

Nigeria has a particular smell. It's the smell of hustle, of greasy akara being sold on the roadside, the smell of bodies with their different odors mingling, packed inside danfo buses like sardines.

This smell, to me, is familiar; it's the smell of home.

When I boarded my flight to leave Nigeria four years ago, one of the passengers on the plane, a white lady, said to her companion, "Take in your last breath of African air." I remember thinking that it was a silly statement to make, after all, we all breathe the same air. Now standing here outside Nnamdi Azikiwe airport, I know I was wrong then. Nigerian air is definitely different. I've been here for ten minutes, waiting for Dele to pick me up, and more than six people have already tried to sell kilishi to me.

"Madam!" I hear from beside me. I turn with the assumption that I am the madam in question, to find a man I don't recognize, probably in his early 40's by the way he looks, standing beside me. "Na you be Miss Tolu?" he asks in pidgin.

"Yes I am, and you are?"

I'm confused because I don't think I've ever come across this man before, yet he knows who I am.

"You say?" he asks with confusion written all over his face.

"Na me. Wetin you find?" My pidgin could use a lot of work.

"Na Oga send me, him show me your pissure, him say make I pick you from airport," he explains. "Oga Dele, na me dey drive am," he clarifies after a beat has gone by without a response from me.

Dele hasn't seen me in four months but he sends his driver to pick me up from the airport. Isn't that just wonderful?

I stand in place so I can take in what's going on. The plan for today was to meet up with Dele and just spend time with him before I head to my brother's place, where I would be staying before I settle down in Abuja. Now that Dele has altered my plans I wonder if I should just head to my brother's house. Dele knows I hate when my plans are messed up and he still pulls this.

"Madam, let me carry your box," Dele's driver, who is yet to introduce himself, says while reaching for my box. He doesn't wait for my approval. This is probably his way of letting me know I'm wasting his time and that we should get going.

During the ride to my brother Tunde's place, I call him to let him know that my plans have changed and that I'll be heading to his place instead. So here I am in Tunde's house thinking about how the main reason I came back to Nigeria was for a man who couldn't even spare a few hours to come and pick me up from the airport.

This is the first time I've admitted to myself that Dele is the main reason I came back. When asked by friends and family why I wanted to come back, I always gave some vague reason about how it would be more beneficial for the current career path I'm on. They disagreed, a valid

reaction considering I traveled in the first place to get a degree in software engineering and pursue a career in tech in the US. I had to convince myself that Nigeria has a lot of potential to grow so I wouldn't feel bad about returning. If I told them I moved back to be with a man they would never approve of because of our age gap.

It doesn't matter to me that Dele is 37. I'm 22, and I believe that's grown enough to make rational decisions. Also, it's Dele who understands me, Dele who I can talk to about anything and everything, Dele who knows who I am inside out, Dele who I'm currently angry at.

I remember that the first day I met Dele, I was at a birthday dinner for one of my friends at a restaurant. He was sitting at the table across from us, and was with two other people, he told me afterward that it was a business meeting.

I noticed during the dinner that he kept glancing in my direction and when I smiled at him, he smiled back.

As he got up to leave, I remember thinking, "Wow, he's tall."

When he walked past our table with his companions to the exit, he paused beside me, said "hi" and dropped a piece of paper, accompanied by five hundred dollar bills beside my plate before walking out.

I remember being too stunned to speak and all my friends giving me teasing looks. I mean guys have flirted with me before but this was a man who came to fancy restaurants to have business meetings and had 500 dollars to spare.

When I was finally able to put myself together enough to look at the paper he dropped, I saw that it was his number with the message "call me, let's have dinner tomorrow" and he signed it '-D'.

I called him that night and we had dinner plans the next day. I can't remember the topic of our conversation but I know that it had to be something spectacular because we talked for hours. After that dinner, we made plans for the next weekend and we spoke every day before then. When that weekend came, he told me he was going back to Nigeria the coming week as he was just here for business. He told me that he had never met anyone like me and he wanted to keep what we had, that we could make a long-distance relationship work, and I took him at his word.

That was 2 years ago, I was in my second year at University.

I fell in love with this man the second time we met and I'm still as in love with him today.

I thought it was the same for him.

It may seem dramatic for me to overthink how he didn't personally pick me up from the airport. However, Dele had been distant with me for weeks. I think it started when I first told him I would be moving back to Nigeria; he must have asked me if I was sure about a hundred times.

I chalked it up to him wanting what was best for me, but then he started replying to my texts less frequently and told me that his work had just gotten really busy and he was trying to balance everything out.

I told myself everything would be fine and that once we finally see each other all my worries would fade away, but how is that supposed to happen when at his first opportunity to see me after four months he bails? I'm trying to stay positive and tell myself it's all in my head but he hasn't even called or messaged me to apologize.

I wake up to the sound of a notification, It's the one I set for Dele, it's a text from him suggesting that we meet up over the weekend. I leave him on read so he knows I'm still angry. I'll wait a few hours then let him know I'll be available— of course, I will, for him I always am.

It's Saturday, and I get up with a renewed sense of purpose because I'm seeing Dele today. We cleared everything up on Thursday. He explained how he was set to leave work on Wednesday to pick me up but they had an impromptu meeting with one of their biggest clients and he had to be there because of the position he holds in the company. Of course, as the understanding girlfriend I am, I forgave him.

I'm so excited for tonight, I finally get to tell him all that I have planned for us. I had our whole future mapped out the week I met him.

You know how on the night before you finally 'japa', you sleep next to your luggage and passport so it doesn't mysteriously disappear while you're dreaming of greener pastures? Well, my excitement was beyond that because I didn't even get a wink of sleep but still lay next to the outfit I planned for tonight. It was the same one I wore at the restaurant where we met. I'm very hopeful about tonight because it might be the night when he asks me to spend the rest of our lives together.

