***Obi m* – My Heart**

'Hello, Hi Oma, I am in your city', Ifeatu's voice announces gruffly over the phone, jolting me from my idle evening nap.

'Wait, what? What do you mean you are in my city?' I stutter, jumping out of bed and parting my curtains to peep outside, as though I expected him to be outside my window. December 23rd 2022. It is just 6 p.m., but it is pitch-black outside, the middle of winter.

'Oma, I am in Brussels. I am at the Central Station. I underestimated how cold it would be. I am freezing. What's that your postcode again?' He grunts. Ifeatu's voice always sounds like the low growl of a bear. When I didn't know him better, I thought this growl to be exaggerated to make up for his slimmer frame. Same reason I imagined he kept an unnaturally lush beard; to exude a manliness that his lean, almost schoolboy frame, did not instinctively afford him.

'Ifeatu! You are in Brussels?' I spill out each word with disbelief.
'It is not good for man to be alone...'
'And so…?'
'And so, I came to spend Christmas with you. Send your postcode!'

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I met Ifeatu in 2015, I was twenty-one. He was seventeen. He was seated at the dining table of his parent's house with a Chemistry teacher whose voice was an octave too loud because Mrs. Nwachukwu, Ifeatu's mother, was laying out bowls of piping hot food whose aroma wafted through the house. Ifeatu's elder brother, Obinna and I sat in the sitting room, whispering our conversation to avoid disturbing the lessons.

'Good afternoon, Ma' I genuflected as Mrs. Nwachukwu turned around and set eyes on me. 'Finally, I meet the famous Nneoma! Obinna's Nneoma' she said crossing the room in quick strides and wrapping her arms around me in a hug which seemed to envelope me, despite being at least one feet shorter than I was. She rocked me back and forth in that hug, separating from me to peer closely at my face before wrapping me again in a hug. Her face, like her hug, was warm, open, and safe.

'You know, when Obinna told me you were in Nigeria, I told him I had to meet you this time. Congratulations on your LL.M. First class! *Nwa oma.* Your parents must be proud!' I smiled my response and nodded my thanks. I was overwhelmed because it occurred to me in that moment that Obinna and I did not have the same intentions for why I was sat across his mother in the sitting room.

'Obinna's Nneoma?! Obinna is soft launching me to his mother.' My mind screamed, as I tried to calm myself.

'You know if not for the very hopeless situation of the educational system in this country, Obinna too should have finished last year. From one ASUU strike to another, now he is only in his fourth year of the course, despite being six years at that school! ASUU, *ndi ara.*' She hissed; sadness scrawled across her face. This reaction was not uncommon to see whenever just about anything is discussed about Nigeria. ASUU, the Academic Staff Union of Universities was no exception.

'It is a shame. Aren't the ASUU strikes in the interest of the students?' I say with sympathy which I could not feel because my heart was beating too loudly for me to think of anything else.

'A shame indeed!' Mrs. Nwachukwu emphasized, looking at me with joyous marvel, as one does watching a baby take her first steps. She is infatuated with me, or rather, with the picture Obinna had painted of me. 'My dear, ASUU is not in the interest of anybody! The lecturers teach for five months and go on strike for seven months. Tell me, how is it in the interest of these children? The Union leaders negotiate with the government, line their pockets, and send the children back to school, back to the same system, the same failed infrastructure! Nothing changes my dear child! Nothing!' Her eyes hold mine with fiery intensity which I imagine is deadly for anyone who dares oppose her.

'Hmmm…' I mutter, shifting the meet the gaze of Ifeatu and his lesson teacher, to get a break from the intensity of the situation. I did not mean for my success to be a source of agitation for another, so I mutter a quick 'It is a pity' in addition, to register my support.

'It is o, *nne*. It is! You see, this is why we tell Ifeatu to take this A-level lessons seriously! He is studying for SATs too. None of these children will go through this epileptic educational system again. None! Unfortunately, Obi m had to suffer through it. But hopefully, after his undergraduate, it is straight to the UK. You both can be in the same country', she said with a conspiratorial wink.

'Mummy, stop please!' Obinna blushed with embarrassment. I blushed too, but for different reasons than Obinna, or *Obi m* - my heart, as his mother called him. I wondered if her other kids whose names, even when personalized, did not quite have as passionate a meaning, felt a bit jealous of Obinna's claim to their mother's heart.

