

Conflicted

It had been two years since the love of my life got coupled with his 'better half'. The atmosphere was wet with dew, but the morning, as dry as a desert. I was chilling in my father's wooden chair in the balcony, listening to songs from a music box and watching the trees dance to the wind, when Ikenna stormed into our compound like an angry bird.

"Chiamaka Okeke!", he yelled. Before this, I could have sworn that he didn't know my surname. We met while I was in my final year in secondary school. I was sitting in a white plastic chair in my mother's stationary shop, and with a biology textbook opened on my lap, when a fine young man that seemed to have been in my age group walked into the frontage. First, he asked for a ball pen, and then if the shop was mine. I told him it was mother's and he proceeded to inquire about my educational status. "I'm preparing for waec exams", I replied, raising the book in my hand as an evidence, before leaving it on the chair and heading to the counter behind me to get a pen.

"Stressful, isn't it?", He showed concern. I could see him, but with a less broad chest and a smooth chin, in my head, but I initially couldn't match it to any particular location. "It is actually stressful", I replied, and we conversed some more. I got to know that he'd finished from Obodoukwu Community Secondary School which was the school I'd been attending at the time. Besides the charm his looks were bedecked with, his hilarity could sweep a lady Goliath off her feet. He was back the next day, to buy something he hadn't even planned; It was obvious since his first question had been, "Besides pens, what else do you sell?". With the joy that had suddenly tickled my heart, I told him everything I could see in the shop as I looked around: notebooks, mathematical sets, cardboards, and so on. My tone was at its usually hidden best, as though I had been assigned to impress the guy. During our chat afterward, I did most of the talking, telling interesting stories about my teachers and classmates, while he fixed his gaze on me, making me bite my words in nervousness, my heartbeat accelerating at a rate that was anomalous, and breathing becoming a task. He finally bought another ball pen, and left it with me as a gift to celebrate our acquaintanceship. He returned on the third consecutive day, when he bumped into the owner of the shop, Mrs Florence Okeke. They equally got to know each other and Ikenna and I became good friends until we got to the university; there, the bond was mutated into something that seemed strong enough to unite two planets.

"Amaka how could you?!", He yelled at the top of his voice, veins nearly bursting out his neck and forehead. It broke me to feel my heart skip a beat as I stared blankly at him. What had I ever done but love this man, as a brother and a lover? He also loved me, at least he acted like it. Maybe if Ifeoma had disappeared from the picture, we would have been married with a baby girl like we'd agreed while in school. Our break up was my first and last, but probably only his last, so it must have been easier for him to get over. I was in my room with Chizi, my best friend, that day, when my younger sister, and only sibling – Nenye – barged in like an ill-mannered child to inform Chizi that she had been sought after. Next, there was a gentle knock on the door, almost immediately she left, and it turned out to have been from Chiboy, one of my secondary school classmates. "Long time o, Amy", he said to me, scanning me from head to toe with his tongue stuck out and gliding over his upper lip.

"Er...Chiboy, you came to my house, and you didn't think the proper thing was to wait in the parlor" I gave him a look of disgust, my eyes were widely open and their brows, creased. He said he'd missed me, and suddenly, started unbuttoning his maroon and black striped shirt from the collar. I was about to exclaim when Nenyé stormed in, with Ikenna and Chizi behind her.

"Ahn ahn, sister, what is Chiboy doing in your room?" The surprise she'd put on, for someone who had been cutting okra in a parlor that led to the room's passage, shocked me, but I couldn't reply as my heart sank the next second at the sound of my boyfriend's gasp, "Amaka." My heart froze abruptly when Chiboy yelled, "Amy what is this guy doing here?!" He also added that I shouldn't have accepted to date him if I hadn't ended my relationship with Ikenna. Words ran far from my tongue, like they'd been carried by a whirlwind. I wanted Chiboy and my sister to burst into laughter and say that they'd gotten me with their prank, but they didn't. Ike walked away. Nenyé and Chiboy followed. Chizi was the only who stayed back to hear what I had to say; she also trusted me when she said, "The truth would always triumph. Ike would come back to apologize for thinking lowly of you." Each time I sent messages I'd already foreseen wouldn't get replied, I hoped that Chizi was right. And she was; he came back a month later, to plead my forgiveness, with Ifeoma, who turned out to have been the brain behind the set up. I made myself understand that he only needed to mature a bit more and learn to trust me, before taking his hands to pull him up from his knees, and then, he begged me to forgive her as well, blaming the devil for her deed. Ikenna had started a prayer group at the biggest Catholic church in our town, so I guessed his plea for Ifeoma must have been a display of Christianity, until he returned the following day, alone. "Amaka, you're an amazing soul", he started, and from there, he talked about how much of a sister I'd been to him, and how there couldn't be anyone else like me in the world, and finally, with an apology, he let me know that he and Ifeoma had gotten engaged three weeks after our misunderstanding.

I was still staring blankly at him when he added, "Amaka even after the two miscarriages, you still didn't think you should let us be"

"Why are you here Ikenna?"

