

To You, With Love.

When I received that phone call two fortnights ago, I knew I would come home to you.

I had curry stew bubbling on my gas cooker yesterday night, so I can quickly warm it up this morning, and dart into traffic by 6 a.m to get to you.

I know Mummy will try to coax me into sleeping over. Rest small and go back tomorrow morning, she will say. Do you remember, Izu? That night when the sky was a perfect black dome, and the air carried the heady, sweet scent of the rose flowers clustered on a nearby bush, that night when I made my third wish?

I did not pack even a single thong. I need today to be that day. The one day when we're ours alone.

- Will you believe me, I wonder, if I tell you I did not really know when I fell helplessly for you?

Could it be that day at my house in Awka? My sister, Jemimah and I were excitedly throwing stuff into our suitcases. Christmas that year was going to be at the village. Another holiday that usually began with yam porridge, or thick vegetable soup at *Mma's* parlour, with pieces of beef and stockfish to be discovered at each dip of a ball of *fufu*. And those moments of lethargy, those moments when we are allowed to be truly lazy, idling away by the stream, traipsing up and down the breadth of the small town while being called *Nwadiana*.

I saw you first in a picture. I had to peer from behind Oge to do so. It earned me a vicious ear twist from him.

"Ahh!" I leapt away and covered my ear, as if to quell the searing pain.

"*Isi aki*," he taunted me. Coconut head. "Come again and put your head. I'll do even worse."

I guess my scream was that piercing, because it brought Mummy into the room in a flash.

"O gini?" She looked askance at Oge when no one replied.

"Just reminding Adaora to mind her business." My brother was casually slipping the picture into his old English textbook. It was a picture of you standing awkwardly next to Oge. You looked like you were unsure of whether to smile or frown. So I imagined reaching into the photo to give your lips a tug. When I asked Oge about you, he answered me with a scowl big enough to wither a virgin forest. But later that day, I heard Mummy talking to Daddy about you. About how you were my cousin, but not really my cousin.

It could be the day we finally arrived at *Mma's* place. You made a funny sight scurrying to the backyard with a squawking chicken, a knife clenched in your other fist. *Mma* was at your heels, blaming you for keeping *ndi Nwadiana* hungry after such a long trip. Afterwards you came over to lift our bags out of the car trunk, and carry them to our own place, a duplex yet to be painted, adjacent the bungalow where you stayed with my grandmother. I wondered then if I could tug your lips into a sunny smile. If only it took that little.

I sit tight in my car, in one of the traffic jams Lagos is known for, flipping through radio channels, fiddling with my phone, twiddling my thumbs, desperate in my search for what to do. My car is one among many packed on the road, unable to move.

A hawker comes to my window, practically shoving a tray of boiled groundnuts in my face.

"*Wan wan fifty*, two hundred," I hear her say enthusiastically. I wonder why though. Has she taken a look at this woman who appears obviously well-fed, in her posh silver Mazda CX-8, with her pricey pin-straight wig, and concluded that she can't possibly lack a spare two hundred naira note?

I let out a sigh, and shift through my possessions in my handbag for the nearest note I can find. Will I feel better, Izu, if I indulge in the delicacy you enjoyed the most?

The cars before me inch forward, and the traffic suddenly clears. I'm sorry, dear groundnut seller, but I must continue.

You will probably call me silly if I tell you this. Nevertheless, the best day of my life was the day you returned my love letter.

I was soaking clothes in a basin big enough to carry me when it happened. You found me at the stream that afternoon alone. You told me you weren't sure of what to say to me.

"What do you mean?" I wrung my hands, and wiped them severally on my grey skirt. I ambled towards you and stopped only when you were a breath away. There was a huge pimple on your forehead. My hands itched to press it open.

"I...um..." You suddenly started to stammer. I also noticed you struggled to keep your frown intact.

"Listen," you finally found your voice. "Oge won't like this."

"So?" Even I was amazed at my own audacity. I took the letter from you. It was neatly folded into a square that reminded me of the love note Zak passed Bisola during chemistry class, and how she gushed non-stop to me about it.

"I thought most boys don't like their friends... dating their sisters. You don't want to get into trouble, do you?"

Sure, I would be skewered meat if my parents found out. If. After all, they never knew about my first boyfriend, Sopulu, even after we broke up last month. I did not give it much thought since then.

"Are you worried about me?" You were. You glanced away as if to mask the truth.

"Or you don't want me?" You hesitated. You need not say anything though. I saw my answer unfold in your eyes before you said the words.

Later, you would tell me I was the bravest sixteen-year-old you had ever met, and I would say to you in turn, that you are at your cutest when you stutter. I meant it then, even as you, in a shaky voice denounced me in front of my father.

It was Christmas day. Even the harmattan wind was in high spirits. We did not need reminding, but Mummy made sure to point out to us about our cardigans and slathering extra Vaseline on our hands and legs before heading to church.

If there was one thing I looked forward to every Christmas day, it was the sumptuous turkey that would wink at me from atop a glorious, king-sized bed of jollof rice, the type that eyes tasted even before the mouth does. Mummy would say a lady should not eat too much so she'll stay in shape, and Oge would inform me that no man wants a fat wife. But that day, I did not have just turkey. I also had you.

