

Title: The Offering
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The dreaded discrete variable test came on a Wednesday and Roli performed terribly. Distraught, she searched for comfort and invited Kennedy over. His presence was always a perfect distraction from all the inadequacies in her life.

She and Kennedy had sprung into place in one another's lives after a mistake under the sway of watered down vodka. It happened in his friend's car in the senate building carpark. Even though they had barely spoken before that night, their bodies moved as one.

Both of them shuddered, the car's fevered motions slowing to gentle creaks. They stole glances at each other, surprised, thrilled, and eager to do it again.

So they did.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Always in secret too. Because it wouldn't do for the rest of their class to know. They ran in different circles and the idea of explaining their relationship to their friends was less than savoury. And for that reason, they never got around to defining what they had.

The amorphous nature of their interactions had a certain convenience they were scared of losing. Whenever they met, they skirted topics which would lay them bare. Their unwillingness to explore any vulnerabilities made them choose to dwell on the carnal; sensations that heightened their shared experience, things they liked, and the numerous lecturers they didn't.

On that Wednesday, Roli didn't invite Kennedy over for conversation. She wanted to cuddle, watch a movie, and then fall asleep with his arm around her. He texted back immediately, asking when he could show up.

"9," she shot back. "Call when you get here. The landlady is around."

Before 9, Roli readied the room. The unofficial nature of their dalliance never stood in the way of her presenting the best image to him. She sorted the book shelf, arranged the packets of popcorn on the bed, and spritzed his favoured perfume around the room.

By 9:11 p.m. she had showered, her legs swinging over the edge of her bedframe when he called. She headed out, looking for signs of the landlady.

The woman's windows were all dark, indicating, Roli hoped, an early retirement. Though she was always careful bringing Kennedy in, the woman had caught her twice. On both occasions she eventually came to make enquiries about the person she saw, to warn Roli against men, and to threaten to call her mum.

None of this fazed Roli though.

She retrieved Kennedy from where he stood in the shadows of the ixora plant bordering their neighbour's wall. They exchanged impersonal heys, then he extricated himself from his spot against the wall and followed her in.

They took silent steps through the lit corridor.

They entered the room. Roli clicked the lock.

Kennedy looked around the room like it was a new space, hands deep in his pockets, posture casual. 'How was your test?'

Roli grunted. 'Can we talk about other things?'

'You looked like it wasn't "it". That's why I'm asking.'

'Please, don't ask.' Roli walked to the bed, adjusted her laptop, then sat next to it.

He remained close to the door, watching her. 'What movie do you want to watch?'

'We can figure something out. Isn't that what we always do?'

Kennedy sidled over, as though reluctant. He flopped down next to her, and the bed's joints squealed in protest. He moved his legs around her waist and pulled her against his chest. With every movement he made, the bed let out whines of indignation.

'This your bed so,' he said with a sigh, 'are you sure it won't--?'

'Collapse?' Roli shook with laughter. 'It won't. It's old, but it's pretty strong.'

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Roli was born premature and the only living offspring of her tormented mother, Aduke. Her would-have-been siblings flowed out of Aduke in bloody rivulets. One made it to full-term and died in her arms in the hospital. By the time she pushed Roli out with vicious screeches,

she had paltry hope of her survival. She stared at the babe, pink and diminutive, and thought her head would crush under the weight of the world's woes.

Roli's grandmother gave her parents the bed as a gift. Though Roli should've been too infant to recall the visit, she occasionally recollected glimpses of the old woman looming over her, dark lipped, hot of breath, and wrinkly fingered. The wood of the bed was from an ancient tree in Ugbolokposo. And she had blessed it with protective powers, to keep Roli from harm. Aduke, desperate for anything to keep her daughter safe, accepted it.

When Roli got into UNILAG, her mum insisted she take it with her. And though Roli no longer used it the way she had when she was younger, she went with it.

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They settled for a random thriller on Netflix. Roli turned off the room's overhead lights and switched on the fairy lights lining the walls. They snuggled together under her duvet as the air conditioning chilled the room. The movie played and they commented on its slowness in gentle whispers. Their comments morphed quickly into wetter sounds. Roli shut the laptop and placed it aside.

The bed let out its usual protests as they began a steady rhythm. It almost sounded like it wanted to collapse. But that hadn't stopped them before. Until it went down, they would keep at it.

A stray thought passed through Roli's mind. "What if mummy can see this?" She had some variant of the thought every time Kennedy was around. "What if the bed's murmurs are its way of sending messages to her?" But Aduke had never mentioned Kennedy before. And even if somehow the bed sent messages, there were other messages it could've sent. About the things she had chucked beneath it. And the things the bed had given her in return.