"Amaka, Ify is dead!", He retorted, "and I know it was you. Amaka I thought you were christian, how couldn't you let go of something even after years"

His assumption that his wife, Ifeoma, must have been attacked by a spiritual force that caused her miscarriages and death was not far fetched. Our village, and even the town at large, had a minimum of two 'powerful' native doctors, known for aiding people's atrocities in exchange for huge amounts of money – ranging from fifty thousand to five hundred thousand naira. What piqued me was how low he had brought me, to have assumed that I had something to do with it. Even if I'd decided to visit Emena's shrine, it would have been to punish Ike, whom I'd believed was christian, and not Ifeoma. I had a fault too; not seeking God early had to have been my worst decision growing up. Instead, I danced to the organs played by 'prayer warriors', like Ikenna. It was also my fault when I told my mother that I had been at the church for a meeting, and not at Ikenna's house, which was the truth. I did not only let my emotions grow into a wild fire, I let them consume my every action and words.

"Ikenna, why exactly are you here?" Amongst the one million questions I had in my head, I chose that one. He knew about how he'd not only hurt me by the break-up, but also pushed my sister to an early grave, and he still had the guts to come back. Chinenyenwa had been my playmate since I was two as she was born only a year and five months after my birth. She grew into an attractive young lady that never told her sister whenever she was being chased by young men. That was probably her own worst decision, because if she had chosen otherwise, I'd have known that my lover was one of the men promising her marriage. The news of his association with Ifeoma hit her on a more delicate spot than it did me.

"Amaka, I want to know why you did this." The more I tried not to see the hurt in his eyes, the more it bore through my heart. I had always been indifferent about Ifeoma right from secondary school where she was my senior in class. The times I'd seen Ikenna then, were when he had defended me by wrapping his hand around Ifeoma's wrist to pull her away, saying, "Just leave the girl", when she was about to seize my new black socks, and then, when they passed the veranda by my class window walking side by side, making their negligible height difference obvious. Learning that she had died was more a shock than a pain to me.

"Ikenna, I've done no single thing to hurt you. I should be the one asking why!", I raised my voice like it could threaten tears into staying back in their glands and stop choking my throat.

"Why what?"

"Ikenna...wow... fine... So why did you leave Ify back then and come for me?", I tried to be calmer. Saying that he'd left Ifeoma was more of a psychological test since nobody had ever mentioned their relationship to me.

"Amaka I loved you"

"So why did you leave me?!"

"Ify was the one for me!", He yelled back. His words seemed to have come with a pointed end as they broke through the surface tension in my eyes and made way for the tears that had been locked up. I bit my lower lip.

"You should listen to yourself Ike. Alright, so what about Nenye, hmmm?"

"Nenye was just...like...even if...it still didn't mean you should react the way you just did." That was unbelievably all he had to say about the girl he had assured that I was only a bet he was trying to win. She had exposed so many things in her Goodbye Letter to me, and even more in the one she'd left for the man who had broken both our hearts.

"Should I apologize again?", He asked with the same phlegmatic demeanor he had when he said that our baby could keep me company after I told him about my pregnancy. Initially, he had asked me abort, but when I insisted otherwise, he simply said, "Since Nenye and your mother are gone, you can as well have the baby keep your family house warm." My mother had died after a ghastly accident she got involved in while she was in the city of Owerri, a few months before my sister's suicide. Ikenna and I had still been together, and he had been a shoulder to cry on all through the period. After our break up, I assumed he had already been seeing Ifeoma even while consoling me, because the fact that our four years old relationship couldn't produce a result that his one month old relationship produced – an engagement – was debatable.

"I no longer need your apology, and I didn't do anything to hurt either you or your wife. You're probably just unable to forgive yourself, and that's why you think I'm still holding a grudge. I'll tell you something... I might not be like Christ, but I've certainly decided to follow Him this time around. There's oha soup in the house, just incase you're hungry." My last statement was not out of concern for whether he needed to eat or not, but I was sure of the one thing Ike could barely resist. Before the set up, we had had three other fights during our relationship, all initiated by my jealous self, and whenever I came back to my senses, I was already sure what to do to soothe him, food – ofe oha and akpu to be precise.

He followed me into the house like I'd expected, and sank shamelessly into one of the ragged grey sofas in our dark parlour while I headed to the detached kitchen through the back door. After reheating the soup, I served some into a porcelain bowl and placed it on a stainless steel tray. For two years, I'd kept the whitish substance tied in a transparent nylon that had been beside Neny's plate of jollof rice in her room on the day we found her lifeless, wrapped in the letters she'd left on her bed. I took it out of the cupboard it had been stored in, and poured some of the substance into the bowl of soup then stirred with my index finger so it disappeared. I put two wraps of akpu on another plate on the tray then hurried back to the parlour, with one of the letters squeezed in my right hand. "Amaka..." he gave me that intent stare again, when I got to him, and again, my heart fluttered. I hurried back to get him some water to wash his hands.

"Are you really going to eat that food?" He had washed his right hand, rolled some of the swallow and was about to dig into the soup. He tilted his head, cornering his eyes at me, and wearing a look of confusion. "I poisoned your food", I added, and he exclaimed with a jolt, "Jesus!", letting the mould fall back into its plate. His eyes were widened and his breathing pattern became irregular.

"Yes. I wanted to kill you, Ikenna, but as I said earlier, I have decided to follow Jesus", I spoke cheekily, seeing as I'd easily gotten him within my claws, "Here's Chinenyewa's letter to you", I hurled the paper I'd been hiding all that time at him, "Now, please leave my house, and don't come back here for any reason whatsoever"

He sluggishly rose up, quivering, nearly stumbling and with the letter in his hand, and without a word more, he traced his steps back to the compound gate while I sank into a loveseat and pleaded God's mercy on both our souls. Was it ever love?