

JUST LIKE LAZARUS

“5,4,3,2,1,” I muttered under my breath, cradling the pocket knife in my hands. The vintage scribbling offered some warmth for my cold hands. Splashes of red painted the floor of our room.

“5,4,3,2,1,” I muttered again. Some old-fashioned incantation, some avowed promise to calm my raging nerves.

“5,4,3...”

The door yanked open. My boyfriend was staring at me, the horror in his eyes clear as day.

“You’re back from work early,” I said, smiling. That was weird. He never came home early.

I saw him step in with that disgusting smudge smile on his face. I stared at him closely. I didn’t want to miss the moment...

“Jesus!” Dele screamed, his laptop bag flying to a corner of the room. He bent and started shaking the cold body that lay at my feet. He was trying to wake the dead woman up, but that exactly was my point. Dead people do not come back to life. They die and they stay dead. The tales of Lazarus and the old widow’s son should be to the ears of their listeners as the tales of dinosaurs and unicorns. You see drawings, you hear stories, but because we believe only with our eyes, we take them as mere folktales and fantasies.

Dele began speaking over the corpse. Hot tongues. His eyes shut close in deep religious frenzy, sweat now dripping from his forehead.

“Just like you raised Lazarus, dear Lord. Just like you raised Lazarus,” he echoed amidst incomprehensible groanings of prayer. He wasn’t praying with the same confidence I had watched him pray every Sunday morning at the pulpit. He was sure, confident, proud, but now? He shook like a headless chicken fighting between life and death. With every bead of sweat that fell from his once handsome face, Dele trembled more. “Lord, please. You’ve done it before. You can do it again.”

If not for the blood on my hands and the tragedy that I had made happen, I would have burst into laughter. I would have laughed and laughed. I suddenly felt like Elijah when the prophets of Baal prayed to their gods. I remembered the first time she heard that story. I had nodded in approval of the supremacy of His power, but now I wondered. Did everyone think the prophets of Baal were so stupid that they would pray to a god that had never come through for them before? That they would beat their chests in the hot scorching sun and vow that their gods would come through if

they hadn't witnessed some form of power? Did everyone really think that the prophets of Baal were foolish?

I ignored Dele's cries of "What have you done? What have you done, Sola?" as I stood from where I had knelt with the cold body of Dele's mother. I had to go wash my hands. I was done here. He paid no attention to me. He just kept on crying and shaking like a helpless baby.

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"- isn't that what his favourite book said? It was a pity really. She was an okay woman. She came over every other weekend and we kind of got along. She shared scriptures with me, her brown eyes beaming with glee when I asked her for more. I may not have liked the disapproval in his mother's eyes when she found out that her spiritual son was living with a woman he had yet to marry, but I liked her food. She made the best Egusi soup, the kind that surprisingly didn't make me purge. She was nice. Pity, really.

The air buzzed with stillness as my legs dragged me to the bathroom, the trail of blood following quietly behind me. Did Dele's mother think she was Abel? Did she think her blood would cry to him for revenge? Why had everyone else failed to see that the man above was now in his retirement? He was done with humans, and if it wasn't because he didn't want to be cancelled, he would show humans that the flood in Noah's time was not a mere folktale.

At the sink in the bathroom, the knife fell from my bloodied hands into the sink as I moved the tap open. I watched as the water started the process of turning blood into nothing. I tried to avoid looking in the mirror. Fear held my head down as I wondered who I would see staring back at me. It would be my first time meeting an actual murderer. I was scared. I was shy. But I was curious. What would my eyes look like? Would my smile still reach the corner of my lips? Would the sparkle in my eyes still be there or would it all just be empty? Would the new me terrify me or would she open her arms in embrace, welcoming an old friend? Would she judge me or would she be proud of me?

It's funny, isn't it? How easily it is to wash your hands of guilt and in my case, murder. The water and the blood in the sink did a little dance until there was no more red in the sink. I picked up the knife and hid it in my wrapper. When I was sure I had cleaned the tap of every red, I raised my head up slightly, like you would do in the presence of a crush who made you blush. My eyes were lifted, inspecting every inch of this person before me. Nothing had changed. My eyes didn't carry that murderous look I had seen in movies. My face didn't look empty and there was definitely still sparkle. I smiled again and made my way to comfort my grieving boyfriend.

He seemed to have processed what had happened. His thunderous prayers had quieted and all that was left was the haunting calm that came after such a violent tear storm. I saw him sniffing, wiping his snot with the white shirt I bought for him on his birthday.

"Dirty boy," I said. Playfully. I made a mental note to wash the shirt.

He watched me draw close to him and I could swear that he shivered. He sniffed and shivered, the weakling. I cradled his sweaty head in my palms and breathed calming words of reassurance to him. "It's fine. It's fine," I said amidst pats on his head.

"Is my mum really dead, Sola?" Sometimes, I could swear that this man was plain foolish. Did he not watch me when I went to wash off his mother's blood from my hands? Is the corpse not still in the room with us? How foolish could he be?

"It's fine, Dele. It's fine. Are you hungry?" I asked him, more out of habit than love or devotion.

"But I, I told you," he began in Yoruba. He switched to Yoruba when his learned English words failed to express the depth of his emotions.

"Sola, I told you. I told you your mother did not die. She was going to come back to life. You didn't have to do this." He said switching the languages in one breath. I really did break him, huh?

