

I.

“You have done it again.”

Nneoma doesn't respond. Inside the kitchen sink, a ceramic cup dregged with clumps of milk sits on a plate of bread crumbs, catching the rays of sunlight fanned in from the curtains. Her heart drops. She looks at her handbag on the table, down to her neatly ironed black dress, and back at Jide, her boyfriend of two years, whose face wears an impenetrable mask.

Even when angry, he is a dark-skinned, buzz-cut beauty. Like one of those bini sculptures that were pillaged by the colonialists and now sit in European museums as decorative soldiers, incapable of expressing emotion. For a brief moment, she considers pushing herself onto his chest and wrapping her arms around him in a bid to bury the entire ordeal with love. But the last time she tried it, he shoved her away so brusquely she almost fell. This time around, she is afraid that he might slap—*no*, he would not even consider it. *Mba*. The voice in her head laughs stupidly. What is wrong with you?

*What is wrong with us?*

“Every time, Nneoma,” Jide grits out, and she is drawn out of her reverie by the hoarse flatness of his voice. Something about the scene reminds her of a rubber band worn thin, about to snap.

“Must I remind you, at your big age, to wash your dirty plates?”

Someone outside coughs out phlegm and toothpaste, followed by the rush of water. A quick glance is cast at the clock and back at Jide. The time is 10:49 am. Classes begin by 11:00. It would take less than five minutes to clean off, and hopefully, she will be able to drop her bag at the library first before going to class.

The only problem with this arrangement is the young man at the kitchen sink, radiating with heat. Be as it may, Nneoma realises that standing in silence would not get anything done, and so she inhales like an Olympic swimmer ready to take the plunge.

“I forgot—”

The rubber band snaps.

Jide looks at her with an incisive glare that cuts through any further attempts to explain herself.

“You. . . what?” He bites out, shaking his head furiously.

It is the opening they had both been waiting for, albeit with less enthusiasm from her end. She surrenders, allows him to box her in and target the weak spots. Fly like a butterfly sting like a bee. One should not find the humour in these things, and yet her lips quirk ever so slightly as the patterns she'd grown accustomed to play out themselves in vinyl fashion. How there is always one innocent word that triggers a feeling, and then a memory, and then more memories; unwinding themselves from the centre out.

And like that, the issue of the plate becomes one of her character, then her clumsy judgement, then Anthony in year five, who Jide is convinced beyond reasonable doubt has been flirting with her. She listens to the inflection behind his accusations, swallows the dichotomy between speech and meaning like travelling gypsies swallow knives whole. And when the party is over, and Jide is exhausted of words, she supplies a crumpled “I’m so sorry, babes. I’ll tidy up now” in exchange for his trouble.

It falls at his feet, unregarded. Jide hisses, jaw working in dissatisfaction. He is hungry for a fight, she knows. Needs his trigger to be pulled, craves the blood spray.

“Dirty pig,” he spits out after a few moments of charged silence. If she hears it, she pretends not to. Drops her phone on the counter and moves to the sink instead.

Outside the window, a man is calling a woman to wash clothes for him, someone else is putting on a generator, and Wizkid’s “Joro” is blasting obnoxiously from a car’s speakers. It is a typical Akokan morning, one Nneoma distracts herself with. Call it wrong, but her ability to stuff her head with anything but whatever was bothering her at the moment was a blessing in disguise. After all, it had made studying relatively easy during the past few months when the state of their relationship had begun to deteriorate.

When Nneoma is done, she rinses her hands. The wet plates clink as she sets one on top of the other to dry. She should have seen it coming, for when she turns around, their eyes meet.

“Nneoma, I’m sorry.”

There it is. A remote part of Nneoma’s mind wonders why it has come early, this apology. Usually, it would have taken an hour or so for Jide to return to his senses. His vivid flashes of anger followed by avid repentance had brought a new meaning to the phrase: post “nut” clarity.

“Babe — “

The apology is left to sour as she rummages through her bag, searching for her land law textbook; hands shaking, lips quivering, brain willing her hands to stop — everything, to stop. Damn it. She pauses in her steps, and her eyes well up with tears. Damn. *It.*

2.

Six months ago, Jide stopped attending lectures. He said that law was no longer his calling and he was better suited for business. While he had always been quite the entrepreneur, the decision was still a surprising one to those who knew that he had maintained a comfortable 2.1 from his first year and was well capable of earning a law degree.

That is, until after year three’s second semester exam results came out.

Nneoma still remembers that afternoon; pushing past the frenzy of students flocking around the notice board and finding Jide outside the faculty with his hands in his pockets, looking lost for words. They avoided each other’s faces when she volunteered to buy him food at Shop Ten. A meal that was shared in silence. But she knew him like the back of her hands, so when he turned silently and buried his tears into the crook of her neck later that night, sobs bubbling from within, she understood perfectly.

He had carried over two main courses and one elective, which demoralised him to the core. But inasmuch as the grading system was brutal, Nneoma felt he would have done better had he spent less time on Crypto and more time on Criminal law. These reservations were kept to herself, however, because Jide needed her unconditional support, especially after his father stopped picking up his calls.

