

BURIED SECRETS

I

It's October 15 and I'm standing behind the cold, unforgiving bars of Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison, located at Apapa, Lagos, Nigeria. A prison notoriously known to house the most hardened criminals in the city.

The rooms are a harsh reflection of the struggles we face daily in Kirikiri. It is overpopulated because a large number of us are awaiting trial inmates in the system.

In my 28 years on earth, I have never imagined I'd end up here—in Kirikiri Prison, where I'm caught in a daily battle for survival, constantly being beaten by those in the "apartments", inmates with wealth awaiting fraud trials. These privileged inmates reign like kings, while the rest of us endure a harsh and unforgiving existence.

Life's twists have brought me from the vibrant streets of Ojodu to this grim reality.

As I gaze around the dimly lit cell I'm in, I can't help but notice the filth that clung to every corner. The air is heavy with the scent of despair, mixed with the unmistakable stench of overcrowding. The walls, once painted but now chipped and faded, seem to close in on us. A single flickering bulb dangles from the ceiling, casting shadows that dance across the cramped space. Rows of bunk beds are tightly packed, each one a haven for us inmates seeking some semblance of privacy. But there is none to be found here. Rats scurry in the corners, unbothered by our presence as if they too had accepted this as their home.

My mind can't help but drift back to the days when life was vastly different. I can remember the warm, sunny mornings when I was a young man with boundless dreams, the early days of my marriage to Tiwa when our love was still full of hope, untainted by the darkness that would later consume us.

II

Tiwa and I, our love story started like a scene straight out of a Korean drama, the kind that makes you clutch your heart and sigh while wishing to experience the same. It was when I landed a gig at my uncle Tade's hotel in Bariga, Lagos that I met Tiwa. Fresh out of the University of Lagos, I was aware of the job market in Nigeria and how those who graduated before me were still searching for jobs so I skipped the endless job hunts and went straight to my uncle's door, pleading for an opportunity to work for him.

Uncle Tade, being the kind-hearted man that he is, gave me a shot, and I joined the team the following week.

It was a Monday morning, and as I sauntered down the hotel corridor toward my uncle's office, destiny intervened. There, in the hotel's kitchen, stood two ladies.

The first, tall and blessed with a rich, dark complexion, was gracefully pouring herself a cup of coffee. But it was the other lady's stunning looks that ensnared me; it was in the way she laughed, her eyes brimming with an infectious joy that reached deep into my soul. I couldn't stop staring at her until she opened her eyes and saw me. Our gaze locked then, and time seemed to stand still as we were locked in a silent exchange.

III

A loud bang rips me out of my walk down memory lane. I move closer to investigate the source of the noise, I peer through the cold, unyielding bars of the cell, and my heart skips a beat as Tiwa appears with her eyes filled with unshed tears. At first, she approaches me, but then she halts to tip the man watching us, the weight of her words hanging heavy in the air as she moves closer.

"I just left the lawyer's office," she says, her voice turning ice-cold as she continues, "It's done, Bayo. The judge's verdict will reign supreme and it will be decided next month, Mr. Adebowale said only two things can come out of this, either you're sentenced to life imprisonment or death by hanging.

She looks at me, her gaze a piercing dagger, while her words cut me deep.

I feel heavy and frozen like my feet are trapped underneath, I can't move. It's like a wave of the most intense pain one can ever imagine rolls right over me. My body rolls with it. It starts at my head, and I curl in on myself, all the way to my toes. I groan, and I sob. I can feel the adrenaline rushing and hysteria that bowls through me.

IV

I love that for us," Tiwa says, her arms flipping defiantly, her eyes brimming with unshed tears as she tries to brush them off without success. "I love how meaningless our lives are now. Bravo, Bayo, you've won."

She turns to leave, and my heart aches with desperation, I find myself gasping, "Please, Baby! Don't." I cry out to her but the cell seems to constrict around me like a vice squeezing me in, and all the air seems to get sucked out of the room. It's as if I've been punched in the solar plexus, my diaphragm momentarily paralyzed.