Tonight is going to be amazing.

"He stood me up." These four words play in a continuous loop in my mind because I'm so stunned that every other coherent thought escapes me.

I've been looking forward to tonight since Wednesday evening and he didn't even think I at least deserved to get a heads-up via text.

The waiter comes around for the third time to ask if I'm ready to order now, you can tell he's ready for me to leave and let someone who's ready to order come in.

This is the point where I lose it, I start laughing, and not that cute laugh I do when I'm flirting. I'm full-on sounding like the hyenas in Lion King, I'm hysterical. Over a man.

I never thought I'd see the day. I have become the woman who I shake my head at and say "could never be me".

Well jokes on me because it could be me and it very much is me right now.

When I get back to Tunde's place, I call Zainab, my only friend here in Nigeria who knows about Dele, to tell her what happened because I need someone to help me figure this out. I want to avoid justifying Dele's inexcusable behavior.

"I don't know why you put so much faith in this man, Tolu," Zainab says when I tell her what happened from Wednesday till now.

"Zai, leave that one and just tell me what to do." She must hear the desperation in my voice because hers softens when she asks, "oya where does he live?"

"Tolu" she prompts because I hesitate to respond.

"I don't know," I reply after some thought. I think about it because I should know where my own boyfriend lives, right?

"You don't know?" She asks surprised, as she should be. I'm shocked as well. "Ok then, call him and ask".

"Zainab, I'm not speaking to someone who had me waiting at a restaurant for 3 hours" It takes everything in me to hold back my tears.

"Tolu, I know you're hurt, but you want to find out why, right? Surprise him at his house, I'm sure he's been so busy he just forgot. I know that's no excuse but from everything you've told me about your relationship, it seems like he cares about you a lot."

She said 'cares about' not 'loves'.

"Thanks, Zai, I'll sleep on it and call you back tomorrow"

What's the point in enlisting the help of someone who doesn't even have enough faith in my relationship to help me save it?

I try to think of what I should do and my mind keeps circling back to Zainab's idea to go to his house. The fact that I don't know his address isn't that big of an issue. I know his first, middle, and last name, finding his house won't be a problem.

It's now 9 pm and I've successfully found his address. I should probably wait until tomorrow to do anything, but I fear if I sit with this plan I'll just end up talking myself out of it and I'm too confused and angry right now to think properly.

It's 9:45 pm now and I sit in Tunde's car and think about how to approach this. Getting into his estate wasn't hard at all, the guards at the gate just asked me where I was headed and if they were expecting me. I probably should have come here with a more elaborate plan than to surprise him at his house. Speaking of his house, it's exactly what I expected from him, ostentatious.

Sitting around in this car isn't helping anyone, I'm here already. I might as well do something.

I get out of my car and start walking toward his door. When I'm at his doorstep, I ring the doorbell before I have the time to think about it.

I stare at the welcome mat as I wait for him to open the door.

"Hello, how can I help you?" a confused female voice asks as the door opens.

I look up to see a beautiful woman. She looks to be in her early 30's and a curious child who looks about 6 years old peers at me from behind her legs.

My first thought is "wrong house" but contrary to my recent behavior, I'm not stupid.

I look at the ring on her finger and I know, this is his wife.

I'm a mistress.

Me, Toluwalashé Alabi, a sidechick?

I want to cry, in front of this beautiful woman who is married to the man I love, in front of the child of the man I love.

She's still waiting for me to let her know why I'm at her house at such an hour and in this moment I decide to tell her the truth.

"I'm looking for Dele" I'm looking directly into her eyes.

She glances at her son.

"Junior, go and stay with daddy" He can sense the seriousness in his mother's tone, so he leaves without hesitation.

She steps forward from behind the door frame, causing me to step back as she shuts the door behind her.

"So it's you" She folds her arms.

“How old are you?”, she asks out of genuine curiosity.

“22” I answer automatically.

“You're even younger than the last one”

Did she say the last one?

This would mean I'm not just his mistress, but one of many other mistresses.

I don't know what she sees on my face that makes her come to the conclusion she arrives at.

“You didn't know”, her delivery communicates genuine concern.

“Of course I didn't know, how could I?” My mouth is moving faster than my brain again.

If I had known that he was married and had a history of cheating on his wife, I wouldn't have let myself get close to him in the first place.

I've never felt like this much of a fool in the entirety of my life.

“He won't leave me for you,” she says with conviction.

All the anger I have been feeling towards Dele immediately transforms into pity for this beautiful woman standing in front of me.

The calmness with which she handles this tells me that this isn't the first time she's dealing with a situation like this one, and that is extremely sad.

“I don't want him.” I grab her hand “You're too good for him, leave him”

With that piece of advice, I drop her hand and walk to my car before she has a chance to reply.

The scales have finally fallen from my eyes. I now realize how much I don't know about Dele and how I don't think I know anyone in his life.

I pick up my phone and send him a text that says: *We're through, you don't deserve her.* Then I block his number.

That should convey to him that I know he's married and I want nothing at all to do with him.

I think about his wife and the fact that she has to go through this and is still fighting for her marriage.

I try to understand her but I can't.

A lot of people might say she's foolish for staying, but I think she's brave for choosing to be hurt again and again with the hope that the hurt will stop someday.

This was a man that I thought I was in love with, a man that I upended my life for.
Tonight I cry, I cry for the love I lost, for the future I thought I wanted, and for the time I wasted.

Tomorrow I'll move on, I will get up and get on with my life.

But just for tonight I'll mourn for a love I thought was worth everything.

I guess when love isn't real, it's bound to fail.