But that was months ago, and Jide was now doing excellently well for himself, to such an extent that he could live comfortably and pick up his bills without help from his family. This fortunate turn of events had boosted his confidence, and Nneoma loved seeing him revel under the attention of people who met him for advice and pitches, attracted by the coins in his wallet and the ease of his life. Money really made him shine.

Deep down, however, she knew that all was not well. Conversations between them were heavily pockmarked with underlying friction. Jide loved to talk about how tough and unrealistic the Nigerian educational system was. And although this was true, some of the things he said made her feel like it was a coping mechanism for him — his way of convincing himself that he had made a good decision by quitting his degree. His favourite line was boasting about how some lawyers were earning 30k a month

while he made 5000 dollars “just by sitting in his living room.” And while Nneoma found it insulting, as it was her profession of choice these digs were thrown at, she chose not to think about it too much.

It was quite easy. She loved Jide and he was very good to her. After all, he had begged her to move in with him after her former landlady chose to move mad and kicked her out of the hostel because of a dream she had. Jide was a pleasant host. He cooked food for her whenever he was in a good mood and listened to her ramble about her wicked lecturers, funny classmates and judicial decisions that made no sense, with a fond smile on his face, even when she could sometimes discern a gleam of poorly concealed emotion in his eyes.

Of course, their relationship was not a walk in the park. Nneoma abhorred Jide’s spending habits, his inconsistent nature and shady friends. But nobody was perfect, so who was she to judge? Besides, they were good together. Real good. And steady. They had plans to marry in four years, and she had never had cause to doubt his faithfulness. Her friends called them relationship goals and commented, “god when o” and “I will leave social media for you people” on their Instagram posts. Even her mother called Jide “our husband” despite her mild tribalistic tendencies. Everything was perfect.

Until it wasn’t.

3.

Maybe the telltale signs had always been there, and she never saw them. Because abuse as she knew it was always cast behind a dramatic stage light; the substance of spoken word poetry, and misogynistic twitter posts that made her rant in righteous anger. It was never a gradual sawing off of everything that once felt safe and pure and lovely. As hard as she could think, it was impossible to deduce at what precise moment their relationship had become a dormant bomb mine, anticipating the weight of a foot.

But here she was, months after it all started, shaking in her boyfriend’s kitchen and willing her tear ducts to cooperate so the moment would be over and she would leave for school and stuff her head with cases.

“I’m very sorry, my love.” Jide pleads, willing his voice to portray all the conviction in his head. “I know, Nne. I know, that sometimes I get irritable and say shit I don’t mean at all. Please, forgive me.”

Nneoma smells him before she feels his hands wrap themselves around her, pulling her in from behind. The scent of axe and misery envelops her senses, and the dam breaks.

It's one of those moments that are left soundless in movies. How her mouth expands into a howl, and her chest quivers, and he pulls her head onto his chest, feeling utterly helpless; their bodies fitting into each other like puzzle pieces. On any other day, this right here, being in his arms, was probably what Nneoma loved the most about being with him. How snug she always felt around him; that favourite sweater type of love.

"It is because we were made specifically for each other." Jide had told her once while kissing her blushing face. She was shocked at how confidently he had said it, so she laughed it off like every shy lover would.

"I'm serious," he had said, staring at her with so much conviction. "You are my custom-made, designer three-piece suit, this guy. I love you."

If her wit were working, she would have reminded him that custom-made suits could fit others perfectly too. But it was just too much, their love. It made her laugh more, at which he unleashed a tickle fest on her sides. A playful, "Alaye, what is so funny?" kissed into the corner of her mouth as they fell into each other on the bed, melting into a kiss.

But now that memory is useless, like the words of comfort he tries to envelop her with.

"It was just a plate," she heaves out.

"I know."

"I wash your plates all the time, Jide. It is one of those things people who live together do for each other." Her voice breaks. "Why did you have to make it such a big deal?"

"I know, I know." Jide placates, cupping her wet face tenderly. "I just got... angry, you know? And I made the terrible mistake of taking it out on you. I'm so sorry my love, please try to understand. What with business right now, and everything — "

Nneoma struggles to control her breath. She looks at the love of her life and sees his face crumple like a squeezed piece of paper.

"Babe, I lost three million naira from that deal, and am not coping well right now."

His hand tightens around her waist.

“Please be patient with me. . .”

He lays his head on her shoulders.

“I love you.”

Jide breaks down in tears, and it is her turn to hold him in her arms like he is the most precious thing in the world. They stay that way for five minutes; Nneoma rubbing his back with one hand and thumbing the single gold chain on his neck with the other. Classes would have begun by now, all the seats would be filled up. But she cannot bring herself to care.

“It is fine,” she exhales, after what feels like years. Then she repeats it again and again and again until it feels like a prayer.

“Nneoma, please stay with me.”

She looks into his eyes with full concentration. And in that very moment, their future plays out in technicolour. He would shove her into a door on another day, and blame it on work-related frustrations, accuse her of cheating on another occasion when he catches her smiling randomly at her phone, then rant about how she does not respect him anymore because he dropped out of school.

Then one day, he would raise his hands on her, and her bruise would purple, and she would leave, finally, leaving nothing behind. But today. Today she needs a roof above her head, and she loves him terribly. So she stays.