

A QUIET REGARD FOR BROKEN THINGS

I watched her breathe.

Her chest expanded and collapsed rhythmically as she pulled oxygen from the air around us into her lungs. It seemed too quick, too forced, like she was on a schedule that meant she had to absorb as much oxygen as she could before time ran out. Her soft snores were periodically interrupted by the ticking sounds coming from the wall clock. It raced slowly, determined to count down the seconds till my world fully imploded. I subconsciously reached out to touch her face, and while she remained asleep, she seemed to lean into the caress. An involuntary sob escaped my throat.

How was it possible to love someone so much and hate them with just as much intensity? I'd waited for so long to meet her – all my life really – and now she was here I could barely suppress the bile that filled my mouth. Fat drops of tears that morphed into silent streams ran down my face. They formed a thin veil that held the agony bubbling underneath the surface at bay. Yet, as the tears blurred my vision of her, I was pulled deeper into a quicksand of grief and hurt. Suddenly, though I still looked, I no longer saw her. All I could see now was a much older face that looked like hers. A face that had always looked like mine since the beginning.

Olaedo and I had always been close in the inevitable way that twins were. We'd had the cliché phase of dressing alike and pretending to be each other, much to the chagrin of our friends and extended family. Even our personalities had felt blended, although Aedo possessed a generous dose of curiosity while my curiosities began and ended with dreams of being a mother. Nonetheless, I had been her best friend for a time, and she was mine. Even after she had discovered boys – *one* boy really, Tekena.

A sad smile stretched my lips as I recalled how she honestly would never shut up about him. He was 19 when they met, only 4 years older than us but Aedo would speak about him like he had lived 7 lifetimes and knew virtually everything. As much as I had rolled my eyes at her obvious obsession, I did like him, especially because he had always been able to tell us apart right from the start. I suspected though that this superpower had more to do with the fact that he was just as taken with her as she was with him, than simply an innate skill at spot-the-difference. So, it was not much of a surprise when Aedo decided to get married at 20.

But happiness is fleeting, and misery will more often than not overstay its welcome. Tekena died in a car accident 6 years into their marriage and his death became her undoing. It didn't start all at once; it was like a slow rot that grew from a broken heart, seeping into her bones and then clinging to her like stale air. In the beginning, she had cried, refused food, stared at his pictures and repeated the cycle until exhaustion drove her into restless sleep. I'd moved in with her, hoping to help her through what I thought were the normal stages of mourning.

'This too will pass.'

I'd repeat that phrase inwardly, and then to her, willing us both to believe it. But her misery had been all encompassing, reducing her to a small shell of a person. Soon she stopped speaking to anyone, but she had started to eat again. So, in a desperate hope for my best friend to be okay, I naively counted it as progress. Then one day she spoke.

"I'm going to Ahoada for a while."

Ahoada was the town where Tekena was from, and it was all the way in Bayelsa. I wanted to ask how long she would be gone for. I wanted to tell her I would go with her because we were going to get through this together. But I didn't. I don't know why but all I did was nod and help her pack her bags.

That had been the first time I lost her. 4 years ago. She'd found her way back eventually, albeit in a form I did not recognize. I reckon it was to be expected as I barely spoke to her in the 3 years she was away. Her limited communications were often restricted to texts or second-hand messages from her mother-in-law. Now, she'd become this illogical blend of nonchalance and responsibility. I'd noticed it in the little things, like how she would call to say that I'd left the tap running before leaving home, yet she would not turn it off until I got back. I had asked her why she'd waited until I returned, but she just shrugged and said she'd liked the sound.

Still, I'd tried to pretend she was the same as before, but her sudden announcement that she wanted a baby and had already started the IVF process should have alerted me. However, I had just gotten my best friend back and I did not want to rock the proverbial boat. Plus, my own fertility struggles had made me selfish and quite possibly insane. I'd always dreamed of becoming a mom, so if Aedo left me to raise her kid – which was likely to happen anyway – well, no harm no foul. It all seemed foolish now but perhaps it was so because I'd lost her again, and this time she wasn't coming back.

A small movement shook me from my thoughts. She yawned and then blinked repeatedly as though she was trying to decide if the world deserved to see the shiny brown orbs beneath her eyelids. Finally, she settled, and soon enough her soft snores filled the room. I glanced at the piece of paper on my lap that had turned my grief into anger. It was so flimsy, barely half of a page torn carelessly from a notebook. The teardrops that now adorned the paper with wet irregular circles made it look flimsier still. Yet, the cursive writing beckoned me to make excuses for her, to believe that she cared and was probably in a rush. But no matter what I wanted to believe, the words within served to cement her indifference.

Ure,

I hope you know that I never meant for things to become this twisted. I don't even know why I did it. Maybe on some deranged level, I wanted you to experience the happiness you always wanted, but please know that I never intended to hurt you. Neither did Dafe. He was drunk. I want to blame pregnancy hormones, but it happened the day before the procedure, so this is my fault. Somehow, I think I prayed that I wouldn't make it because I don't think I could have lived with myself without telling you. I do see the irony here, so I suppose my punishment is fitting.

I guess you might be curious but I'm afraid I don't have the answers either. She could be his or just mine, I don't know, but maybe it doesn't matter. Whatever part of me she has, you do too and vice versa.

*I'm really sorry. I love you.
Aedo.*

After Olaedo passed, the OBGYN nurse had closed my hand around the small piece of paper, mumbling something about a message for me if she didn't make it. I had been in a daze after finding out she was gone but this snapped me out of it briefly. I rushed to open it, wanting some part of her to hold onto. But shortly afterwards, I was plunged back into a stupefied daze. I had stared at the letter blankly for what felt like hours. It was more a note than a letter, but that made no difference because I'd read the words and I understood the words, but they made absolutely no sense. My grief had taken a back burner as the truth struggled to surface. What did she mean?

