

The preachers—a man and a radical woman who interpreted for him—went by as usual, calling on sinners: liars, fornicators, drunkards, gossips, husband and wife snatchers, murderers, idol worshippers, and all that would hear, to repent or face the judgement of hell. And while they were at it, with more passion than even that old Baptist ever expended, the clouds gathered thick and dark. It would, no doubt, break forth before they reached the end of the long street, and it would break in such torrents they would call it an act of God. They would deem it His way of punctuating both their condemnation and invitation.

It was a mysterious day in May. The ambience in the room where I lay was terribly off; no different from the mood of a graveyard. Yet I'd just finished and dropped a copy of *The Great Gatsby*, which meant I was happy and exceedingly enthralled. I felt my mind exploding with the greatest imaginations there are. But my room... What was wrong? I immediately got on my feet, not willing my rare moment of epiphanic bliss disrupted, and prepared for a walk. Long walks were, for me, the real escape; the shortest route to solitude when books failed. It was another six hours before I came back to my room to find the strangest thing I'd seen since I was born.

In the early 2000s, the university town of Nsukka boomed under the auspices of trade and the sheer bustle of interestingly bright youngsters—from everywhere across the country—coming and going throughout the town. The university was the center of all attraction; a lighthouse in the midst of a brooding seascape. I lived on Odim Street, No.4, at the time. It was the closest residence to the campus, and the walk from Odim, through the sprawling alleys of the campus, to Hilltop—another residence located north of the university—was always nothing short of pleasant. Why, one got to feast his eyes, in an endless stream of encounters, on passing beauties; beauties of all ages, complexions, styles, sizes and shapes. Strange and familiar kinds of beauties. Beauties which either brought love and sunshine into your life or set it rolling in a tunnel of pain towards the spikes of despond. Such beauty as I met in Emem in June of 2006.

She was coming in the opposite direction as though towards me, walking with the aplomb of one who thought little or nothing of herself—mindless and free, but gracious all the same. I had never stopped a girl on the road before, but I stopped her. She was disconcertingly beautiful and I acted on a brave impulse. *Excuse me*, and she stopped, fully and friendlily. *Can I talk to you?* And she held out a smile that seemed to say, *but you're already talking to me*. Astute as I was, I took the green hint of her countenance and proceeded to introduce myself. She said Hosanna, my name, was nice, and I asked her the meaning of Emem, her name. *Peace*, she said, in her native language. We talked for a while, then exchanged contacts, and she asked me—in a manner both startling and pleasing—to walk her the rest of the way to Mary Slessor, one of the female hostels on campus.

On our second meeting, at an inside-school café, Emem told me she already had a boyfriend, but that *they were going through some things at the moment*. I asked her whether she loved the boy

and she said it was exactly the problem: *she did not know*. I asked her what his name was and she said she'd rather we talked about something else, maybe about *us*. *Us*? A slight, exciting tension coursed through me, and my heart raced. This was the very thing I'd always dreamt of: a moment like this, with a pretty girl looking directly into my eyes and suggesting things with a bold interest. And yet when she said *us*, I felt a rumbling in my stomach. She asked if I had a girlfriend, urging me to be honest. I said I did not and she said it was hard to believe. She said it was hard to believe that I was single, *handsome and funny* as I was, which bemused me out of my gourd. She said my dentition and my smile could get me any girl I wanted if I made the necessary moves. She said she liked me, and she thought, from how I spoke, that I was a very smart guy.

From where I sat opposite her across the high, plywood table, I stared, at complete loss, into the face of the prettiest girl I'd really gone out with, flustered and helplessly piqued at the same time. We spent the entire evening at the cafe, drinking *Mountain Dew* and eating *suya* and pastries and chatting about random things—mostly about how differently Engineering boys treated their girls because they were so few, and how desperately the girls at *Behind Flat* strove to outdo their Hilltop peers in the flaunting of body parts on streets dimly lit at night by faint orange street lights. We kept talking, laughing and locking gazes until it was half past ten and unsafe for even two people to walk down the dark, lonely incline that led to Mary Slessor. So she came home with me that night, her eyes flashing with both mischief and a longing so tense you won't fail to notice. I would normally have passed on a girl in an active relationship, but Emem and I slept together with a lurch that burned far into the night.

