

The End

By January 2030, Harmattan came with the worst heat waves Ghana had experienced in the last decade. Sand storms, metallic dryness in the air, and red dust thick enough to fill sandboxes covered the untarred ghettos of Kumasi. Looking down at her dry, or as she was used to saying — “*ashy*” — legs, Uju watched dust heave from the ground with each step and settle on her old, tired, grey loafers.

Today was far from her monotonous drill. For the first time in nine months, light was at the end of this gloomy, lonely tunnel that had become her life. She finally got to the dinghy apartment complex that had been “*home*” for nearly a year and took the rusty spiral staircase leading to the backdoor of her minuscule studio apartment on the second floor.

Son clung tightly to the left side of her shirt, his chubby arm sticking out of the baby carrier on her back. Digging into her distressed purse, she got her keys and unlocked the doors to let them inside.

She switched on the lights and took a melancholic glance around the small space housing a thin mattress, a 3-foot-long kitchen, and a makeshift sitting room topped off with a saggy, brown-tinted POP ceiling. At least the dry season alleviated the damp smell of mildew she had suffered in her first six months of living here.

They were somewhat “lucky” to get this apartment almost immediately after escaping to Ghana last April. *Son* was born on a rainy day in the first week of September — September 5th to be exact — and is now about the same age as her pregnancy had been when they came here. Taking him out of the baby carrier, she set him down in his playpen and smiled at how his face instantly lit up.

“Do you know how thankful I am that you’re such a peaceful, unfussy, sweet baby boy?” She said, lightly squeezing his healthy cheeks. He burst out in a fit of giggles while she walked to the kitchen to prepare his formula and heat some water for an evening bath.

It has been nine months, two weeks, three days, and — she glanced at her worn wristwatch — roughly eight hours since she had seen his father, her hero, and the absolute love of her life — Jubril. Nigeria’s second civil war broke out, and she had to flee the country for the sake of *Son*. Life had been so painful and hard since then that she couldn’t even bear naming their child without him around.

After heating the bottle, she did a drip test on her skin. “All ready, *Son*,” Uju said, walking to pick up her baby and get comfortable on their single flea market sofa to feed him. She continued with her thoughts.

During her first two weeks here, she crashed at a motel and ate roadside meals until she found this spot in an ad. It was the only place they could afford with her cleaner’s salary. White-collar jobs were out of the question. She was a year short of completing the university, and her fabricated papers meant they had to stay under the radar.

However, it seemed like her luck was finally about to change. While cleaning at the office where she works today, she saw the news on TV about the war ending and Nigeria now declared a military state. That meant she could finally go home.

She will return to Nigeria and reunite with her love. *Son* can finally meet his father, her life will get back on track, and she can finally find some form of happiness again. After her first week here, they lost touch. Uju tried her best to find Jubril. She wrote letters, made as many calls as possible from her new number, and sent emails and postcards, but nothing.

She didn’t know what to think, but one thing was clear. She was going to get out of here, and as soon as she got back to Nigeria, she would start her search at the Onitsha Barracks.

The Beginning of The End

Early December two years ago, the herdsmen attacks were becoming more rampant. Communities across Northern Nigeria reported weekly occurrences, racked up death tolls, and citizens began retaliating and protesting. Even Eastern to South-Eastern states were unsafe from invasions, and Anambra was the most heated.

The Igbos did not take this situation lying down. Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) made several camps around Awka, Onitsha, Nnewi, and other communities within the state. They fiercely retaliated, and since Nnamdi Kanu's release and expected disappearance earlier in the year, there had been reinforced passion and anonymous funding in the community, with a consistent flow of ammunition.

On Monday, December 4th, their commanding heads declared a state-wide lockdown that was barely adhered to. IPOB extremists started going into communities, schools, and even places of worship to enforce this law through any means, and Nnamdi Azikiwe University had a particular target on its back.

The Chancellor refused to send students home, claiming they did not answer to non-government bodies. So, the militants affirmed their position through daily raids, deaths, injuries, and even rapes. Staff and students — who could afford to — fled at the first sign of trouble. Those that couldn't were left behind. Each raid was worse than the last, and today was the worst.