"What is this one smiling about?" Jemimah chirped at me. She still had on her 'Christmas' dress, a lovely peach number that flared from her waist, its hem brushing her knees at each flounce.

"Nothing." I busied myself with measuring out rice into a bowl. "This your gown is fine o. Go and remove it abeg. *E don do.*"

Trust Jemimah to sashay aimlessly about for two straight hours with the sole intention of showing off her outfit. I had to admit, the dress indeed enhanced her flattering physique. My sister at fourteen possessed an enviable figure, with legs up to her ears, hence her dream to walk runways someday.

"Talk na. You know you can tell me anything." She even lowered her voice conspiratorially. The nerve of this girl. "You can confide in me." I knew better than taking her words for it.

"Mummy! Do you have anything for Jemimah?" I called out. "It's like she has nothing to do and she's disturbing me."

The tactic worked almost immediately. The result I desired rang out in form of Mummy's voice. "Oya Jemimah, come and wash this tomatoes! And will you remove that dress this instant!"

She looked at me with round, disbelieving eyes like I've betrayed her.

I said nothing.

"What's that?" You took my elbow and raised my hand slightly to see the book. It was a Mills and Boon novel with its title page ripped off.

"Do you read novels?" I turned to you. We sat huddled together in the empty poultry stall you spent your evening cleaning up. You told me "our fine-feathered friends are making their entrance tomorrow."

"Of course." I wished I could see what expression you had on your face. It was a starless night, and for some evident reason I did not leave my flashlight on. "Does that sound surprising?"

"It isn't something I've seen any boy do. It's mostly a girl thing."

You went silent for a while. "Sometimes novels are better than friends."

My heart ached at those words. You perhaps did not want to bother me, but I knew about the battles you fought alone. The loneliness that weighed in your chest like a ton of bricks. I knew how grateful you were that Oge was your friend. I pondered on the kind of life you must have led before you came to the village to stay. So I told you. I told you about your mother, my

aunt. I revealed all I knew about your parents. I told you about your birth mother, the other woman your father fancied. I did not tell you how much your sadness wrenched me inside. I told you instead you could lean on me. I loved you so much I would gladly be your strength. The night I kissed you first was the last we would ever be together.

A shaft of light fell on us. I made out the silhouette of a child. There were many of them that came around that evening for a candy or two.

And that was the end of it all.

"*Nnoo, nwa m.* Welcome." Mummy is the first person I see. Her arms unexpectedly enclose me, and I momentarily stiffen before I settle into her embrace. It feels alien because it's been years. I realize now I miss her hugs as much as I miss you. Her eyes are filled with an emotion I refuse to acknowledge as pity.

"You look well." I say to her. "*I dizi ka agbogho.*" There goes my feeble attempt at a joke. She shows off that dimpled smile I've always been jealous of. I am back to the same place I spent eighteen years running away from. The compound is more expansive than I remember. The grounds are interlocked too. New ixora bushes line the edge of the fence. The tops are trimmed so flat they look like leafy tables. Our duplex sits, brand new in the midst of everything.

There are plastic chairs in an array under some canopy tents. People in matching Ankara outfits are milling around. They are staring at me in vague recognition. We regard each other in an awkward silence, as what next to say completely eludes us. I miss too, the way conversations used to flow so naturally between us. The past years we only spoke out of duty, because it felt like an appropriate thing to do.

"Oge *kwanu*? What of Daddy and Jemimah?"

"Oge should be around somewhere with your father." She looks left and right like she's really searching for them. "Oh, and Jemimah won't make it today unfortunately. She might come by tomorrow."

"Okay na." I wave at Mummy. I wander off in search of you.

They will ask me if I still love you. They will laugh at me when I say yes. They will tell me a man who could not stand up for me does not deserve my love. But you were barely a man.

How did you feel, Izu, when our kinsmen spat at me, and called what we had an abomination? I try not to blame them. It was no fault of theirs. The elders who could see lying down, what we can't even if we ascended to heaven, did not know the truth about your birth.

What went through your mind that day, when Dozie called me an ashawo, a prostitute. He told me, in the presence of many, not to act like a saint. If I could do it with a cousin, then I definitely should do it with him. When I retreated to the backyard to quietly lick my wounds. You thought you hid yourself properly, but I knew you were watching. Were you ashamed for me? Were you annoyed on my behalf? Were you silent when they said daughters only bring home shame?

Mummy viewed me in a whole new light. I could not reach for Daddy over the huge chasm that separated us. I was supposed to be innocent. I was supposed to be their demure daughter. Did they resent me because you were 'family'? Were they disappointed because they had been

wrong about me? I did not know. I did not ask. We became nothing but strangers bound by blood.

How did you feel when you sent those emails, despite knowing I wouldn't read them?

I see you finally. A sea of faces stir as I approach. I notice the glares they shoot my way like flaming arrows. I pay no heed.

You can apologize now, or maybe, you can't.

I touch the cold box that selfishly holds you in, away from the rest of the world.

For the first time since I heard of your death, I feel the wetness roll down my face.

For what might have been, for what could have been, I cry.