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Roli discovered the bed could grant wishes in JSS 3. It happened when she stole Amarachi's hair tie as payback for speaking to Dolapo in 3B. She saw them through the library window, Amarachi's lips lifted in a seductive smile, caressing Dolapo's arm. Roli plucked the hair tie from Amarachi's desk when no one was looking, and back home, flung it under her bed in a fury. The rest of the evening, she huffed and puffed about how much of a traitor Amarachi was; knowing how much she liked Dolapo and yet, proceeding to touch him anyway.

Amarachi's interactions with Dolapo didn't end. So, Roli didn't stop stealing either. She took her handkerchiefs and snatched the tissue paper Amarachi used for toilet runs and wiping surfaces. On the day Roli saw them holding hands and heading towards the toilet during a free period, she stole Amarachi's maths homework note.

Eventually, Dolapo and Amarachi's brief stint ended. At that time, Dolapo set his sights on Roli, swinging by her classroom and asking for her instead. Pacified by his sudden affections, Roli decided to return the things she stole. But there was nothing beneath the bed. Scared it might have been her mum, she went to her. Aduke had no recollection of going into her room or near her bed. And there was nobody else in the house who could've taken the things.

Roli didn't think too much about it, and decided her mum was the culprit and couldn't remember. Besides, she and Dolapo were closer now. That was infinitely more important. They talked about the movies and TV shows they watched while holding hands in the library and labs.

Dolapo's interests couldn't be captured for long. As Kike in 3C swished her hips while striding down the corridor one day, Roli noticed Dolapo's eyes going with her. She was hurt but not surprised when he stopped talking to her. So she stole Kike's things too. First as petty revenge. Then subsequently, when she noticed the objects disappearing, as an offering to whatever gods lay beneath.

Before sleeping, she would pray to these unknown gods. For Dolapo and the hips Kike swayed to get him.

Her hips grew wider.

And Dolapo pinned her to the wall behind the toilets in the middle of their junior NECO.

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'Really though,' Kennedy says, one arm slung over her belly, the other supporting his head, 'how was the test?'

'No nau. Please, no.'

'Was it that bad?' His gaze in the dim glow of the fairy lights was piercing. 'I can help you before exams.'

'Where?'

He shrugged. 'Here. In class. Anywhere you want.'

'What about everyone else? They'll think it's curious.'

He let out a near exasperated sigh. 'Maybe that doesn't matter. You can ask your friends to join us. So it looks less weird, you know?'

Dimly, she recalled Amarachi and Dolapo and her mouth turned sour. “What if Kennedy leaves me for one of them?” She stared at his face, lifting a hand to touch the sparse hairs lining his chin. Then she tamped down the thoughts. Her grades took precedence.

‘Maybe we can work something out.’

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. Her chest ached.

‘I need to pee.’ She slipped out of his loose embrace and the warmth of the duvet and went to the toilet, picking up her t-shirt from the floor on her way. She shrugged into it and turned on the room and bathroom light.

Her urine tinkled in the bowl, and she thought, “If he goes after them, I’ll just steal their pads.”

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In SS1, Roli took Kesiena’s physics textbook as another offering. Earlier, before their test, she asked Kesiena to explain latent heat and the girl turned her down, claiming she didn’t understand it. When the test results returned, Kesiena had a perfect score. Roli’s angry thought process was: if Kesiena didn’t need to “understand” to pass, perhaps she didn’t need her textbook after all. She hurled it under her bed and prayed for Kesiena’s intelligence in physics.

Time crawled by, exams approached. Physics still beat Roli up and Kesiena looked to be having a ball.

While in the toilet one day, she saw Kesiena drop her pad in the waste basket. Roli’s head spun and bile rose to her throat as she devised a new—albeit disgusting—plan. Kesiena had wrapped the pad in layers of tissue paper and a black polythene bag, but when Roli took it, she could feel the warmth radiating from it. She tucked it in the band of her tights, returned to class and slipped it into her bag.

She tailed Kesiena the rest of her menstrual period to steal two more pads, heavy and warm. And she gave them all as offerings to the bed.

She had perfect scores in physics in the following exams.

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Kennedy was on his knees, looking under the bed when she got out of the bathroom.

‘What are you doing?’

He looked at her, startled. ‘What?’

All the thoughts of pads had made her remember the time her mum found the pads under her bed.

