

## **SLASHED BY OMOTAYO KOLEOSHO**

As I stared at the washed paint on the wall, the broken pieces of what was left of the furniture and the low ceiling with visible holes, I wondered if running to my mother's abandoned house was a mistake. This house wasn't hers anymore, and neither could I call it mine. It belonged to the rats whose squeaks and the pitter-patter of their tiny feet I could hear in the ceiling. It belonged to the lizards that clung to the walls like they were on life support and the snakes that camped in the corners during the day and sought after delicious meals during the night. They were the rightful owners now. They had paid their dues and had waited for a long time to be sure no one was coming back. No one did, until now. Without giving it much thought, I snatched my duffel bag from the ground. It was the only thing I had brought with me. I headed to my car parked outside the building, got into it and began to drive.

My mother died on a Sunday. I remember because I was wearing a white garment and I had walked home barefoot with three prophetesses. Prior to that day, I had been asked to stay in church for three days because I needed to be delivered from the spirit of seduction. The prophet had told my mother that fair girls with twinkling eyes like me were prone to be used by the devil to cause the fall of men. I was the only child of my mother and she was too self-righteous to bear the thought that her daughter would cause others to sin.

From an early age, I knew what jealousy was. I learned from my mother that prayer was a solution to jealousy, or at least it would comfort you that God is fighting your battles. My mother would go on her knees and cry out, "The master in heaven! You know my problems. Deliver my husband from these girls with tiny legs that cause him to fall into temptation. Make my husband have eyes only for me."

I knew what jealousy was and I knew what jealousy could do. It could lead to insanity. My mother would leave her workplace early and go to my father's office to bring him home directly. She would run from the kitchen to the room if she heard his phone ring inside. She would wait for him to fall asleep before her so that

she could monitor him. She would fight with any woman on the street who dared to raise their eyes to look at my father. Yet, she would never blame him for cheating. It must be the other women who were trying to snatch her husband.

When I was eleven years old, one day, my mother took me to the hair salon. The hairdresser was braiding a woman's hair and promised to do our hair when she was done. There were two other women in the shop. The woman whose hair was being made began to lament to the hairdresser that her husband was at it again, this time with a single mother in their compound. The hairdresser asked if she had caught them together, and the woman said that she had not.

“We all know that single mothers are indecent women. How else do you explain not having a husband but you have a child?” another woman said.

To think that this unknown woman was belittled because she had a child but no man was beyond me at the time, but when I grew older, I realised that the world was unkind to women, and some women never heal, so they project unkindness to other women.

The woman with the supposedly cheating husband was upset and close to tears. With a heavy sigh, she concluded that she was going to leave her husband. It was as if she had dropped a bomb. The salon was silent for a few moments, then all the other women began to talk at the same time. They dissuaded her, “You cannot do that. People would ridicule you for being unmarried. You would lose respect. Those stupid girls he follows will win, and you will lose.”

Like it was some kind of competition and the man was the prize.

Then, my mother spoke, “All men cheat. That is how they were created. So far he provides for you and your children, pays school fees and gives you money to cook, so far he comes home without those girls, it's okay. Just bear your cross for your children's sake and don't allow any useless woman to chase you from your husband's house.” Her reasoning was flawed and untrue, but became impressed in my mind.

When my mother informed me about the deliverance session with the prophet, I had no choice but to obey. I never got the chance to tell my mother that on the second day of my deliverance, the day she breathed her last, the prophet took me to the uncompleted building at the back of the church and asked me to raise my dress. I did as I was told because I did not want him to lay a curse on me. My mother used to say that curses from a prophet could never be broken. His eyes widened when he saw my breasts shielded in my bra. He unhooked my bra. I stared at him soullessly. He flicked the bead of sweat that had formed on my forehead and stared into my eyes as he palmed my breasts.

“*Alagba!* Prophet! Where are you sir?” someone called out for him from a distance.

“Wear your clothes fast!” he ordered.

He pushed me to a corner and smoothed the creases on his clothes before stepping out. He told the person that he had obeyed an urge to come to sanctify what would be the new children’s church when it was completed. I was seventeen years old when all this happened.

My mother had died of a heart attack according to the doctor’s report but her family concluded that it was a spiritual attack, and I must find redemption, otherwise, the evil ones would come for me as well. My father had since died of alcohol poisoning when I was thirteen, so I became an orphan. The day my mother died, she was buried next to him in our house. It was strange. I always thought that I would get to celebrate my mother better. She would die at ninety-eight, satisfied with life. With my father dead, she would enjoy life and not be burdened by it. I would make a lot of money and shower her with all the love and affection my father denied her. Yet, here she was, in the earth with sand dumped over her body, shut in a wooden coffin. No trumpets, no drums. Just family, in miserable black clothes with miserable tears.

It was on my journey to redemption that I met Ekundayo Aliu. I was running to board a bus to go find the powerful man of God who would redeem my life when I almost got run over by a man in a nice blue car. He was sorry and offered to take

me to a hospital, but I declined. He asked me where I lived so he could take me home. I shocked myself when I said I did not have a home. I did have a house, but it did not feel like a home without my mother. He took me to his house instead. I was scared. What kind of man took a girl he had never met to his home just like that? But the fear of going back to nothing was greater and made me stay with him.