It was not love that I felt for her at first, and she knew it, and it was mutual, it was desire; a dark and heedless desire. She kept coming and coming and we kept doing things we never spoke about openly, couldn't speak about openly. She was calm and serene in public, and spoke very little, except when we talked about her favourite movies and songs—she didn't read much—but fierce and brash whenever we were alone and ready to meld together in that way that produced heat which left our bodies shimmering as though smeared with a light ointment: my umber and her sleek caramel. She came and flung everything which previously held the record in my mind—everything which commanded my utmost indulgence—far away, taking up every space within me, within my thought frames. Yet, for the first three months, I could not truly say that I loved her, nor she me. All we felt for each other was longing: a lust that consumed us.

It was in the fifth months into our amorous dalliances that the fervid passion I felt for Emem chilled out and gave way to something much more firm; something that came close to love. But then, it was doomed to jeopardy, for she'd begun to see Eric, my best friend, behind my back: an affair which kicked off on his 20th birthday, 19th November. I knew because such things didn't escape my notice, first of all, but then, I had twice caught her, prior to Eric's birthday, furtively looking at him the very same way she looked at me at the cafe that evening: that piercing stare

that reeked of longing. It made me mad with jealousy, but I feared a far greater injury: the end of *us*. The risk of pushing her away by reacting to what I knew was one I was most unwilling to take. So when, in the middle of the little shindig Eric hosted for his birthday, she snuck out with him, I stayed put and silently endured the choking clasp of rage that clogged my throat; the pounding contest in my head and the inflammation that burned in my heart. I did not explode, even when she came to my place the next morning to apologize for leaving without a word; for leaving without a word because of "an emergency". I began, from then, to gradually untangle myself from her. It helped that I had many hiding places all over Odim.

On a certain lecture-free Thursday, I was preparing to go into town to visit a distant cousin of mine who lived in Nsukka when I heard a gentle knock on my door. Who? *Emem*—and my heart skipped. I hadn't seen her in ages, and with enough time to think, I rehearsed what I would tell her if ever her perfidious legs brought her to my doorstep. I also conditioned my mind to defy that bedazzling impact her eyes had on people, especially on me. I was ready to end it all, yet when I opened the door, I struggled to stay the urge to lean over and kiss her. Goodness! She was so beautiful and she was just there, staring at me with the vulnerability of a sentient offender. *Can I come in?* She asked, as if pleading. I hadn't practiced saying no to her hypnotizing plea, so I let her in, to be civil—I convinced myself—but we ended up sleeping together, as though nothing had happened. As though she hadn't so flagrantly betrayed me. When we were done filling out our only-dormant lust, I told her that I knew she was sleeping with Eric, and she said she knew that I'd known all along, unapologetically. *So why are you here*, I brought my livid self to ask. *I came to tell you that I'm pregnant...*

I laughed. In that moment, hollow as it was heavy with the weight of darting thoughts; of things unsaid, laughing seemed to be the best first thing to do. I laughed and laughed in spite of the droop her face had assumed. I laughed, not caring, for once, how my reaction to something sat with her. I laughed until it dawned on me that it was not a joke. She was really pregnant. But for whom? I wondered. There were, at least, three of us—as far as I could tell—bonking her. Did she even know which one of us was responsible? *You're joking right?* I asked her.

*No*, she said, unbelievably sangfroid.

*Who's responsible?* I asked, careful to conceal the hint of denial that lurked in my tone.

*Eric... And he knows*, she said. When she walked out of my room that day, I told her, in staid tones, not to come back.