"Dele, you said she wasn't dead, right? You said you would wake her up, didn't you? You stopped me from going to her burial because I should "let the dead bury their dead," I said making air quotes. "You said she was going to wake up. That if Lazarus could wake up, so would she? Or don't you remember?" I asked leaving the fake calmness behind, summoning the fiery storm within me. I had carefully hidden that spark, that fire of madness deep within me for 3 years. 3 years since my mum passed and this failure of a man echoed reassuring words of nothingness that my mother was coming back to life. 3 years since he made me cut off everyone I called family, everyone I called friend, because they were unbelievers and would only lead me astray.

I laughed, a bitter sound massaging the ears of all who would hear.

"Dele, you haven't forgotten, have you? How you made Olaitan my enemy because she tried to show me the truth- that you were nothing but a stinking old religious carcass, an empty drum, a fucking narcissist! You don't remember? I'll remind you.

"You told me my sisters were all witches, that they killed my mother and were coming for me. You told me that I would never become anything if I stayed with them and to run in and live with you. Dele, it's been 3 years. Look what you have turned me into. See what I have become, my love. A murderer. A fucking psychopath.

"But that's not the point. Seeing is believing. Or isn't that what your Bible says? Oya, raise your mother back to life!" I said, spun around and took my place on one of the sofas.

He was still sniffing. As I watched him all snot and tears, it dawned on me. I hated this man. I hated him for everything he stood for. I hated him for every lie he told me, everything he did to

me, everything he made me do. My hands ran through my 2-month cornrows, rough atop my head and in every corner. They had tried to warn me, to let me know that this man would succeed in driving me clinically insane. I laughed again.

“Dele, raise your mother na. Is your god sleeping? Maybe he took a nap? No? Oya wake her. I’ll wait for you.”

He stood from where he had crouched, wiping the tears off his face. There was a familiar look in his eyes. I knew that look. He rushed towards me and let his palm come crashing down on my face. I smiled. He was back.

This was the man I knew, the man my friends warned me about, the violently insane man. I let him get a few blows out of his system, not because I was weak like he assumed, but because I needed the evidence.

Narcissists were as predictable as clockwork. Beg, cry, sniff, snivel, and when you ignore their passionate cries of repentance, they take off the mask and revert to their violence. Looking back, I realized that the signs were always there. Right from the first time we had that argument, and he had cried, promising heaven and earth, only for his voice to change mysteriously from timid to threatening, from pious to proud and arrogant. He had told me that I would not leave him, had asked me where I would go, and who would listen to me. I had believed him, had chastised myself for being foolish in my anger and had taken to the kitchen to cook his favourite pounded yam and egusi meal. All was well after that. Until it wasn’t.

Now, Dele threw punch after punch, he slapped my face, punched my stomach, slapped and punched over and over and over again. When I was sure that the bastard had given me the physical evidence I needed, I retrieved my vintage knife from where I hid it in my wrapper and stabbed him.

“5!

“4!” I screamed, my hand’s movement punctuated by my counting.

“3!

“2!

“1!” I screamed and pushed him off me.

“Go to hell, you bastard!”

I dragged my feet to the bathroom, the air buzzing with that stillness and the trail of blood following quietly behind me. If there really was a god, now would be the best time to strike me

down. I waited in the bathroom for something mystical to happen- for the bathroom mirror to crack, or for a strange handwriting to appear on the walls. I waited. Nothing.

“Showtime,” I whispered, smiling. I dragged my feet back to the living room, reached for my phone with my bloodied hands and called the emergency number.

“Help!” I recited as rehearsed.

“Help! My boyfriend! His mother. Dead! Help!” I said amidst my perfectly cued tears. I recited my address to the respondents on the other end and got off the call.

Contrary to popular belief, I was an amazing actress. I waited for the sirens, the engine sound from the police cars outside and went to the floor as soon as I heard them. The tears came of their own, and I mourned the life I had, the one I wished for, and prayed to my dead mother that my plans would all come to fruition.

Something about the police station reminded me of the secondary school I attended in Osogbo. The poorly painted blue walls, the paint cracking off in more areas than were painted, the smell of sweat and cemented floors- everything took me back to Osogbo.

I explained to the detectives the same thing I had written in my statement. I had rehearsed it over and over again in front of my bathroom mirror.

“My boyfriend was a psychopath. He was abusive and violent, he hit me whenever he was in a bad mood. With Dele, this was every night. His hands became his weapon. He did with me whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. I learnt to avoid him when his anger was anywhere close. But today happened with no warning. He had told me to prepare some food for his mother who would be joining us later in the day. But I was having cramps and couldn’t get up from the bed. His mother came and he called me into the living room to bring her food.

“I quietly explained that I hadn’t been able to do it and was on my way to the kitchen when he attacked me. He hit me all over. He must have not been satisfied with his hands and he ran to the kitchen, picked a knife and came for me. His mother pleaded with him to stop, and when she saw the knife in his hands, and the murderous look in his eyes, she ran up to stop him. He must not have been expecting her to try to cover me because his hand and the knife came down on his mother. He killed her.” I broke into tears at this point. I needed to be dramatic. I needed their sympathy. They consoled me and urged me to go on.

“He saw what he had done and began crying. Then as soon as he started, he stopped. Dele came for me. I knew what was coming. I picked up the knife he killed his mother with and held it up in self-defence. He mocked me, slapped me, and told me all his troubles were my fault and I

deserved to die. His hands wrapped around my neck. He was strangling me. That's when I stabbed him. I was defending myself." I finished, breaking into another round of tears.

They let me go.