My whole body hurts as she continues to brush tears off, my lungs dry up, and I feel like I'm being cut with a knife as tears roll down my eyes.

V

Her attention flicks back to something in her bag, and my heart becomes heavy. I watch as she retrieves a photograph and points it toward me. It's a picture - a picture of our daughter, the one I had killed with my own hands. The anger and pain I felt that night as I saw my daughter's lifeless body on the floor rushes back. I had meant to take the knife from Tiwatope so she wouldn't harm me with it, I didn't know I would kill my only daughter in the process.

I clutch the photograph in trembling hands, my heart aching with an overwhelming mixture of love and guilt. In this picture, my daughter's smiley face radiates pure joy, captured when Oluwaseuntimofe turned four. Tiwa, my wife, had endured numerous miscarriages before God decided to bless us with Mofe. We had waited anxiously to celebrate her birthday, fearing the loss that had haunted us for so long.

Oluwaseuntimofe, a name that meant so much to me, it's a reminder that "God fulfilled my desire," She was the answer to our prayers, she was a bundle of happiness, and everyone adored her. With cheeks as chubby as Tiwa's and dimples that mirrored her mother's, she was a vision of beauty. My friends teased me constantly claiming that Tiwa's genes dominated, but I knew Mofe was like me. She was extraordinarily bright, walking at nine months and questioning everything by age two.

On days Visitors would arrive, and I'd instruct Mofe, "Go upstairs to your room and watch 'Sofia the First,' sweetie." Her favourite TV show.

Without fail, her response would be, "Why, Daddy?" Even when she eagerly yearned to watch cartoons, she couldn't resist asking why. Her insatiable curiosity, a trait she inherited from me, was endearing. Her hugs, her tiny hands in my hair, and her exuberant shouts of "Daddy!" when I returned from work were the simple joys I cherished.

But those joys are now memories, tainted by the unspeakable truth that haunts me. I killed Oluwaseuntimofe Williams with my own hands. My own daughter, my sole living legacy, the wellspring of my happiness. The one who always brightened my world, my princess, who played tea dates with me, who styled my hair and pretended to be my makeup artist. A sharp, searing pain slice through my chest as memories of that night keep flooding my mind—the night that would forever haunt my soul.

VI

Sighing, I pinch the bridge of my nose between my finger and thumb.

Tiwa hisses as she looks at me bringing me out of my walk down the haunted memory lane.

"You are destined to rot in hell, Bayo, and I will never forgive you. Our daughter will never forgive you, and I'm sure you can't find forgiveness with God either for killing your only daughter and especially for all the pain you've caused me."

Her words hit me hard. I try to gasp for air, but there's none left. Only fire and dread fill my lungs. With those words, I am thrown into a limbo that lacks oxygen and stability. I sink further and deeper into a jungle below, where all I can see are nightmares and the unforgiving brown eyes of our little girl haunting every corner I gaze.

Numbness settles in my chest as I sink down against the cold floor.

In a matter of minutes, the entire life I had known had fallen apart with the pull of one string.

VII

It's over between us, Bayo," Tiwa declares, her voice quivering, the tears she's been fighting back now stream down her cheeks, like a rainstorm, leaving glistening trails on her neck. I'm here today to say goodbye," she continues, her words heavy with sorrow. "I won't be there for the hearing in court and I pray to God that our paths never cross again." Her voice wavers, mirroring the emotional storm within her.

Bayo, you have destroyed my life, "I never truly trusted in love," Tiwa confesses, her eyes brimming with anguish. "My life was spiralling when we met, mirroring the wreckage of my

parent's failed marriage, and then you entered my world. You breathed life into my belief in love, making it tangible, promising me a forever, only to shatter it all in one crushing blow. She sobs.

As she starts to leave again, I say goodbye to her silently, my voice trembling. She exchanges a brief greeting with the warden before resuming her walk out of Kirikiri, her steps purposeful. She doesn't cast a single glance back to look at me.

I remain seated on the floor, a sense of helplessness washing over me like a tidal wave.

VIII

I can't face the truth, the truth is an excruciatingly painful son of a bitch.

