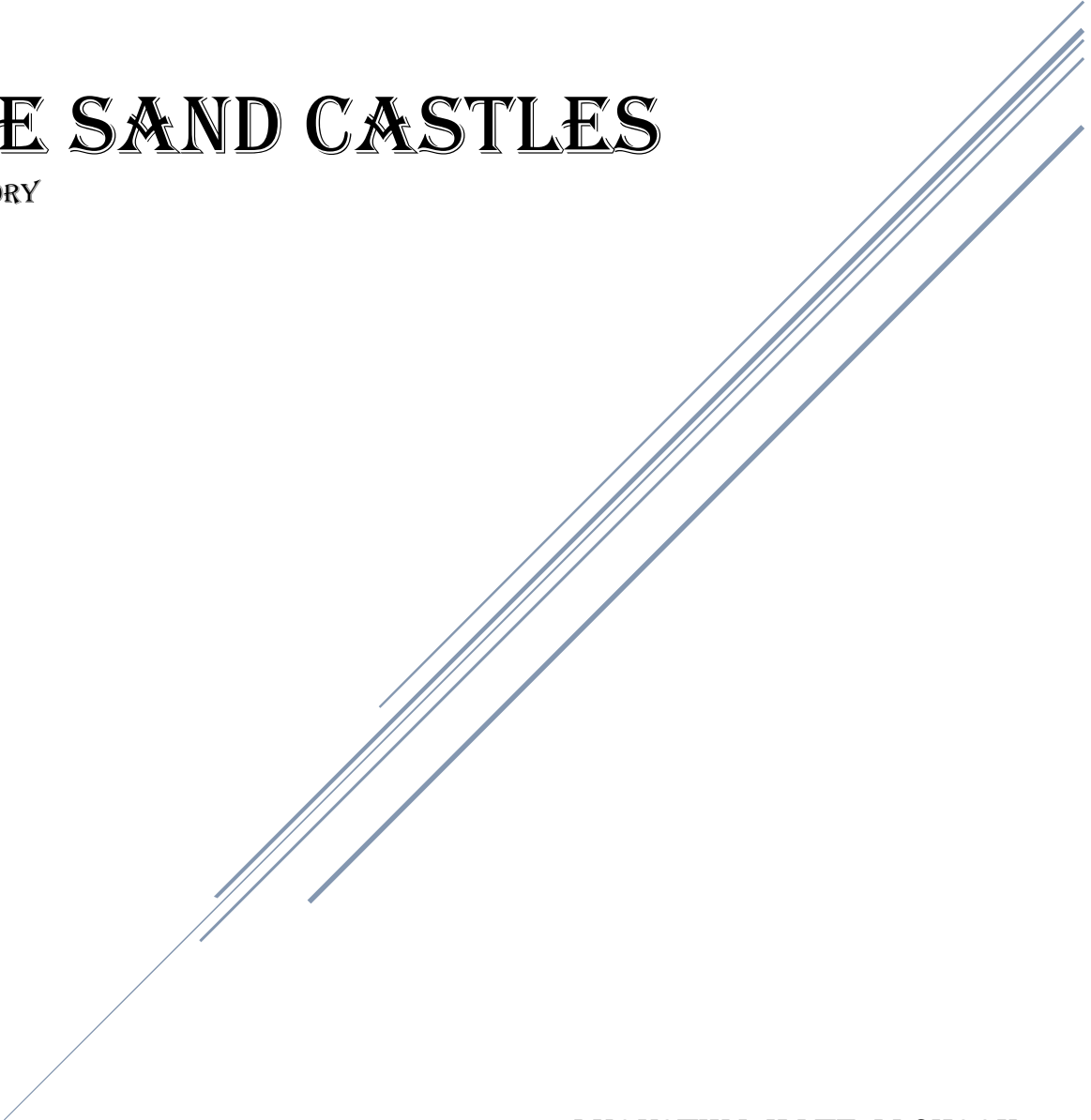


# LIKE SAND CASTLES

SHORT STORY



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## CHAPTER ONE

Stillness enveloped the night and the sky was adorned with the beauty of shimmering stars, each one a distant luminary in the cosmic expanse. Efe perched herself on the windowsill of her hotel room, her gaze affixed to the heavens as though she intended to understand the secrets etched into the constellations. Some sort of magnetic force seemed to draw her into the velvety embrace of the dark sky. As she thought of her big day, a touch of melancholy brushed against her thoughts. Both herself and Larry, her soon-to-be husband, became subjects of her empathetic reflections. A wry smile curved her lips in silent acknowledgment of the events that had led to her predicament. Her eyes remained steadfast, entranced, as she embarked on a mental odyssey, traversing the landscape of her imperfect life.

She was brought back to life by an incessant knock on the door, startled, she leaped up, releasing a sigh that mingled with her lazy amble toward the wooden door. With a gentle push, the door creaked open, revealing her aunt dressed in a vibrant Boubou and headwrap. Clutched firmly beneath her armpit was her bag, a testament to her bustling excursion. “I’m so tired, these market women have no mercy o, they aren’t playing with their prices these days, Can you imagine those small small candles we had to get for the souvenirs cost almost a thousand cedis? What is happening in our country today? Yehowa!” She collapsed into the lazy sofa beside the bed, but Efe resumed her position at the windowsill as if to survey the land below. “Efe, tomorrow, no lateness, it’s your wedding, no lateness and the venue is right under your nose. Why am I even talking plenty, I am here, nothing will delay, you trust me” Aunt Awo turned to look at Efe who looked lost in her own thoughts, deaf to her rants.

“Efe” Aunt Awo called.

Silence

“Efe”

Silence

As she watched the evening tides rise and fall, her guts burned with nostalgia. A cascade of memories unfolded, carrying her back to the days of her youth when the world was smaller and simpler, when she was innocent. In those bygone moments, she, a mere wisp of a girl, would frolic upon the sea-sand, her laughter harmonizing with the whispers of the waves. She remembered her sand castles and her wishes, the kind that is spoken with twinkling eyes and borderless imagination, dreams taking form in grains. Saturday afternoons