

“I have HIV! Wait! I’m not clean!”

Ireti’s eyes weren’t fully open when she blurted out those words. She had been rudely roused from her slumber when she felt something...or rather, someone tugging on her dress. Her heart had not only skipped a beat, but it had traveled to her throat on seeing the figure of a lanky man towering over her.

“If you want to carry disease too, no problem. But you’ll pay me,” she added, unmoving from underneath him.

One skill Ireti had mastered after spending a little over three months in Lagos, was blatant audacity. She managed to keep calm even though she was terrified. She could feel the sweat starting to build up in her palms. Her lips were mildly quivering in fear, but she was convinced that there was no way the stranger would be able to tell that she was scared to death. The silver glow of the moonlight wasn’t nearly strong enough to oust the darkness in the uncompleted building.

A few seconds felt like an eternity. Ireti stayed still, waiting to see if the man would call her bluff. This was the second time she had used the lie, and although it had worked the first time, she was not so confident this time around. The man was mumbling underneath his breath, and he was still holding onto her dress, as he contemplated his next course of action. The smell of beer was so strong on him that she wondered if he bathed in it before he stumbled upon her. He looked and sounded disoriented, and there was no telling how he would react. In fact, Ireti wasn’t even sure if this was a sane, or a mad man.

“Ashawo,” the man muttered as he staggered off of her, clearly disgruntled.

Although offended by his words, there was no use responding to him. In fact, Ireti was relieved that he had resorted to derogation. It was the common response expected of weak men that couldn’t get what they wanted. His insults didn’t matter to her. All that

mattered in that moment, was not getting deflowered on a dirty ground, in an uncompleted building.

When the man was finally gone, Irete sprung to her feet, picked up the bucket of water sachets she hawked everyday and ran out of the building. It was already past midnight, and she had nowhere to go. After missing one weekly payment, her landlord had been quick to send her packing from the carton box he called a self-contained apartment. She had moved to Lagos in hopes of becoming a career woman, but nothing was working in her favor. In the short period of time she had lived there, the only constant things in her life were problems, and problematic men. Lagos was a warzone. Lagos was hell. There was no love in the city. No friends.

But Irete was hell-bent on making it. She couldn't go back home. For some reason, the hell in Lagos was much better than her life back in Ibadan.

"Where do I go now?" she whispered to herself and stumped her foot on the ground, grumbling. Her small bag of personal belongings was tucked under her arm and she carried her bucket on her head.

The sound of her phone buzzing in her bra snapped her out of her thoughts, causing her to jump. She pulled it out quickly and her eyebrows furrowed in concern when she saw her mother's name on the small screen.

"Mummy?" she said as soon as she picked up the call. "Why are you not sleeping at this time?"

"Wo, Sister Irete, mummy is dead o!" Ade, her brother voiced from the other end. "They want to bury her tomorrow. Start coming back to Ibadan right now. I don't know what to do."

His words hit her like ice water on a hot day. Her knees instantly grew weak and she dropped to the ground, still holding the phone to her ear but with shaking hands.

"Dead as how?" she managed to say. "What happened?"

"I don't know," he said. "Please be coming. I'm scared."

“Okay,” she said as tears began to run down her cheeks. “You will see me tomorrow.”

Layefa town.

Ireti stared out the window of the rickety cab, trying her best to maintain her composure. She couldn't take any more of the constant swaying from side to side, and the squeaking sound the car made every five seconds. It was making her nauseous, and driving her insane. If not for the fact that her family house was far into the town, she would have preferred to walk. There were no good roads in Layefa. Not in one street of the town. When it rained, cars got stuck in the mud, and during the dry season, everywhere was covered in dust. Even people.

The only thing Ireti missed about the town was her family and the few friends she had. There was nothing to do in Layefa. Most of the families were living hand to mouth. School was a luxury that only a few people like herself got to have. In Layefa, secondary school was the highest any girl could go up the academic ladder. It was the primary reason she had left the town. Her dream had always been to bag a university degree and work in a big company. It was a dream she wasn't willing to give up so easily. Before her mother's death, her ultimate goal was to get her family out of Layefa. Now that her mother was gone, the only family she had left was Ade, her younger brother.