Truth stabs and pierces deep into one's heart, crushing it. The sharp pain keeps coming, slow at first but now fast. It's unbearable, Why did I do what I did? Why did I make Tiwa suffer after treating her like a queen?

Why did I decide to yield to the temptation of beating my wife, womanizing, smoking, and drinking, just because I wanted to feel among them, I wanted to roll with the "big boys in Lagos", the club Akintunde told me to join?"

My voice quivers with regret and self-loathing.

I can't help but reflect on the emotional wreckage I've caused—the pain I've mercilessly inflicted on the woman I vowed to protect and love. The tears I've provoked, the trust I've obliterated—all for the misguided pursuit of acceptance among those I thought mattered. God punish "Lagos big boys".

IX

I remember the days when Tiwa used to open up about her past, like that day at Omu Resort during one of our picnic dates. After eating and playing games, she rested her head on my lap, and we started talking.

She whispered, "Bayo, - the saddest times of my life were those days that I'd sit alone in my room, with a heavy heart, listening to my parents fight. I was just 13 when I decided I'd never get married. I used to tell my friends that marriage was cursed because it ruined my mother's life. It shattered my aunt and the scars it left on her still ache today, impossible to heal."

When I was 26, " she had continued, "the pressure to marry was immense. Relatives made snide comments about my age and childlessness. They said a woman needs a crown on her head for a fulfilling life but I was pursuing the vanity of a career, That was my mom's favourite line, You can imagine, a woman who experienced the pain of marriage still believed in it for her daughter.

She had ended the whole talk with " But I'm here with you now, Bayo," her eyes filled with hope. "I'm ready to give love and marriage a chance.

I'd run my fingers through her hair, gazed into her eyes, and made promises to her, I told her "I promise, baby. I promise not to let you down. I'll change your view of marriage, and we'll always be in love. You're my queen, and my heart beats only for you."

X

I carry secrets, too many to even share with Tiwa. Dark moments haunt me, leading me down a path of destruction, I hid them under the guise of late nights, and alcohol-fueled rages that led to the unforgivable night I harmed Tiwa, the woman I vowed to cherish. So many things have happened that I can't tell anyone, secrets I will take to the grave.

I know Tiwa can never forgive me. I have caused her so much pain and I have subjected her to this everlasting agony with the loss of Mofe. The agony and terror etched into her eyes when our precious Timofe died will forever be seared into my soul. It's a haunting look, and it's a weight I will bear until my final breath.

I sigh in despair as the memory of that fateful night plays on an endless loop in the theatre of my mind, a scene of unending torment.

Bayo, what have you done?" was the first thing she said, her voice, trembled with sorrow and disbelief, it echoed through the room that night. She clung to Mofe's lifeless body, tears streaming down her face, pleading for our daughter to wake up, to not leave Mama in this cruel, heartless world. But Mofe would not wake up.

XI

Days turned to weeks, and Tiwa would always retreat into the emptiness of Mofe's room, her sobs a mournful lullaby, She would eventually fall asleep there giving her a temporary escape from the relentless pain.

I, on the other hand, did not shed a single tear that night. My own hand was the instrument of tragedy, the knife that stole my daughter's life was in my hand. No tears fell even as we rushed her to Mokola hospital. The walls of the hospital stared at me with miserable eyes, they must have known.

Tears didn't come when I gazed upon her lifeless form, on the cold tiles, Instead, what consumed me was more than tears – my entire world had crumbled, and my life was snuffed out that very day.

I've been a living dead awaiting execution since then. And death will happen this month or in November. Whatever month it comes, I will welcome it with open arms. It's a fate I prefer over a lifetime of imprisonment in Kirikiri, that will be more torturous than any physical pain because I know my soul is already imprisoned in despair.

"I can feel the weight of my sins crushing my soul, I understood that my journey had led me to this place of eternal darkness, where even the faintest glimmer of hope seems out of reach. I know God can never forgive me, I had done the unthinkable, the death of Mofe being the least of them all.

What led me down this dark path are twisted tales I will never share, secrets I'll forever lock away.

No one will know the truth, not even Tiwa!