

CLANDESTINE AFFAIRS.

Sitting in the rickety sardine packed bus going to the village's central market, Lara knew she was in soup. Hot smoking soup. She felt the strong masculine urge to just run away. Far away from the village, from her husband, and from the nightmare that was her life. She would follow the bus, as it passed through village by village, farther from her's, till it reached it's final stop. She had enough money to last her awhile wrapped in the top corner of her loosely tied wrapper. She chuckled inwardly as she adjusted the dropping sleeves of her shapeless buba. She had lost so much weight from worrying about her good for nothing husband, Lanre. She looked disheveled, with the clothes she was wearing looking very old and worn out, and her hair like a bunch of angry chicken had fought in it and she had made no efforts to arrange it or cover it, her loose hairtie laying on her lap as she sat staring in to space and wondering the next move to make.

She thought back to the early days of her marriage to Lanre. They were so in love and he was such a gentleman. The other married women wished their men would be like Lanre, and the young girls prayed they'd have husbands like him. It was sugar and spice, until the kids started coming. Till that day, Lola was unsure about what brought about the terrific change. Was it the way her body had changed with each child she had? She knew she wasn't so young anymore, she wasn't the slim and curvy young girl with the high pitched laughter that got married a few years back. She had changed, she was a woman. Childbirth would taken a toll on any woman, even if she was the most perfect woman to walk the earth. And Lola had gone through that process five times!

Her eldest daughter, Fumnilayo, was sixteen years old. As beautiful as her mother was in her youth, and almost ripe for marriage. The men were already looking, lingering at the mango tree beside their compound longer than necessary. The twins had come after her, Taiye and Kehinde, with Kehinde towering above her brother although they were thick as thieves. Then there was Ayo, the most quiet of her children. Most times you'd miss him in the room, until he spoke. His voice commanding attention even at 8. And there was Bolu, the one who came last, before things started to fall apart.

It started from him reducing the money for the house upkeep. It seemed off, but she didn't pay any heed to it. She had her stall at the market where she sold tie and dye wrappers, the profit from the business was enough to balance the meagre amounts her husband gave her as the days passed. And then the complaints came in.

Everything looked wrong in the eyes of Lanre. The children annoyed him, and the food looked or tasted bad, and his wife smelled badly or she snored too loudly for his comfort. The local scented powder Lola started to wear did nothing to reduce his complaints. Infact, they increased and she just couldn't believe her ears. And then he stopped coming home. Because, in his words he couldn't sleep with a pig every night. She was apalled. Had her husband lost his mind? Or had he eaten where he shouldn't have? Maybe someone had slipped one of those potent love charms into his foods. Or was he having an affair?

Even if cheating was unusual in the village, everyone knew they still happened in secret which weren't much of a secret to start with. Every one knew Mama Bunmi's husband was very good at having clandestine affairs in almost all the villages he visited, too numerous to count. And he was such a lousy man! Especially after a cup of palm wine or two, and the whole world would know of the deepest secrets of the underworld. You don't keep secrets with a man like him. He loses his senses the moment the cup of the wine touched his lips. But that wasn't her problem now.

The men here tried their possible best to keep the news of their mistresses away from their wives, even if most failed at it woefully. Respecting your wife was one of the strongholds of their tradition, and you don't defy that by letting her grasp knowledge of a mistress. She didn't understand his erratic behavior at all. If he really was having an affair, that was more reason to be nicer to her. To perhaps cushion the effect of how much pain and jealousy the woman would feel. So it didn't make sense to her.

But one day it all made sense. His recent strange behavior had a root and she wasn't sure she was delighted by this discovery. She had forgotten the small bag that held very expensive wrappers for her high class costumers. They only came on Fridays, from one of those big, far away villages and she knew she couldn't give those big women excuses whenever they came. They paid her handsomely after all, not like the women in her own village that'd haggle with her for long hours till she'd feel herself swoon slightly from anger and exhaustion.

She knew nobody would be home by that time. Fummi was at the community center where young girls of marriageable age were all mandated to learn a trade at. The twins would have gone to fetch wood or water, and Ayo would be in the bush building one of his strange playtoys or catching lizards and frogs just for the sheer fun of dissecting them. And Bolu was at her mother's, and her dearest Lanre might be anywhere in the world. But she didn't understand the sounds coming from her hut as she moved closer.

Was it burglars? She wondered. It was the hut she shared with her husband and he had a few valuables in it, most he got from his journeys. And all her ornaments, bridal beads and chain with usually cost a fortune was in that hut. She was alarmed for a fraction of a second till it dawned on her again. Burglars do not sound like this, it was too bizarre to be thieves. Except if they had been struck by the gods and it was a sort of manifestation. Or had animals managed to enter into her hut? Maybe she had forgotten to lock the door, she pondered quickly as he began to tiptoe toward the door, trying her best to be silent as possible so she could confirm whatever it was that was going on. And then she saw it. With her eyes fixed on the crack on the door, she saw it all even if the room wasn't so illuminated.

It felt like someone had rammed her in the face with a pestle as she staggered backwards. She ran her hand over her face, her movement lingering a bit longer at her eyes. As if to wake her up from the nightmare she was having. Steadying herself, she crept to the hole again and she watched as she listened to their grunting, and

panting and huffing. So indeed Lanre had been having an affair, but it was the other presence in the room she did not expect.

