

What Remains After

Have you ever been serenaded by an expert? He had the perfect words, words which excited your ears. This kind of expert will subtly get hold of your heart, mind, body and soul and grip them in his firm hold. Do whatever you can, you can't escape him. Spontaneity is his middle name. From writing flowery verses to dropping secret notes in your handbags, he does it all. Your pictures are always on his DP and status 24/7 with different captivating captions, *Akwaugom. My woman, my everything. Soul mate. Wifey.*

His favorite pastime is taking pictures of you. He cooks for you and gives you a massage every Saturday evening. When you are ill, he stays by your side and even pays the hospital bill. He throws a lavish birthday bash for you. When you want to know why he is *spoiling* you, he says, *You are the centre of my universe.*

Everyone that meets him tells you, *Hold him tight. He's a rare kind.* You feel lucky. Seems the stars aligned in your favor.

Have you ever been in a relationship with a man and all your actions and thoughts start and end with him? Even the mundane appear magical with just his touch. This expert is a magician. He is very good at everything. This is the type that scams you, not just out of your money, but takes your heart as well. He travels with you to meet your family – a good sign of commitment. He calls your mother *Ogo*, my in-law. He gifts her pricy laces.

He gives you different doses of in-your-face kind of love. His affection is like a ritual – always displayed, never hidden. You get a daily prescription of heartwarming voice notes every morning: *You are my forever.*

You soak it all in, basking in the euphoria of one who has found a special thing, an enduring kind of thing. You are now dishing out relationship tips and couples' goals. Your relationship is worthy of emulation.

At your friend's bachelorette, other bridesmaids are putting on robes with inscriptions like: *Single but not searching, Single and searching, Single and complicated.* But yours is in the full glare of the public: *Taken and in love.*

Your glowing face tells the tale of your boisterous happiness. There is fear also. It manifests in the beginning. This love looks hurried. An unexpected rain in the midst of drought. Uneasiness hovers around you like a bad smell.

Can I visit you?

When can I meet your mother?

Your direct and subtle questions. But they are expertly maneuvered, replaced with whispered sweet nothingness. You are simultaneously loving and despairing, fearing that a storm is coming your way but there is no evidence of it.

With his visits, almost a weekly thing, you are thoroughly courted. Your hidden fantasies are brought to life. He takes control of your house too. It is as if he has *Man of the House* tattooed on his forehead. He is what your people call *able and capable*.

He lavishes attention and thoughtful gifts on you. Everything that makes you comfortable is what he does. Everything that convinces you that he is what he says he is to support his *I am a consultant with NNPC and also into exportation and importation*.

To work with NNPC means to have oil money. To export and import is to have extra cash. The cars he shows up in confirm it. His gentle, dragging-the-earth stride screams confidence. His voice, a mixture of coolness and amusement, sugars your heart.

Later, you try to analyze the speed at which you fell into a trap you have been forewarned of. There have been many unsuccessful scammers in the past. There were those who tried to hack your bank account, the ones that tried to swindle you with a lucrative job, and the ones that offered you a scholarship abroad. They all had one thing in common – bad English. It has always been the first thing that tips you off whenever they approach you through email or SMS.

You feel the initial pangs of fear, but in your head, he didn't possess the distinctive attributes of fraudsters. He has impeccable manners, garnished with a good command of English, and your native Igbo language. He talks of his mother with fondness and you are hooked because you love men who cherish their mothers. He doesn't boast of his comfort life all the time. He rather lets you see it from the many pictures you see on all his social media handles. And yes, he let you

have the password to all of them. Something he did to show you that he trusts you with his life. He has nothing to hide and you can trust him with your life!

But you have no idea that he has other accounts for his business. And yes, he is into the business of making women lose their hearts and money in one swoop. He has numerous social media accounts that you are not aware of. Now he has your heart, he even sends you money once in a while to surprise you and drag you deeper into him.

It has been ingrained in you that a real man is one who pays the bills for his woman. He visits you often wearing expensive shirts and shoes and belts – your very own definition of a gentleman. He never litters your house. Never shouts at you in anger.

When he returns to his base, which is usually nowhere in particular (for sometimes he is in Dubai, then next in Johannesburg, other times in Kuala Lumpur), he leaves some articles of clothing and his soap in your bathroom – signs of permanence!

He hints at both of you exploring life and the world together. *Asoebi* colours are now dancing before your eyes. Your girlfriend is a wedding planner and you start asking her subtle questions, dropping hints. *What kind of theme do you think is best for a Dubai wedding, Kenenna? I love this cake, but I would love mine to be ten tiers.* You want a destination wedding. It's been your dream all your life.

And then he buys you a ring and proposes in your own living room. Finally, your evidence has arrived! Your yes is loud as the trumpet of rapture. You are ecstatic. You tell your friends and your parents. Your Facebook handle is filled with pictures of the proposal, with many *oohs* and *aaahs and God when*. Both of you agree that your *Ikuaka* will be in a month's time. He says he is in a hurry to make you his wife.

