TITLE:

HOW TO START A REVOLUTION

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VANESSA ESSIEN

How do you start a revolution? First, one of us will have to die.

There was a fire the day Ify Okoli died. It was a literal and metaphorical fire.

A fire that blazed across campus, faculty buildings and the university's church; placard-carrying girls with chanted phrases and raised fists as they stomped the streets.

A fire that burned through the halls. Yellow-red, hot, scalding; ravaging any and every thing in its path. Books turned to ashes. Metal to black. Bodies unrecognizable. The walls of the nearby Federal Medical Centre pulsated with screams. There was pushing and clamouring, a near stampede. People with bloody gashes and melted flesh pounded on doctors' chests, pleading, *begging.* Families and friends turned to tearful desperation. There was the first throw of a flame-filled bottle, then another and another and another. By the end of the day, corpses lined the A&E building. It was a dark day; unlike anything anyone had ever seen before.

How do you start a revolution? You pick the perfect victim.

I first met Ify one day after Wednesday service. She had a way about her that pulled you in; that made you want to listen, to talk to her, to allow her talk about mundane things and even topics you'd rather escape. She was wearing faded blue jeans and a blouse that stopped just below her hips. It was my first time seeing a woman of her…*convictions* wearing jeans. I knew even then that she was different. Trouser-wearing was not something I had ever seen my mother or sisters do in God's house or our own house — though by that time, having already abandoned those convictions, I had long stopped seeing or speaking to said mother and sisters.

I wouldn't have believed that Ify was one of *them* if she hadn't said what she said when she approached me: "Hello. Can I talk to you about Jesus?"

It was a clear violation of an unspoken rule, the *dos* and *don'ts* that regulated campus groups: the fundamentalist ankle-skirt-wearing, jewelry-abhorring, bible-wielding, Jesus-prophesying

girls we called S.U (Scripture Union); and the girls who didn't believe, the girls who did unspeakable things, the girls who were *different.* To the S.Us, those other girls were all the same, one group no different from the other, all destined for an eternity of fiery damnation — a now ironic proclamation since the S.Us formed majority of the fire victims.

Still, these groups didn't mix. It was the rule. Ify had violated that rule, but she was not the first. To the S.Us, Wednesdays were for service, but to us, the damned, Wednesdays were the crux of campus social life. Fridays were for off-campus festivities, but Wednesdays were for preparing for Fridays — gathering intel on what festivities abound on the weekend; networking with potential sponsors, the big men with big cars who littered the campus grounds in search of young girls who needed quick cash.

I was one of such girls, painting my lips with bright colours, motley wigs and pseudonyms, padding my bras and arranging my breasts in small tops as I paraded the sidewalks of buildings: Y*es sir, I can show you where the nearest ATM is*; *Haba, no chief, I don't have a boyfriend; I'm not busy on Friday.* It was an annoying, sometimes humiliating routine, but it paid my fees, my bills. I could afford to not speak to my mother and sisters.

The S.Us did this from time to time — broke the rule — thrusting their leather-bound books in people's faces. It was their way of deterring us. Perhaps they believed the brush of their holy book against our scantily-clad bodies might cast out the evil spirits that dwelled within; or the shouting of a hastily-spoken scripture might enter our ears and disarm us, have us fall to our knees and confess. My friends and I indulged them, playing the stereotype of bad-girl-turned-good as in the infamous Mountain of Fire movies. We clutched their ankles and admitted to sins and crimes we made up, scratching our bodies energetically — like a drug addict going through withdrawals — as though the sins burned our skins, crying faux tears and screaming.

When they caught onto our theatrics, they made thinly-veiled insults masked as prayers. *You already look like burnt plantain. I can't allow you entire hot fire on top.*

Ify did not react like the others. Instead, she smiled a wide smile that covered the expanse of her face, drew her pamphlet-holding hands back to herself and moved on to the next person. "Hello. Can I talk to you about Jesus?"

How do you start a revolution? You tell a good story.

The next time I saw Ify was in one of my classes. I was in my second year studying Economics, but it was my first time seeing her in class. There were many problems that accompanied federal universities — the sudden strikes and the prevalent exchange of sex for rightfully-deserved grades — but I managed to keep my CGPA at a second class upper. It was no small feat, but Ify surpassed the rest of us. We were a class of about three hundred students, yet our lecturer, a no-nonsense pot-bellied man, used Ify's test script as his instructional material that day. I had not done well on the test, so I chased her down after class to ask for her notes.