'No problem, let me not talk before you say my mouth is smelling. But Ifeatu…' she continues, turning to Ifeatu, who seemed to have abandoned his lesson and was staring into the sitting room, 'Nneoma is like your big sister. Beg Obinna to connect you with her. Ask her questions, she is a lawyer, let her help

you review your college essays before you submit, even your visa documents o. Use the resources God has given you. *Anaghi agwa ochi nti na agha esugo* – you need not tell a deaf man that war has broken out', she drew her right ear in admonition.

Ifeatu nodded his agreement with exaggerated reverence.

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'What? What the hell…you are here? I am so confused right now' I stammer, clutching my imaginary pearls in shock, over the fact that Ifeatu was indeed in Brussels, and at my door. He had called me out of the blue in September 2021 to 'reconnect', and by December, we had fallen into a comfortable routine of speaking every day; morning and night, in between errands and work meetings. Many days, I was wrecked with guilt at the giddiness I felt over his texts, or nervousness I felt when he broke out of a pattern and did not call at the expected time.

It was strange to be in that space with Ifeatu, given that after my ordeal with Obinna, the Nwachukwus fled from me like I was a deadly plague. I understood the need for the distance. Obinna had loved me in a way which was quite literally impossible for me to reciprocate from the day he saw me. My parents were dropping off my younger brother, Nnamdi, and me back to boarding house after a long holiday. Making our way from Ikoyi, it was easier to drop off Nnamdi first at King's College in Victoria Island, before making our way to Yaba to drop me off at Queen's College Lagos. I sat in the car crying my eyes out, as I did every time I was shipped off to boarding house.

Obinna stood outside the car, his right hand tossed protectively over Nnamdi's right shoulder. He was Nnamdi's school father. Now and again, he peered through the glass to look at me and when my eyes met his, he quickly dropped his gaze. The next holiday, he convinced Nnamdi to let him speak to me on our shared mobile phone, and we quickly became inseparable. Obinna and I spent all day exchanging text messages because we could not afford to be on calls. We spent all night awake because MTN's free midnight calls afforded us that luxury. Even Nnamdi was a touch jealous of this relationship; he had never really viewed me as an object of beauty, till Obinna, and a clan of King's College senior secondary school boys started to drool over 'his sister in QC'.

He soon started to enjoy the attention because it often got him privileges as long as he promised to slip their phone numbers to me. But really, it was always Obinna and I whose bond remained. In my penultimate year in secondary school, when I was diagnosed of malaria, typhoid, and pneumonia; the Nigerian boarding house trifecta, I spent most of the school year admitted at Clinix Hospital. It was Obinna who spent many nights on the phone with me, working me through tests and assignments that were brought to the hospital so that I did not have to repeat the school year. By this time, he was 1 year

out of secondary school and was writing JAMB a second time to secure admission into University of Lagos.

The first time Obinna told me he loved me was my first year of university, 2011. He let it slip out right before he ended one of our routine night calls. I called him back immediately and he refused to pick my calls the rest of the night. I spent the whole night restless; Obinna loves me! I slept in fits and woke up to a long text message from Obinna confessing that he had loved me from the first day he saw me – something about my tear glazed eyes and how they bounced light off the car window. He talked about the shape of my lips and how he wanted so badly to kiss me, every single time he saw me. I read the message in haste; afraid I would throw my phone out of the window in agitation. I had never had anyone confess their feelings to me so thoroughly.

When Obinna summoned the courage to call me later that night, we spoke about everything else but his declaration of love. When I finally brought it up, I lied to him that I loved him too with all my heart, and I could not imagine my life without him. I lied to him that the distance between Nigeria and the United Kingdom made dating a chore, and physical presence was important to me. Everything I said was not necessarily a lie, I loved that I held his attention and affection so completely and consummately. I loved that he spent the next few years telling me he loved me every chance he got, showering me with gifts of books, perfumes, dresses and even a painting of us. He wrote lavishly about how he felt about me everywhere; his Blackberry, Facebook, even Twitter. He flooded his timeline with pictures we took every summer on dates he carefully planned out every time I returned home for the holidays.

