by the admirers and fan-girls.

Everyone clapping and cheering and saying how proud and inspired they are by you so it becomes almost impossible to spot the ones wearing a mask.

But TJ wasn't wearing a mask.

The devil doesn't need horns.

Potato. Potahto.

I woke up with what I thought was a panic attack.

The walls were moving and I could see blood dripping from every corner including the mirror and curtains. I slapped my ears close and tightened my eyes shut but it still felt like a million loud voices in my head. They wouldn't shut up despite my plea. They got louder.

TJ sleeping peacefully made my heart burn with rage. He didn't even bulge. Couldn't he hear them?

I turned and saw *him* walk in. I'm not sure how he got past Samuel and the security but I never thought I'd be happier to see him.

"Preye?".

He didn't look up at me or say a word.

He reached for the pocket knife by my bedside, jabbed at Tj's heart and twisted until he groaned.

Tj must have thought it was a nightmare because he tried to stand up and shrug it off but Preye pinned him down to the bed and ensured his heart pumped out fresh blood till it went numb.

I had wanted him to die slowly but instant was more liberating.

I shouldn't be glad my ex lover killed my husband.

Afterall, before it all, I would have protected TJ with my life.

But he never deserved it.

TJ had been drugging me for years with DMT. A hallucinogenic drug responsible for the sudden intense visual and auditory hallucinations I was experiencing.

He intended to make me go crazy, guilt-trip me, haunt me with memories of my dead ex-lover through the letters so I would be taken away and declared unfit to possess my own fortune and be without my daughter.

I did went crazy. But not so much that I wouldn't plan my freedom.

Part of me is thankful TJ had Preye secretly killed and buried after making him write me those letters because it made it easier to play a different narrative and bribe the police to hide all evidence of Preye's death.

I had my dead lover framed for the death of my husband through the letters he wrote to me at gunpoint.

I would rather deal with the pity I got from everyone including my daughter than be locked behind bars for rightfully seeking justice for said man.

Call me twisted but I don't think I'm an ingrate. I love Preye more than life itself.

Afterall, he was my savior even in death.