The militants bombarded in the thick of the night at 11 p.m. Uju jolted awake once she heard the screams and cries of girls in the room next to hers. Across the room, smoke seeped through the crevices and engulfed the small room.

Uju ran to the door, reaching for the handle, but quickly got burned by the heat. Hissing, she knew her only way out was through the window facing the back of the school. While coughing, she hurriedly stuffed a backpack with any necessary supplies she could scramble.

After that, she walked to the window and looked as far as her eyes could go. There was nothing but vegetation and farms for miles to come. She said a quick prayer and looked below. Thankfully, she was on the first floor, but it would still be a steep jump.

Grabbing onto the widow ledge, she briskly swung herself over so that her feet touched the wall beneath as she bent her knees. She dropped with a loud thud, turned on her flashlight, and ran into the thick, dark bushes.

Gunshots resounded afar, and she trembled at the sounds, struggling to keep her composure. Surrounded by palm trees, shrubs, and thick bushes, she ran for a few minutes until she heard a strong voice.

“Who goes there?” The man yelled. She stopped dead in her tracks, quickly turning off the flashlight. “I say who dey dia?” The man continued as she quietly inched toward what she hoped was the opposite direction.

“Shebi we talk say make una commot school, una no gree. You get coconut head abi? Today, you go see sometin.” The deep, menacing voice continued.

Before he could say another word, Uju fled; heart racing, eyes wet with tears, body vibrating. It was pitch black, and she ran for what felt like years before tripping on a stray branch and falling head-first into the dirt.

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Jubril walked into the Barracks’ clinic two days after the last IPOB raid in Nnamdi Azikiwe University. He found a single survivor passed out on the damp forest floor in the early hours after the catastrophe. Others had been taken hostage or fled, so he was happy when the doctor informed him that she had finally woken up earlier.

He stopped at the foot of the sick bed and found her sleeping. Regardless of this dreadful situation, he couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she was. Her caramel skin shone as the sunlight stroked it; her facial features were dainty, a perfect fit; and her hair, though disheveled, was long, black, and thick. One could easily mistake her for a Fulani.

She stirred awake on cue, and as she rubbed her eyes clear, he took the seat next to her.

“Happy to see you alive and well.” He said in a calm, reassuring tone. “I’m Captain Jubril, head of this army unit. You’re in the Onitsha Barracks; we brought you back here after I found you in the forest near your school.”

“W-w-w-” she said faintly before pointing to the glass of water by her bedside. Jubril took the cup and gently handed it over. She sat up and took several large gulps. “What did you say happened?”

Jubril tried to fill her in as best as he could, and once he finished and she seemed to understand, he asked his questions. “Who can we call for you, Uju?” He asked softly.

“I have no one.” She answered solemnly, looking down into her cup.

“I don’t understand.”

“My parents died when I was little; I’m their only child, and we weren’t exactly well-to-do. I immediately went into the system and grew up at an orphanage in Awka, thankfully one of the best. I got a sponsorship to the University and was in the first semester of my final year when all this chaos started.” Uju explained tearfully.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jubril said genuinely, with the softest eyes Uju’s ever seen. “Do you remember anything?”

It was the first time Uju had the mental capacity to think about that night, and at this point, the tears were in free fall. She wailed, screamed, and shook uncontrollably. Jubril was shocked, pained on her behalf, and didn’t know what to do. So, he just held her for as long as she needed.

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Three weeks passed, and Uju had never felt as close to anyone as she did with Jubril in such a short time. She grew up believing you had to look at all Muslims with ‘one eye,’ especially being Igbo. Yet, he had been nothing but respectful and caring, unlike any man she had ever known.

As the unrest thickened, they had been in the Barracks and getting to know each other on a deeper level. She had also learned Jubril is 27; — five years older than her — from Bauchi, but grew up in Jos and had been in the army for six years. Tonight, like most, they sat on the couch outside, drinking palm wine, watching the stars, and talking.

“My mum forcing me into the military is the best thing she did,” Jubril said after taking another swig. “I wasn’t heading down the best path before that. Growing up in a polygamous home was very unstable; drugs and alcohol helped me escape that.”

“You’re strong for overcoming that,” Uju said, holding his hand.