were her favorite because, she and her brother, together with their cousins got to mingle with the sea sand till evening. She would tell them how she wished to marry a prince and live in a proper castle happy ever after. Larry knew she loved the beach and suggested they had their wedding there. She was so grateful for his thoughtfulness. Larry was no prince, but with him, she saw her happy ever after.

“Efe!!!”

“Ma”, she startled

“I’m talking to you, where’s your mind?”

Efe sighed heavily and migrated from the windowsill to the bed, she clasped her fingers together and sighed again. Her face had dropped and her lips quivered. “I don't think I can get married”, she stated blatantly

“Ehn?” Aunt Awo exclaimed, “What do you mean? Your wedding is tomorrow... cold feet?”

Efe nodded and shook her head simultaneously, “I know cold feet, aunty, and that’s not what I’m having.” Her voice shook and her body tensed while she, fought her tears with all her might. Even though she knew with her aunty, she could just be herself. Efe's mind was consumed by the man she loved, a man she thought didn’t deserve any deception, not Larry. He had the most untainted intention and she knew, she just knew.....She didn’t deserve him. “Larry is a good man and he doesn’t deserve this”

“Deserve what? What are you talking about, he already knows you can’t have children so what is the problem now?”

“Aunty, there’s something I need to tell you”. Efe cursed herself as she traveled down memory lane, to a year ago, to the night when the man who claimed to be their father showed up at the house. Growing up, her father was never in the picture so the meeting had not gone well. Her brother was miles away and Larry was out of the country to pursue his second degree in Corporate Law.

Aunty Awo’s forehead creased with worry as she leaned forward and clasped her fingers together “What is it?”

Efe sniffed, “Do you remember when that man showed up at the house saying he was our father?” Aunt Awo nodded eager to hear the end of the matter. “And I went out to take a walk?” Her Aunt kept nodding. “Well I umm, I run into someone, a man. I had met him a few times before, but we weren’t really friends but obviously, I needed someone to talk to, he gave me an ear. I don’t know if you remember, but it rained that evening and his house was close, so we went in....one thing led to the other and..” She paused to wipe the warm tears. “We slept together”

“What is you slept together? Young lady, speak to me in plain language, Ehen?”