When the cab finally stopped at the junction, Ireti got out, thanked the driver, and began to stroll down the familiar street she had grown up in. She said many hellos, knelt down to greet so many times that her knees were colored with mud. Her cheeks hurt from feigning a smile for so long but she endured. She had to look happy to be back, even though she was devastated.

On reaching the front of her gate, Ireti stopped to scan the street with squinted eyes. Something was off. Not once, in the five minutes of greeting everyone did someone offer their condolences. She was aware that not many people liked her mother, but it was strange that they weren't looking at her with the usual eyes of pity people usually had for bereaved families.

"What's going on?" she mumbled, stepping into the yard.

“Aunty Ireti!” Ade screaming, running out of the narrow passage and into the yard. “You actually came! *E kaasan*. I missed you so much.”

Ireti returned her brother’s hug and lifted his head to scan his face. “How are you, Ade?” she said with teary eyes. “Are our uncles treating you well now that mummy is no more here to defend us?”

Ade laughed awkwardly. “*Ah*, I’ve even forgotten about that.”

“Forgotten?” she exclaimed with a shaky voice.

Ireti had heard about the stages of grief people passed through after losing a loved one. She was trying to grade what stage Ade was to justify his smile and reaction to their mother’s death, but she couldn’t. The only explanation that made sense was that her brother was running mad.

“Ireti. You’ve arrived?”

The sound of Modinat, her mother’s voice caused Irete to let out a sharp yelp. She dropped her bag to the floor and took multiple steps back. She first scanned the sky, thinking that she had developed the ability to speak to the dead. Her mother’s death was untimely. The woman just turned thirty-eight years old. Also, a lot of people had betrayed her when their father passed away. Perhaps, she had transformed into a vengeful spirit.

But then Irete lowered her gaze and her eyes locked with Modinat’s. It took her a second to put two and two together before she realized that she had walked into a trap. One that her mother had been setting for a while.

“You look good for a ghost, mummy,” she said, glaring at her.

“Is it me you’re talking to like that?” Modinat snapped at her. “Get inside and sit down. There’s no time.”

With furrowed eyebrows, Irete lowered her head to stare at her brother and before he could make a run for it, she grabbed him by his ears and lifted him off the ground.

“So you helped mummy trick me, *abi*?” she questioned.

“I can’t say no to mummy,” Ade answered, wincing in pain. “She has been asking you to come back since and you’ve been ignoring her calls. You didn’t even come back for my primary school graduation. She said if I lie, you’ll come and you did.”

“Ireti!” Modinat yelled from the corridor. “Enter this house, now!”

“No, mummy. I will keep saying no. I’m not doing it.”

It had started when Irete turned seventeen. Hamzat Murideen, a local businessman old enough to be her father had set his eyes on Irete after she finished secondary school. He had made his intentions to marry her known to Modinat, and even went as far as promising heaven and earth to her if she gave him Irete’s hand in marriage. Deep down, Irete couldn’t blame her mother for entertaining Hamzat. After their father died, her uncles took everything he had, leaving Modinat penniless. It was a miracle Irete had managed to finish school during that time, but she did. Modinat worked hard, but there were little opportunities for women like her in a small town like Layefa.

“Your friend, Bolanle got married last week,” Modinat said to her. “Did you hear about it? Her husband is taking care of her. She’s glowing. She’s wearing clothes I would only wear in my dreams.”

“Wife number what is she?” Irete retorted.

“Does that matter?”

“It matters, mummy,” Irete groaned and rose to her feet. “Is this why you called me back home? I’m doing well in Lagos. I have a business. I’m making money. Good money, I swear. Soon, I’ll save enough and I’ll sponsor myself to university. Don’t you want to leave this house, mummy? Our uncle’s wives bully you every day.”

“This is the way out!” Modinat said. “Marry Hamzat, Irete! He will take care of us. He has promised.”

“He has three wives already, mummy. His first daughter, Eniola is older than me. Is that the life you want for me? I’m nineteen years old. I have a future if you would just let me-”

“You are selfish,” Modinat rasped. “All you’re talking about is yourself. I got married to your father when I was seventeen years old. I did it to save my family back then. To pay my father’s debt.”