“Strong?” He chuckled. “You’re the strong one here. After everything you’ve been through, you still came out so beautiful, inside and out.” He continued, turning his head to stare at her softly. “I’m glad I met you.”

Before Uju could think, she pulled him in for a kiss, slipping her tongue into his mouth. Meeting her more than halfway, Jubril lifted and placed her on his thighs. Not long after, he was carrying her indoors. If trees could talk, they would sing songs about their passionate lovemaking that night.

Just like that, the second week of January was ending. The days blended into weeks, and the weeks followed suit. Protests, riots, and attacks spread like wildfire on the outside; Jubril and Uju were lucky to have each other for sanity on the inside.

Too good to be true. That’s what Uju thought about their relationship, so it was no surprise that ill-health came to give her a reality check. She had been struggling for a few days, and Jubril was worried sick.

He returned from duty one evening to find her lying on the couch in the small living area of their quarters.

“Are you okay, baby?” he said, rushing to her side.

“Yeah,” she started, sitting up. “Still dealing with that fever. How was your day?”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” he consoled, sitting beside her. Before he could say another word, Uju curled forward. Gagging and holding her belly, she rushed to the bathroom.

Jubril could hear her hurl in the bathroom, and a wave of anxiety washed over him. Uju had been sick for days, but this was her first time throwing up. Could it be...he rubbed his hands over his mustache in concern.

On her way out, she stopped by the door; Jubril lifted his head to look at her. Nothing needed to be said as they stared at each other. They were both thinking the same thing.

Somewhere In-Between

Uju looked down at her swollen belly before gazing out the car window. She was lucky to be one of those women who weren't so obviously pregnant. Holding Jubril's hand tighter with each bump on the road, she thought about how much had happened these past four months.

They decided to keep the baby. She didn't know whether to blame it on the vulnerability of war or Jubril being so ready and excited to start a family, which made her love him even more. In any case, she was in love and prepared for this next step. Of course, it wasn't what she planned, but it felt right. At least, that was until a few days ago.

Jubril got a letter of redeployment to Maiduguri; they needed more men in the North. He was close to becoming a Major, and this could be his big break. It was too late to do anything about their situation — neither did they want to — and the country was breaking into a full-out war. It was no longer safe for Uju or their child.

Jubril used every connection he had on such short notice to arrange a fake passport, — Uju didn't have one — documents, some money he hoped would suffice for at least six months, and other things she needed for a move to Ghana. The plan was to be there till the unrest was over or he returned from duty.

After driving for a day, they had just passed Lagos and headed for the rendezvous point. Their journey took longer due to the nationwide tension. He had to follow a longer, safer route, and Jubril's position helped in all the checkpoints they passed. Since flights were inactive, he had chartered a private driver to take her straight to Kumasi.

"We're gonna meet him in five minutes," he said, squeezing her hand. "I hate that this is happening, but it's our best bet."

"I know," Uju said, her vision blurry from tears. "I'll never stop thinking about you."

"I hope not because, when you're back, I'll make you my wife and spend the rest of my days protecting you and our son."

"How do you know it's a boy?" she said, laughing and wiping her tears.

"Call it a feeling," Jamal replied, stealing a glance with a coy smile. "I put all contact information on the phone, and I'll wait right here until you call to let me know

you've passed check-in." He continued, finally bringing the car to a stop at the side of the express.

While he got down from the truck and came round to open my door, I looked at the Samsung he had gotten me in my hands. As I alighted, a Nissan pulled up and parked in our front. A round-bellied man with a friendly face got down, greeted us, and took my duffel bag to his car.

"Here's your ride, princess," Jubril said as he pulled me into his arms. "I love you, and I'll be here when you're back. I promise."

I held him tightly and inhaled his scent like oxygen. I didn't want to let go, and I knew he felt the same way.

"I love you," I said, pulling back to plant a deep kiss on his lips. I reluctantly detached and got into the back seat of the other car. Jubril had a quick conversation with the driver and handed him some cash before he got into the car and turned on the engine.

I took a mental picture as we drove away. Jubril and his pearly white smile, mouthing the words '*I love you*' while waving. Waving back, I thought about how handsome he looked in uniform.