Then bam! Everything starts happening. Misfortunes rain on him. He suspects his village people. The ship ferrying his 40-foot containers sinks. Another is seized by the Nigerian customs authority. He loses his consulting job with NNPC. He says it is as a result of the president's nepotism. The job has been given to a northerner.

You intensify your prayers, casting and binding evil eyes. His phone gets stolen at the airport. He can't access his bank app. Then your prospective mother-in-law, his mother, the one you have never met becomes terminally ill. He calls you in the night: "*Ugo m*, transfer 5million to **Ike, my brother's account**. When I do a welcome back for my lost sim card, I will pay you back. It's for mom's hospital treatment." His request is casual, like one accustomed to millions. There is no begging.

This is the moment you have been waiting for to prove your love and loyalty. You once told him that your money is his, and he in turn said that his was yours. The time has come for you to fulfill your words. You already know he can afford it. It's just that all kinds of misfortunes have been eating up everything he has abroad, and he also needs to be in Nigeria to get his Nigerian

phone number back in order to access his bank's mobile app. He promises to transfer the 5million in a week's time when he returns.

You are a good woman and a good woman stands by her husband. He is your husband already. What is remaining is mere formalities. You transfer all the money you have been saving since you started working after graduating from the university. You don't leave anything for yourself.

You call him to confirm if his brother has received the alert and his number is unavailable. You send him a WhatsApp message. It gets ticked but stays unread till evening. You are not worried yet. His mother's illness is taking a toll on him. You understand.

You try to send a message to his Facebook, but you realize it doesn't exist anymore. You try Instagram, the same thing. You repeat the same cycle the next morning, afternoon, and night. You are becoming agitated. What if he's been involved in an accident? What if he has been arrested for what he didn't do? Did his plane crash? Is he hospitalized? Has mummy (what you call your mother-in-law to be) died? Your heart breaks for him at the thought because you know how close he is to his mother.

By the fifth day, you are confused. You don't know who to call because all the friends you spoke to, even the ones that called you *our wife*, were through his phone. His brother's number is switched off.

Then you remember that you know the name of his village and that of his family. You were smart enough to save that to memory. But on getting to your destination, his village, you find out that no family bears the name he gave you. Your eyes are getting clearer, and you are dying slowly.

Your situation is becoming clearer but at the wrong time. You had in your arrogance thought that you are beyond being scammed, boasted of it, declaring, *I am a child of grace*. You told anyone interested to know why you have never fallen victim to fraudsters. You weighed your intellectual abilities above their various format of swindling people. Escaping scammers was in your blood, something photocopied from your powerful genes.

No one in your family has ever been scammed. It was said that the father of your great-grandfather is the only man who didn't sell his land to the white man for a small handheld shining mirror.

Your father, the previous year, had received a call from some people who told him that they had been contracted to kill him and promised not to do so if he paid them 200k. Your father had known that they were conmen and laughed at their amateurish attempt to con him. Your mother too had escaped one in a taxi. That one had paid his fare with USD and when the driver, whom your mother discovered was part of the gang, insisted that they go to *Ama Hausa* to change the foreign currency to naira. The dollar man declared that he had a bagful of dollars in the trunk which he would make sure to share among his co-passengers.

He had sworn in a fake accent and mismatched suit that hadn't seen water and soap in a while. Your mother had calmly explained that she didn't need riches and was subsequently pushed out of the taxi.

The meeting, the chats, the actions, nothing gave it away. Nothing showed you that in 3 months time, you will be shattered. You met him on your *pet* day, Saturday, there in the middle of the thick rains that heralds the August break.

You had come out from SPAR mall, your umbrella shielding you from the stormy rain. He ran to you asking to join you under your umbrella to where he parked his car. He offered to drop you at your destination and you obliged because of his gentle demeanor. The rest became history. Your savings too.

Who do you tell this story to? How do you explain yourself in a country where victims miraculously become suspects? To worsen the matter further, you are female and female victims are always shamed.

The vision of the premium dragging you will receive on social media if your story gets out nightmarishly flashes in your mind. It silences you. You confess to your parish priest and he says that you deserved what happened to you. When was the last time you contributed money to any church project? You remind him that you donated 5k at last month's project for the purchase of parish flowers and he retorts, *Now you see the kind of blessings 5k gives you.*

Your friends are asking when to send money for their *asoebi*. You are no longer picking their calls because you have no answers for them. Comments on your proposal photos are constant, taunting you, making you feel foolish. All your accounts on social media disappear. There is no bearing the savage on twitter streets.

How do you explain to your parents that your introduction has been postponed indefinitely because you can't find your perfect gentleman? So you lock everything inside you, telling yourself that love is overrated.

What remains after is a woman who declares to everyone that there is nothing wrong in being single. You now have a group of young women who follow you on Instagram and Tiktok. They believe your words are true and they see every man as an enemy.

They don't know that in the silence of your heart, you hunger for companionship, you hunger for a loud wedding, and you hunger to be called a wife.