“We had sex, aunty, okay?”

“Just last year when Larry was in Canada?” Efe nodded, “Oh Efe!” She exclaimed. Disappointment written over her face. She adjusted her headgear. Even though her aunt was not judgmental, Efe never wanted to disappoint her. She still had for her, respect and a slice of fear even after seventeen years of living under her roof, a bond forged through the sorrow of her mother's passing.

“A few weeks later, I discovered I was pregnant and he asked me to terminate it. Larry was coming back in a few months and I didn’t know what to do”

“So you aborted the baby?”

“Well, obviously”

“If you were close. I’d have knocked that your stupid mouth” The both chuckled.

“Sorry, so yeah, I had complications, this is why I can’t have babies and I feel guilty everyday”

“Who is this man?”

“I can’t tell you that, I’m sorry, but I can’t, I just feel guilty and I want to tell him what happened, he believes my inability to give birth is of natural cause.”

“I’d be lying if I say I’m not disappointed, and if you don’t want to name this person, I respect that, but you see this secret, let it follow both of us to our graves.”

“What if this person is feeling as guilty as I am and has told him already?”

“If he had, you two wouldn’t be getting married tomorrow.”

Efe sighed in relief and wiped tears from her face. Aunt Awo walked up to her and pulled her into a warm hug. She patted and rubbed her back, “My dear, it’s all in the past now, for how long can you beat yourself about this, wipe the tears and prepare yourself for your big day tomorrow, mmm?”. She strode out of the room. Aunt Awo always showed her tough love, something she had eventually gotten used to.

## CHAPTER TWO

Efe barely slept. She woke up to the most beautiful message from Larry, she smiled and sighed, now fully convinced that he knew nothing. She walked to the window and opened the blinds slowly. The once-vivid sky had mellowed into a delicate hue of blue, where the sea waves converged with the heavens at an invisible threshold. From her room, Efe gazed out, greeted by a panorama that exuded serenity, the seagulls performed a harmonious melody, their choreography gracing the balmy waters below. A smile crept to her lips, while she tracked their elegant pirouettes, her gaze unwavering.

She shook her head at the realization that her life was sad and she was the only person who knew that. Everyone else thought she should be the happiest person on the planet, who by the end of the day would be the newest bride. She walked to the opposite side of the room, which faced the venue of her wedding, elegantly decorated. The sand dazzled like grains of gold under the sun. A white carpet stretched from the altar to the end of the congregation, held in place with huge white ceramic vases holding white carnations. Rose petals in soft hues of pink and coral created a gentle pathway, leading to the heart of the celebration while white folding chairs stood in neat rows, their backs adorned with delicate rose garlands. A rustic wooden arch, entwined with billowing white fabric, framed the ceremony space against the vast ocean backdrop.

She was glad she trusted her friends to try these decorators on Instagram. She lost trust in social media vendors a few years ago when she got a grade eight 10-inch wig instead of the grade 11 14-inch she ordered. It was the worst day of her life because her hair was messy and it was Larry's birthday. But, looking at her wedding setting was the most breathtaking view she had ever had.

In a span of less than two hours, she was all set and poised to meet her groom. Her reflection was a testament to perfection, the delicate strokes of makeup accentuating her features, and her Princess wedding gown draping flawlessly. Standing by her side were her two close friends, her bridesmaids, Michelle and Lucy, cloaked in flowing mullet dresses of regal purple. Aunt Awo whispered prayers of blessings, and with each step, they descended towards the shoreline, filled with ready guests. At the altar stood Larry, resplendent in his white tuxedo. While music accompanied Efe down the aisle, her mind was caught in a moment of self-assurance, reminding herself of the profound choice she was about to make.