She hadn’t stopped with Kesiena, naturally. She took pads from Bianca and Bisi too. Bianca, because she had, for three terms, remained in the first position, and wouldn’t let anyone hear the last of it. And Bisi, because she saw her tits in the toilet once while Bisi was changing to her sportswear and—against her better judgement—had felt jealousy so severe, she was unable to stop herself from grabbing her pad when she saw an opening.

Expecting the transaction to operate as it always had, Roli never checked to ensure the pads were gone. While she was at school one day, Aduke wandered into the room, and troubled by the rancid smell she perceived, investigated until she found the pads tied in black polythene bags beneath the bed.

At least, she only thought the pads belonged to Roli. She scolded her for days because the bed was sacred, meant to keep her safe, and couldn’t harbour such uncleanness.

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‘Nothing,’ Roli said. ‘It’s just... What’s going on?’

He stretched a hand under the bed, in continued search of something. ‘Some popcorn rolled under the bed while I was gathering the packs. I was—’ He gave her a funny look.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘What’s under your bed, Roli?’

Her heart froze. ‘What is wrong?’

‘I’m stuck!’

Roli rushed to his side. ‘Stuck how?’

As if for emphasis, Kennedy tried to jerk his arm from beneath the bed and couldn’t. ‘What is this?’ His voice wobbled.

Roli lowered to the floor and looked under the bed, looking where he was looking. At nothing.

Beneath the bed, there was a void, a blank. Blackness. Nothing. Her fingers trembled as she turned on her phone torch. The darkness swallowed the light.

“What?”

‘Calm down,’ Roli said, her voice anything but calm. She loathed the way her words slipped out, like she had no control of them.

‘Calm down? Calm what down? Can you see what I’m seeing?’

She was trying to think. And he was still talking about how he had always hated the bed and the sounds it made. ‘It couldn’t just stop at sounds. Now hell is under it too?’

‘Hell has fire,’ she said.

‘Fuck you, Roli. Pull me out of here.’

She had considered putting her hand into the black space and holding his own to drag it out, but she feared getting stuck too. She grabbed his waist as best as she could and tugged. He wasn’t budging. Sweat beaded on her forehead and she could feel it slick about his waist.

But the space had other ideas. It began to tug too. Roli could feel him sliding in and he could feel it too. He struggled and he called Roli names as he went. She was a witch and her bed was her weapon of destruction.

Sliding sliding. In went his head.

Sliding sliding. In went his torso.

Sliding sliding. In went his legs and then his big black feet.

Nothing.

‘Jesus.’ Roli stood in sweaty defeat. The fear, which had sat in the distance in her mind, now descended and she couldn’t move. Her heart twisted. No way!

She tried to go under the bed, to go where he had gone. But the space underneath was back to normal; no longer a thick gloom. She could see the wall on the other end and the white skirting bordering it.

No.

No!

She got back to her feet and kicked the frame, over and over and over. She wasn’t aware she was shouting until she heard the knock at her door.

The landlady stood behind it, wearing a long-suffering expression. ‘You this girl. I will tell your mummy to take you away. Why are you shouting at this hour?’ She noticed the wetness on her face, and reached out a hand to touch her cheek. ‘Ah. You’re crying? What happened nau?’

‘My test,’ Roli supplied. ‘My grades are—’

‘Oya—’ the woman patted her shoulder ‘—go to sleep, eh. All that energy for shout, use it to read when you wake up, okay?’

Roli nodded, wiped her face, and allowed the woman to pat her again. Then she locked the door.

She lay on the bed in the cold darkness, thinking of Kennedy. He didn’t deserve this. Maybe she did, but he didn’t. She prayed to the unknown gods for his return with her eyes tightly shut and hands clasped. For once, she wanted something for someone else. The bed needed to see this as an act of selflessness and answer her. “It doesn’t matter if he avoids me and goes after someone else. Just bring him back safe.”

The prayers still on her lips, she drifted off.

Roli’s alarm rang by 8 a.m., pulling her into a hazy consciousness. She groaned and looked at the date on her phone screen. Thursday. Her class was by 9 a.m. She stretched her aching limbs and struggled to her feet, heading to the bathroom.

Close to the door, she paused. “Why am I so tall?” She stretched out a hand, wondering why the ceiling seemed lower.

“This hand.” She stared hard at it, bringing it to her face. The fingers. The length of them and their dark complexion. The hand looked familiar, but it wasn’t hers.

Heart beginning a dreadful rhythm, she entered the bathroom and gazed at Kennedy’s face in the mirror. She considered weeping, but when she thought that now, she would probably have his intellect too and never have to write another dreadful test, she began to laugh instead.