Lanre sat at the edge of their raffia bed, with Kehinde's breast in that greedy, nagging mouth of his. Sucking like a starved child on her tender, sprouting breasts not bigger than the size of two oranges. And there was Taiwo, kneeling in between his father, with his father's rod firmly placed in his mouth. Sucking and stroking, like he had been presented with his favorite snack, those sour cherries with seed in them, and making those sounds. She couldn't remember how long she stood there, peeping, but she saw it to the end. When they'd switch position, and it was Taiye sucking his sister's breast, and his father sucking on his immature teenage rod. Her face contorted in anger and agony, as they changed positions again. This time, Lanre had positioned himself behind Taiye, as he ushered himself into the child, in a place she knew was only for passing stool, his face squeezing from something that looked like satisfaction as he made that guttural, animalistic sound again while the child groaned too, but she wasn't sure if it was from pain as much as it was from pleasure. He moved his waist slowly and then faster, with Kehinde looking on like an eager child about to witness the wonders of the world. While she just watched on, petrified and unable to move.

She wanted to stop them, but it looked like her legs and mouth had failed her. She wasn't even sure she was breathing. Another switch, and he was ramming into Kehinde, as she tried to cover her mouth to reduce the sound of her moans. Her brother looking on eagerly waiting for his turn to go. And oh, did he go. With Lanre first, then his sister. That must have taken hours, but she wasn't sure as she watched them all sprawled on the bed totally spent, and her wrappers, the reason she was home totally forgotten.

She could feel movement returning to her legs, and her jaw slackening as the shock wore off. But her legs were wobbly from the shock as well, as she stumbled into the room. Father and children had sprung up from the bed like wild cats, their eyes alert and disbelieving as they tried to focus on who had walked in on them. Lara tried to steady her feet as she swayed slightly. Her eyes skimming over their faces quickly to avoid looking at their naked bodies, and finally resting at her feet like something interesting had sprung up there. No words were said as they got dressed, still dazed. Lara couldn't be angry, or sad. She just stood in the centre of the room, numb to her very core.

She looked at Lanre intensely, like she was studying him, as he walked past her, she could see his shock slowly turning to a look of defiance and subtle anger. She wasn't shocked by his audacity, nothing could surprise her anymore. Her eyes returned to the twins, as she searched their face for anything, an explanation to all this madness. Kehinde stood looking at her, wearing a similar look like her father. One void of remorse. But Taiwo was a different case, as he dropped on his knees, crying and swearing his father had coaxed him into it even if he was against it the first few times. Saying nothing, she walked out of the room almost in a daze but at least it had answered one of the million questions in her mind, confirming her earlier suspicion. This wasn't the first or second time it was happening. Their movements were that of people who had been doing it for a long time, and all that had been happening under her nose.

She wondered if it happened everyday she went to the market and if they were doing it to the younger ones too, or had plans to start soon. But she knew she wouldn't be getting answers at that moment. She dragged Ayo who had been coming home from his play as fast as she could, like she was scared he'd run away and they'd include him and fearing that she was scaring him, the urgency in her grip evident. She hoped Funmi was untainted as she walked to the centre, pulling her out too without any explanation and dragging both children with her to her mother's house, hoping it'd provide sanctuary for them till she was sane enough

The next week, there was Lanre and the twin sitting opposite her with Bolu on her laps while she stroked his hair. She had thought hard about it before that day, she didn't want her dirty linen washed in public but she knew there was no other alternative that'd serve as a perfect explanation for why she was with her mother and not her husband. While she sat there, in the midst of family members and elders she felt very exhausted from having to repeat such an unpleasant story times again, probably because it was too wild to believe, or they were just daft. Someone had muttered in the crowd that her tale sounded like something fabricated by an angry wife. Her head snapped so fast in the direction the murmur came from and she glared at whoever dared to say such nonsense to her hearing. What sensible parent would fabricate such a story? And then it was her husband's turn to tell. She couldn't look directly at him, so she just stared over him listening attentively.

Lanre had said a lot of rubbish that she chose not to react to until he told everyone present that it was all his wife's fault. Lara was beyond shocked, she just stared at him like he had started growing a tree from the middle of his head, the way you'd stare at a nut job. He continued accusing her with growing conviction, she was the reason he had committed such abomination. Her daily absence was discouraging to him and all that not. A small cackle escaped Lara's mouth, her face filled with disdain and disgust. And the children did not object to it, he had added with a defiant shrug of his shoulder. Lara felt her heart stop as his words settled in her mind, her face contorting to one of burning rage, then she was on him, clawing and scratching and biting like the village's madman, Aja, who lived in the madhouse and was always in chains. It took the strength of about three men to pry her off her husband.

The whole time the children just sat there and cried, even Bolu who was oblivious of everything that was happening was crying too. She looked at the twins, Taiye looked as miserable as they came. Kehinde's tears looked like they had a different motive, they were not the tears of remorse and Lara could feel it. And when she dropped the bomb, Lara knew why she felt that way. Kenny was pregnant, with her father's child! The world seemed to spin round in Lara's eyes, her mouth felt dry, and she just wanted to wake up from this bad dream. The later part of the meeting seemed to pass in a blur, she was barely even there anymore, so it was adjourned till some other time when she could decide what to do with Kehinde's pregnancy and what remained of her marriage.

The former was already sorted in her head, the marriage was over and she was taking her children with her. She'd rather die than stay in the same space as Lanre. But the

trickier matter was with Kehinde. She was stuck between a rock and a hard place, she knew whatever decision she took would be hard on all of them. She could either let her keep the baby and go with Lanre, or force her to terminate it and live with the guilt.

As the bus trugged on, she let her eyes settle on the man opposite her who was playing with his daughter, not more than 4. What if this man was as bad as Lanre? And he did things to the child too? She felt herself shudder in disgust at the thought.

Closing her eyes, she let out deep sigh, wishing she could run far away from it. Maybe she indeed was a bad mother. But then, reality is not something you so easily escape from. This was her cross, and she'd bear it with her full chest.