As I walked up to her, I thought she would not remember me. But a smile spread on her face when she saw me. I noticed quickly that she always smiled.

"How's your hand?" She asked.

"Huh?"

"Your hand." She held up her own arm. "Last time, you were scratching it over and over. Hope you're better now?" The corner of her lips twitched as she held back a laugh.

She was funny. I laughed and said my hand was fine.

When I asked her for her notes, she brought her jotter to her chest and asked slyly what she'd get in return; said she'd give me her notes if I came to her church; insisted her church was better, different from the fellowship groups and church on campus.

She pulled out a pamphlet — it seemed she always had one on her — from the tote bag slung over her shoulder and gave it to me. “Just come. You’ll like it, I promise.”

I went to her church. New Living Word church, that’s what they called it. A youth church.

The men wore rings on their fingers and ears and lips; and dreads and cornrows and dyed hair tips. The women were bald or had their hair loc’d, dyed, bleached; wore palazzos or jeans or skirts above their knees. They called their Sunday school groups *trybes* — like ‘tribe’ but with a ‘y’— and their Wednesday services, Mid-week hangouts. The pastor was a youngish man who paired his shirts with skinny jeans and punctuated each spirit-filled word with a throaty ‘turn to your neighbour’. The choir sang Nathaniel Bassey and Sinach and Koryn Hawthorne; Ify standing in the front role, hands caressing the mic, hips swaying side to side as she delivered each note with easy perfection. At the end of the service, pamphlets filled my hands. The ushers smiled as they thanked me for coming and asked me to come again. I would not.

When I caught up with Ify, she was surprised to see me. She had not expected me to come.

“I’m glad you came.”

“You said you wouldn’t give me your notes if I didn’t.”

“Yeah, but I was joking.” She handed me the battered book. “I would have given you anyway.”

We became fast friends. It started with notes. Then we sat together in class, asking the other to repeat what the lecturer had said. We moved to study sessions at student centre, in the library, in hostels, where we took study breaks, watching Netflix, K-dramas and teen series. Then she came over frequently, asked if she could borrow salt, sugar, garri; if I wanted to eat with her at the canteen. She was the same in some ways, and in others, different from what I’d expected.

She said she wanted to be a nun. “Well, not a nun. But like a nun, without the whole marriage and children thing, dedicating my life to God and the church and the community and all.” She

wanted to live life on her own terms. “But without the clothes.” We both laughed. She made me laugh; a belly-deep kind of laugh that made me feel good. I liked being around her.

On Wednesdays, she went for service. And on Wednesdays, I networked. We said nothing about our different groups. We respected each other that way.

When my birthday came, I invited her for my party. My other friends could not understand why, our insistent friendship, our unlikely bond. They never outrightly said it, but it was clear in the way the air changed when Ify walked in.

It was my 21st. I’d planned a game night with friends. We rented an apartment, one with blue lights and POP ceilings. We had jollof rice and chicken and small chops and pizza. We played Charades and Jenga, Jackpot and Lemon-Lemon. We settled into a comfortable dynamic. But it did not last long.

I’d wanted an evening with my girls, but one friend invited her boyfriend who invited his friend who invited more friends. The games changed. Cup Pong, Truth or Dare and Never Have I Ever, games where losers were punished with forced shots of alcoholic drinks — Jack Daniels and Chocolate Vodka, 4th Street, Smirnoff and Hennesy. Bodies began to touch and lips began to meet. I did not protest. When midnight rolled in, music boomed at a deafening volume and there was a sea of grinding bodies spread across the living room. Ify was nowhere to be found. I assumed she had left. But I was wrong.

Ify said it’d felt like drowning over and over again. But the waves were tame, and she knew how to swim. Her body simply refused to cooperate. Her head was light, and her limbs heavy. Her drink tasted strange. She was not herself. Then there was another set of limbs by her sides.

She hiccupped. “I asked him to stop. He said he’s heard my gist. But I don’t do that anymore. I haven’t done that in a long time.” I did not ask what the gist was. She cried. I cried.