Ireti dropped her shoulders. “Mummy-”

“Let me talk!” she retorted as tears welled up in her eyes. “Because of me, my father didn’t lose his land. Because of me, my mother got a space to sell in the market. I did that for my family. We are suffering here and you’re thinking of yourself, Ireti. Have I not tried for you? For Ade? You of all people know what your father’s family put me through when he died. You were there. You saw. I’m still living in that hell and you want me to wait for you to do what? Hamzat has promised to pay for Ade’s school up until his university if you become his wife. Why not let your brother be the man of the family? Let him be the one to go to school.”

“What about me?” she questioned as tears stung her eyes. “If I marry him, I will wither away in his house. What about me, mummy?”

Modinat approached Ireti and placed both hands on her shoulders. “Your time will come. Do this for me, Ireti and your children will make sacrifices for you too. Hamzat will take care of you. He has promised. Have mercy on me, Ireti. Please.”

Ireti could feel all hope leave her body. Saying no to her mother in that moment would be an evil thing to do. She could see the pain in Modinat’s eyes and although what she was asking of her was horrendous, Ireti understood that Modinat was just desperate.

“He promised to send Ade to school?”

“Yes.” Modinat nodded.

Ireti inhaled sharply and nodded too. “All right then. I’ll do it.”

Three days had passed since Irete arrived back in Layefa. Earlier that day, she had gone from bearing Miss Ayoola, to bearing Mrs. Murideen. She sat in a room at the far end of a long corridor in her Iro and Buba, waiting for Hamzat, the heavy beast that was now her husband to come and swallow her whole. Her insides felt like someone had taken a wooden spoon and stirred it. Her fingers were trembling and she was struggling to breathe properly. Hamzat's potbelly alone weighed more than she did. How in the world was she going to enjoy her wedding night?

*Calm down, Irete. This is your life now. You don't have a choice.*

On seeing a shadow underneath her door, Irete jumped to her feet. After jiggling the door knob for a second, Hamzat staggered into the room and stood in front of her with his hands on his hips. She wondered if he took out time every day to curse the person that drew the tribal marks on his face as they made his horrible looks even worse. The man was six feet tall, but overweight. He didn't keep even a strand of hair on his head. His lips were black from smoking too much and his stomach was an obvious result of drinking. There was nothing attractive about the man. He always stared at Irete like she was peppered meat waiting to be downed with a cold bottle of beer and it made her skin crawl every single time.

"You're still dressed?" he questioned in a husky voice as he began to strip. "I expect you to be waiting for me with only your wrapper covering your nakedness. Take note for next time, okay? Tomorrow, Iya Eniola will tell you all the rules and regulations you have to follow. This is a strict household and all my wives submit to me."

Watching him take off his clothes sent shivers down Irete's spine. She began to recoil, certain that she didn't want Hamzat to touch her. She wasn't ready. Not like this. They didn't give her time to prepare. No one told her anything.

"Where are you going?" he asked, noticing that she was about to hit the wall at the corner of the room. "Do you think I have time for games, Irete?"

Without warning he reached for her and grabbed her tightly by the arm. Instinctively, she began to struggle, trying to free herself as he attempted to undress her.

“You can fight it, but it will be of no use,” he grunted.

“Leave me alone,” she said, pushing him in an attempt to create distance between them.

Ireti had never really seen the effects of adrenaline until the moment she tried to push the giant man with her all her strength and he actually staggered back, letting go of her arm. She watched him slip and he began his descend to the ground, head first. When his head hit the sharp end of the bedframe, the sound it made frightened the living day light out of her.

“Daddy Eniola?” she whispered, taking cautious steps towards him. “Sir?”

His eyes were open, but he was unmoving. At the sight of blood oozing out from behind him, Ireti’s gaze widened. She stared at his unfocused eyes, then at the blood and lastly, at him again before her flight mode was triggered. She picked up his trousers, pulled out all the money inside and sprinted out of the room.

Her heart was pounding fast, but she didn’t stop running. In fact, she was determined to run all the way out of town. A man was dead. She had killed someone. The townsfolk would surely call her a witch and set her on fire. She had to leave. She had to disappear.

She should have never come back home.