I did not confront him concerning the pregnancy, and he did not reach out to me either, my quondam best friend. It was the penultimate year of our program. We were both in the Faculty of Arts, but while I combined History and Anthropology, he majored in Linguistics. Every gut in

me told me he would ask her to abort the pregnancy, and she would do it, because she loved him—enough, at least, to have sex with him without protection (in my experience, she was uncompromisingly insistent on protection: there was intensity in our lovemaking, but not reckless abandon) —but also because he could afford to send her to a good hospital for it. Eric's father owned four hotels in Eastern Nigeria, so money was never his problem.

For many months after my last encounter with her, I did not set my eyes on Emem, nor would I ever again see her, but I ran into Eric from time to time, either on the faculty premises or on my way to or from one of the popular canteens on campus. I was prepared to wish them well in my heart and move on, but I couldn't help feeling a sense of foreboding each time I crossed paths with Eric. At first it was slight and vague, but eventually, it grew thick and precise. It was about Emem: she was going to die. I had felt like that many years ago, before my brother, Elo, passed away. Our family doctor, Dr. Jaff, had blamed my parents, saying they brought him a little too late, but I knew the foreboding pointed to a cause greater than negligence. And had I not resolved to stay away from the couple, I would have approached Eric to find out about the health of his pregnant girlfriend (that was the convenient justification I put forward for my inaction whenever my conscience revolted, in truth, it suited my ego to turn a blind eye). In February of 2007, Emem died, without any warning, at her uncle's house in Enugu. It must have been those inevitable post-abortion complications, or my foreboding. For weeks, I wallowed in the terror of that news, but slowly, it passed and life returned to normalcy.

He started seeing her on the day I wrote a complaint to the school registrar about the librarian's discriminatory conduct: *she seems to be constantly looking out for those marked few who bribe their way into the choice sessions of the library, and so forgets that the rest of us are equally entitled to the facility, whether we choose to give her anything or not.* I gloated over the lines I wrote as I repeatedly read them aloud to myself, as though it were some lofty literary accomplishment. When I walked out of the registrar's office, I imagined the supercilious librarian already in front of a horn-mad disciplinary committee. Later, that same day, Eric came to my house looking distraught and shabby. In my befuddled state, I completely forgot our misunderstanding and opened my door to him as though he was still my friend. *I'm seeing her*, he told me, trembling. *You're seeing who?* I asked, all the more confused. *Emem*, he said. *She follows me everywhere I go, always smiling, always...* he broke into tears, weeping uncontrollably. I was too terrified to say a word of consolation to him. I couldn't grapple with the things he said; with the fact that he was seeing the ghost of someone we both knew. Such stories had always sounded so fictional to me; so far from possible.

In the weeks that followed, Eric moved in with me, and in those weeks, he told me he found peace in the preachers' message—the man and the radical woman who interpreted for him. And he stopped seeing Emem, except in his dreams. In those weeks, he introduced a few marvelous books to me, including *The Great Gatsby*, which he said was his all time favourite. Books, he

told me, helped the body and the mind better than long walks. We argued about it at the time, but after a few more readings, I gradually came to agree with him.

Like I said earlier, that May day dawned with a mysterious tone in which Eric decided to go back to his lodge. I asked him if he was ready and he said yes. He left my place around noon, spirited and sound. I told him to call from time to time, he said he would, unfailingly. After he left, I washed some clothes before slipping into my bed with the copy of *The Great Gatsby* I borrowed from him. This is where this story should have ended, but when I returned to my apartment six hours later from that walk, I saw Eric in my room. The door was still locked from outside with the heavy B&K padlock, the room was dark except for the faint light that streaked across from the bathroom door left ajar, and yet he sat there, motionless, looking at me. I called his name, asking how he got in, but I got no response. As I made towards him with the aim to prod him out of his reverie, he vanished before my eyes. Overwhelmed with horror, I stormed out of the room and tremulously made for Samson's room, where I spent the night. In the morning, news reached us that a student from the Linguistics department had committed suicide at Hilltop. I felt nothing. The horror of the previous night had drained me. All I thought about was that ghostly look on his face the previous night. I wondered, too, why he did it.