She said his name, but only to me. She did not want anyone else to know. She wanted it to go away. She wanted to shower, to rinse off the reminder of that night, and go back to the way things used to be. But it was not possible. A part of her had died that night, and the part that remained alive followed in that death, a slow pitiless death that was painful to watch.

I wanted him to suffer. I wanted her to expose him. I was angry at him, at me. And I was sorry — sorry that it happened to her, sorry for what he did, sorry I hadn't stopped him. But it did not matter what I wanted. So I said nothing; sat there instead, sad, angry and guilty.

How do you start a revolution? You get angry.

It was a Wednesday when Ify spoke — a 13-tweet thread on what was once called Twitter.

It all happened so quick.

We were in our final year at the time, well-versed in the art of pretence, in the art of skilful avoidance — that day never happened; that boy didn't exist. But then she saw *him* that Wednesday, a slight brush of his shoulder against hers as we passed him in the canteen, then the thread appeared the next morning. It was a big school. We had seen him a total of three times since that night. And each time we'd seen him, Ify had withdrawn for days, then reappeared, like nothing had happened. Maybe it was the girl that had been on his arm, smiling, laughing, blissfully unaware. But Ify finally cracked, a vulnerable permanent crack.

We learnt the hard way that nothing would happen, that he would walk away scot-free and Ify would be left in even more pain than before, broken, dying, *dead* already before the physical death she eventually succumbed to. We had not been naïve to expect immediate retribution. But we did not expect what happened.

There were likes and retweets, heart emojis and well-meaning comments under Ify's tweet. But after a counter-thread by him, the story changed. Ify was a victim, she was a survivor, she was brave. Then she was a liar, she was a slut, a lover scorned.

In the weeks that followed, the media gave patronizing tips to women: how to stay safe, to avoid situations like this. And the university's church — I would hear, from others, not by myself — gave sermons: perhaps if she hadn't gone to a party at night, a party with alcohol; perhaps if she hadn't kept bad friends (A.K.A me); perhaps if she'd dressed more decently. *What respectable God-fearing woman wears trousers? And with a bum bum like that??* Classmates whispered; gossip-mongers masked as sympathizers, comforting and questioning. And then the New Living Word Church, the different *better* church, thought Ify should step down as a trybe leader — too much negative press. Then she could attend online services too, for 'her own good' of course.

I saw the crack widening, expanding, like a black hole ready to close in on itself. Ify became doubtful. Maybe it wasn't like that. Maybe she misread the situation. She deleted her tweet. I slept in her hostel, in her room. I didn't want her to be alone. Sometimes, in the dead of night, she'd wake up startled and cry. "I stopped. I changed. Why did this happen to me?"

One night, she kissed me. She put her hands on the sides of my face and kissed me. On my mouth. It was a slow wet kiss. I did not know what to make of it. Our faces tear-stained, lips pressed against each other as she kissed me. I could not tell where my tears ended and hers begun. When we pulled apart, she wrapped her arms around me and I let her cuddle me.

When I woke up the next morning, I think I knew that was the last time I would see her alive. There was a heaviness that weighed me down. I wanted to stay back, with her. I wanted to allow her cuddle me and kiss me again if that was what she needed. But I had a test, so I left.

I found her when I came back from class, a tangled mouth-foaming mess lying on the floor. The doctor said it was sniper. She was dead. My Ify was dead, yet the world did not stop.

How do you start a revolution? You make a mistake.

I was the first one to throw the flame. It was an accident. A still-lit cigarette I disposed near a filling station. The filling station near the church. The church near the Faculty of Social Sciences, near the Faculty of Law. It was a mistake. But I wasn't sorry.

Give people a chance to express anger and they will take it. They will throw flames because others have. They will march and raise placards. They will believe in a cause, and they will say they believe because they think they should. They will mourn a dead girl they mocked.

Amidst the sirens and the fires, the bodies and the noise, there were more people on the streets than those who had supported Ify when she was alive. They stood outside the buildings that had not caught fire. The girls who didn't believe, the girls who do unspeakable things, the girls who were different like Ify — they all came out to walk. There were microphones and cameras everywhere, yet no one came to address us.

So I stood there, angry, grieving, alone yet surrounded.