Somewhere in the corner of my mind, I knew exactly what she meant. It was like a gnawing sensation, eating away at the wall of denial I tried to hide behind. It reminded me of a silly story our aunt once told us as kids to scare us into washing our hands. She had spun a ridiculous tale about a famine in the animal kingdom. The famine had resigned rats to nibbling on the hands of sleeping children who refused to wash their hands after eating. Olaedo and I had argued that rats didn't eat humans and even if they did, we were bigger and could chase the rats away. But she'd laughed cheerfully and informed us that we would wake up without fingers because apparently the rats knew when the pain was becoming unbearable and could blow a soothing breeze to lull us back to sleep.

Footsteps thudded cautiously behind me, pulling me back to the present, to the day everything I had ever wanted would be rudely snatched from my grasp. Dafe sat beside me and pulled me into a hug. I leaned into the embrace, foolishly taking pleasure in the comfort of his touch. I allowed the soft kisses he placed on my hair as he whispered words of comfort for my grief. But the gnawing continued.

"I know", I croaked.

I hated the way my voice sounded. Too vulnerable, too needy. Like I was hoping he would lie so I could forgive him, so I could pretend that none of it was real. He pulled away to look at me with the question in his eyes. His fingers traced an invisible pattern on my shoulder as if he was drawing a magic rune that would infuse calm directly into my soul. I touched a hand to my throat and started.

"I know you slept with my sister."

His hand stilled on my shoulder and the truth accompanying his action hit me like a fifty-tonne boulder. God, this wasn't happening. He'd actually done it. But I knew that already, so why did this little affirmation seem to twist the knife even deeper?

"Urenna..."

"How did it feel?" My voice surged with renewed hurt. "Was it a fulfilled fantasy? Did you take notes to compare all the ways we're different?"

He looked away and dropped his hand from my shoulder. My heart slammed wildly within my chest and the air was suddenly too thin. I needed to scream, to physically hurt something, someone – him, her, both of them. Myself.

My fingers clawed at my chest. It was a fruitless attempt to dislodge the heated lump there that refused to go away no matter how many times I swallowed. I turned to look at him as fresh tears burned a new path down my face.

"Why?" I asked, dropping my voice to barely a whisper.

The silence that followed was loud but not unexpected. I hadn't meant for him to answer, not really. It was just the one thing that rang clear in the jumbled mess my mind had become since reading Olaedo's letter. Why did he do this? Why did she? Why was she defending him? Why tell me at all? Why did I still want him to put his arms around me?

"I...I'm sorry".

His voice pierced through the haze in my mind and my eyes refocused on him. He looked distressed, tormented and something else that had become a permanent fixture on his face in the last few months. I'd struggled to identify it and when I asked, he'd called it stress. Now, I cringed at how stupid I must've been to not know. It was etched deep into his face as wrinkles would be. Guilt.

It was such a foreign emotion that didn't sit quite right with his features. It made his face into that of a stranger that was not exactly alien, like a faceless person from a long-lost dream. My chest constricted at the thought, and the pain of his betrayal made it difficult to breathe.

Dafe was *my* person; he'd always been, right from the moment we met. We had that inexplicable connection that made it feel like we'd been lovers in a previous life. When he called my name, my toes curled inwards, and something twirled deliciously in my belly. It was a such a bizarre thing, seeing as so many people spoke my name frequently. Yet only he affected me so. However, it wasn't just because of this that he was mine. It was in the way we were intimately in sync in a completely non-sexual way. I'd met him the year Olaedo moved to Ahoada and it had felt like breathing crisp clean air after drowning for so long. In hindsight, I wondered if I hadn't just swapped one relationship for another. Maybe I'd fallen in love too quickly.

"Did you plan this with her?" I asked, as my brain drifted back to Olaedo's letter.

"What? No! It...just happened."

He seemed mortified by the suggestion in my question, but it wasn't enough. I needed to know.

"Was it because I couldn't..."

I struggled to say the words, but my hands clutched my stomach in an unconscious move, and he noticed.

"No." he said forcefully.

I felt stupid for how my heart lurched at his determination to erase any doubt that his infidelity was the result of my infertility. I screamed at my brain for noticing how his hands seemed to want reach for me. I resented that I saw how his jaw tightened as if he was using what little self-control he had left to keep his hands in place. I couldn't speak – not yet – for fear that I would forgive too quickly, so I gave him a small nod. But it pushed him over the edge, and he took my hand in his.

"Urenna, please. I love you."

Once again, I heard the strain in his voice. I heard all the things he didn't say but packed instead into those three words. It was too much and too soon. So, I pulled my hand away and focused on the sleeping bundle in front of us.

"Just go."

He paused for a while before he finally stood. I heard retreating footsteps. Then silence.

I watched her breathe.

The rise and fall of her tiny chest was oddly comforting. The movement seemed to coax me into remembering something I'd forgotten. A dance or a tune that started and ended the same way. One that said things would be back to how they were once the music was over. The tears had stopped but the lump in my chest burned hotter, searing a path into my throat. I tried to focus on the rhythm of her breathing, on her little snores, on the smell of her – anything to distract from the pain that threatened to kill me from the inside. But as I shifted my gaze to her face, I realized something that I would've also concluded if I had seen my own reflection instead. Perhaps one day life might return to some semblance of normalcy, but for now, the music had only begun.