The ceremony unfolded succinctly, not hurried, but with a graceful simplicity that allowed the essence of the occasion to shine. And then it arrived, the pinnacle of expectations – they both had a few things to say before the vows. Efe retrieved a paper from the Michelle. Fingers quivered slightly, and in that moment, evading Larry's gaze as she had been doing occasionally no longer felt right. She cleared her throat and the carefully curated words spilled forth in a steady cadence. As the last syllable fell, emotions surged. Tears glistened in the eyes of some guests, as the resonance of her words settled in hearts. Larry, too, unrolled his script, his words a masterpiece of sentiment while he brought back his favorite memories of the life they both shared till this moment they were about to tie the knot.

“So now, do you, Efe Frimpong, take Larry Osei-Agyeman, this day to be your lawfully wedded husband?” asked the priest

Efe smiled, “Yes, I do”, the crowd cheered

The priest now turned to Larry, “Larry Osei-Agyeman, do you, this day, take Efe Frimpong to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

Larry held on to the eyes of Efe and kept holding on to them, as if trying to dig something out of those pearly eyes, till the priest whispered his name, but he still held on to Efe’s gaze. He shifted his feet a few times and looked like he had something to say but was not finding the right words “No, I do not.”

“Babe?” Efe’s voice shook, she was at sea...literally, her knees weakened. The guests murmured among themselves as nothing had prepared them for this after that amazing and heartfelt declaration.

“Efe, I’ve never loved anyone as I’ve loved you, and I don’t know if I’ll ever do, But I can’t marry you, I’m sorry”. Larry walked down the aisle and Efe running after him, calling after him. When they were a few feet away from the guests, who were already torn in uproar, Larry stopped walking and Efe caught up with him. “Babe, I don’t get this, what is going on?”

Larry already had loads of tears in his eyes, he turned slowly to face his bride. “Were you ever going to tell me?” He asked calmly.

“Tell you what?”

“Okay, now she is lost, perfect!”

“Babe, seriously, what you’re talking about, whatever it is, please let’s talk about it later, it’s our wedding, look behind me and see all the people who came to support us, please don’t do this”

Larry chuckled, “Last year? My Uncle Paul? Rings a bell?” All the guests started whispering to each other in indistinct chatter, definitely making up their own version of the story already.

Aunty Awo run to the scene, “Larry dear, whatever it is---”

Larry put up his hand to stop her, “Aunty please, please stay out of this” and then he turned to Efe, “You found nobody, nobody in this entire world but my uncle? You know, he told me last week, he was probably feeling guilty, I didn’t want to believe him, wasn’t going to, but he showed me the conversations, the scans and reports you sent, everything. We’ve been together for years, Efe, years and you could do this to me? How on earth could anyone be this heartless?”

“Larry, I was going to tell you”

“No, you weren’t, this happened last year, I can’t believe you would—I gave my everything for us and you took all that and threw it in my face. Efe, my Uncle?! I didn’t even know you knew him like that”

“I didn’t”

“So you just what, decided to sleep with him, just like that, wow”

“Larry, it was just a moment of weakness, it wasn’t planned and I--”

“You know what? I don’t want to hear it, just—” Larry broke down to tears and his father rushed to his side, “I don’t ever want to set my eyes on you Efe, ever again”. His father led him out of the scene along with his family. The guests dispersed and left one after the other and by the time the last person left, Efe was sitting on the sand, surrounded by her friends and family who were doing their best to calm her down. She couldn’t speak, and warm unstoppable tears cascaded down her face.

“Are you sure about this? I don’t want you to feel like I’m taking advantage of your pain”, Paul had asked, when they were both almost naked.

“Yes, I am sure” Efe had said and pulled him closer.

A year later, she was reaping a bitter fruit from her sweet expedition. As she sat, abandoned in her wedding dress on the beach, she wanted to build castles and make new wishes but she did not even have the energy. Before her eyes unfolded the spectacle of her life collapsing akin to the waves erasing her sand castles. She wailed and refused to get off the shore apportioning blame to nobody but the echoes of her own decisions. Now that she was thinking about it, maybe she shouldn’t have said her wishes out loud but what difference would that have even made?