Every night, he would come to my room and we would talk. He would tell me about his day and what he did at work. He would tell me about his office partner who tried to sabotage him and about the silly clerk who peed on himself while he was being disciplined by the boss. He would listen to me as I told him stories from my childhood. He always knew how to respond. He laughed when I told him funny stories and was solemn when he heard the sad ones. He was furious when he heard about the prophet and said he was sorry I ever went through sexual assault. I never really classified it as sexual assault before then. For the first time in many months after the incident, I cried and acknowledged my feelings of violation.

Ekundayo never called me a maid, but I did everything a maid did. In return, he bought me clothes, shoes, and bags, and displayed me like a trophy whenever we went out together. He treated me with such respect and dignity that I never knew a woman deserved. His parents and siblings knew me as the young girl he helped off the street and treated me with kindness. They loved me and I loved them too. Three years passed, and I turned twenty. The night after my twentieth birthday, he sat me down and told me that he was growing older and was running out of time. He needed a woman who would love him and could bear his children. He could not think of any other woman in his life and he had grown to love me. Of course, I agreed. He was my only friend, the only man I could trust. It was a huge honour to be his wife. We got married three months later. He was thirty-four at the time.

Ekundayo was my first love. Everything about him made me feel alive. I yearned for the moments he would flash me a smile. I missed his body as soon as it left mine. When he was away at work, I wore his clothes and basked in his smell. I ate the food he ate and stopped eating the food he didn't. I wore the long, unflattering dresses he bought for me because he knew what was best. He said I was too beautiful and he didn't want other men looking at me. That made me blush. He thought I was beautiful enough to protect me.

At first, he loved me. I know because he told me every so often. Men are not so open with their feelings unless they mean them. Those were the words my mother said. Then three years passed and I could not bear him a child. I would cry every night and squeeze my belly, wondering why it had refused to carry a child. Every time I took a pregnancy test, it would crush me to see his eyes fall when he discovered I was not pregnant. Every time he touched me, I would feel guilty for not being able to give him the one thing he truly wanted. Everything changed, but I didn't see it, because nothing really changed. He still made love to me with an unrivalled passion and brought me the most expensive gifts.

I discovered the truth quite by chance. His sister was coming to visit and I was to prepare the guest room for her. I needed to make a good impression. I did not know if she hated me because I did not have children, but I refused to take chances. I was going to transform the guest room into a comfortable haven for my sister-in-law. I scrubbed the tiles with a hard brush and soapy water, till they nearly sparkled. I changed the bed sheet and laid the softest sheets on her bed. I cleaned the windows and scrubbed the toilet and bathroom. It took me four hours to clean the room to my satisfaction. I was glad when I finished. I was about to leave the room when I saw a cockroach on the wall, near the ceiling. With the mop stick in my hand, I aimed at the cockroach and I hit it. It fell to the ground splat, but I did not care about its death anymore. While I tried to hit the cockroach, the mop stick shifted a loose ceiling board. I had never seen that in all my years of living with Ekundayo. I got a stool from the bedside and climbed on it. I dug my hand into the hole in the ceiling and my hand discovered a thin leather briefcase. With shaky hands, I pulled it out.

In the briefcase was a file. In the file was a Will. My husband's Will. My husband, the man who had vowed to love and cherish me forever, had a Will, and I was unaware. Yet, that was the least shocking thing of all. All Ekundayo Aliu had and possessed belonged to a certain Eniola Odeyale and their son, Olawale Odeyale Aliu.

When Ekundayo came home that night, I flung the file in his face. He said nothing for a while. Then he began to apologise. He said he was sorry and that he loved me

forever. The devil made him do it. I told him I could not believe he was a liar and a cheater, and he was no different from my father.

“I’m not like your father. He had a child with your mother. And I can’t even have a child with you.”

The words cast a heaviness upon the room. We both stopped and stared at each other in morbid silence for a while. Then he went on his knees and began to beg me. He said he was sorry and that he wanted to make things right. He hugged me and told me he would amend his Will. I did not say a word.

That night, I went into the kitchen to make our dinner. I was going to make his favourite – chicken stew with lots of gizzards. I wanted to do something nice for him because a part of me told myself that my barrenness caused his infidelity. If I were a real woman, I would have given birth to some children by now. But I was damaged somehow and that was why I could not make my husband feel like he was man enough.

I was chopping onions for the stew when he came into the kitchen and hugged me from behind. Then he said a lie that hurt even more than the truth. He whispered into my ear, “I am sorry baby. I love you so much.”

My car finally came to a stop outside a police station. My heart began to race, my palms became sweaty, and the tears that had been threatening to fall since I left my house for my mother’s streamed down my face. I walked into the police station and spoke to the officer at the counter.

“My name is Adesewa Aliu. My husband, Ekundayo Aliu is lying dead in our kitchen at 24, Ikulopin Street with seven stab wounds and a slashed neck. I am the one who killed him.”