My heart wished with all my might to turn on a switch and love him the same way. 'I can't imagine him kissing me' I told my best friend, Jadesola, when she finally wore me down with questions on what was really going on between Obinna and me. She guffawed maniacally and refused to compose herself despite my pleas. 'What the fuck are you on about, you sanctimonious bitch?' Jadesola swore and cursed recklessly as part of her 'dedicated and persistent fuck you to society' (her words, not mine). I steadied myself because I knew what I was about to say would secure another wild fit of exaggerated responses from her.

'Jadesola, Obinna is great. Very smart. Loves me intensely…' Jadesola rolled her eyes and her index fingers, willing me to get to the point she did not already know. '…but when he talks, balls of saliva gather at the corners of his lips and stay there, foaming as he talks. I just can't get past it. I don't see myself kissing him, I can barely share a piece of food with him. It makes it tough to be physically attracted to him, even though we are deeply emotionally connected', I finally let myself admit the truth, stunning Jadesola into silence. I expected Jadesola's trademark wild laughter and cursing hurled at me for my childishness in refusing such great love, but Jadesola was silent. 'Well, if you can't kiss him, you

can't fuck him. What good is that?' she shrugged, finally breaking her silence, with understanding in her eyes for me, but also pity in her eyes for Obinna.

Jadesola's words popped the bubble in which Obinna and I had been trapped since I was fourteen. At twenty-two, I finally entered my first relationship while in the Nigerian Law School. At the time, I knew from intelligence from Ada, Obinna's sister, that he was about to ask me out again, since we were finally in the same country – distance was no longer a barrier. *How could I say no? After all these years? What would be my excuse?* I stayed up losing sleep. I had neither the wisdom, maturity nor decency to speak straight to Obinna, so he found out about my first relationship through Facebook; 'Nneoma Uwadiegwu is in a relationship with Dayo Dare Jr.'.

Obinna's numerous calls and frantic messages begging to talk went unanswered for months. Eventually he scored through Facebook and Twitter, deleting all the pictures and posts he had made about me. Ada, who was, at that point, a close friend and shared with me every few days about some new frustration about life in London, disappeared from my life. Even Mrs. Nwachukwu who was already in the habit of sending me morning and evening Whatsapp prayers ceased. I deserved it, I knew I deserved it. I had broken her heart - her *Obi m.*

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'I still can't believe you are here. When did you leave New York?' I ask, attempting to calculate how Ifeatu could be standing in front of me even though I had spoken to him a few hours ago when I woke up. He always called to wake me up with 'Good morning, Oma*'.* He liked that the shorted version of my name translated to 'beautiful' in English, which charmed me unreservedly.

'I can believe it, because I have imagined this too many times the past few years', Ifeatu counters, stepping into the warmth of my apartment.

He peels off his coat and hangs it by the door. 'It is really warm in here' he says, his eyes twinkling when he turns around to meet mine, still staring at him in disbelief. 'I better take this sweater off', he announces while the sweater was already halfway over his head. His white undershirt lifts in the process, and I stare lustfully at the perfect leanness of his body. It has been ages since I had seen a man shirtless outside of Netflix.

'What's wrong?' he asks, catching my transfixed stare. 'Ummm… I am not sure, you know, about the appropriateness of this….' I respond, stammering my words. 'Appropriateness?' he echoes, laughing mirthlessly, before he fills the space between us, grabbing me to him. I wedge my right hand between our bodies in weak resistance. 'I think we are way past propriety Oma' he winked, before lifting me,

gently placing me on the dining table, which doubled as my workspace, trailing my ears to my neck in gentle deliberate kisses.

'Ifeatu…. what of Obinna?' I interrupt feebly, the electric reaction of my body to his kisses betraying me.

He lifts his face from between my breasts and stares at my worry frozen face. He kisses my creased forehead as his answer, before adding 'Oma, I have spent most of the year thinking about this moment. I spent my eight hours on the flight here, including my two-hour layover in London, thinking about this….' He plants a kiss at the tip of my nose. 'I cannot think about this and think about Obinna at the same time' he pleads, kissing me delicately, starting with my bottom lip, like I am a delicately wrapped gift he is afraid to fully unravel.

I unravel anyway, tilting my head back to hold back tears as his lips find my collar bones. I am ashamed to admit that my concern for Obinna is selfish; I want Ifeatu to assure me that Obinna and his family are handled because I want this thing between us to last forever. I want to be certain that this fire would not be extinguished because I had allowed myself to be loved so deeply in the first place by the wrong brother.

Ada Montserrat Okeke