

nightfall at the heart of a city

salvy snr

on the night you met, only a few people existed in the world. on a monday in april around that span between oba market entrance & unity bank. you'd always left work around 7 p.m. but tonight was different because the restaurant's manager had called for an impromptu meeting.

& now you were here, perched on a bannister. there was no way you could reach ogbe, your fiancé, to pick you up because your handbag had just been stolen.

then it began to drizzle. a blatant swirl of breeze rinsed your face. you found shelter under that awning where gala vendors always thronged during the day. it was past ten & this side of ring road was where the illumination died. you could still spot a few buses, drivers looking for the last passengers of the day. one of them stopped before you with a soft screech, asked if you were going to estate gate or along. you wanted to explain your predicament, but you recalled past experiences with male strangers, so you shook your head.

another bus stopped shortly after & three young men exited. you could tell they were some of those area boys who sold tickets to drivers. the one with a pink beanie approached & asked if he could join you under the awning. it sounded ridiculous because this was their spot, but you agreed.

“thank you.” he said.

he smelled of weed & that familiar musk that always heralds a man's presence. he observed you, squinted into your face to hunt for an expression.

“you dey shiver.” he remarked. “i for give you my sweater but fine women like you. una too posh, even in the middle of adversity. una go still reject. sorry.”

but what struck you was the word “adversity”. how come? why would an area boy use that? you wanted to ask, but this would encourage conversation. instead, you concealed a chuckle & said thank you.

“why rain go dey beat fine woman like you? e wrong nau. but if you no need my help, notin spoil. just feel at home. *you gat natin to fearr.*”

he sounded like november. that part of the year when you realise things aren’t going as planned but can always be thankful. that absurd comfort. that sound of two rivers in pleasantries.

so you opened up about the tiny bits of your hindrances. how your bag had been stolen, & now you could not reach your fiancé. how you had no idea what to do next & could use any help getting home.

he let you call ogbe with his phone & gave you one thousand naira. he told you his name was james.

when ogbe drove you to work the next morning, you glanced at that spot as the vehicle sidled by. some area boys had gathered, arguing in cursed tones & sharing a bottle of orijin bitters. none of them resembled him. where he'd helped you the night before was now occupied only by flimsy, premature sunlight.

after ogbe had dropped you off, he gave you some cash, helped you untuck the seatbelt, gave you that hug, which at this point had become tradition, & said his usual "don't forget to be world-class today. i love you." with a brief kiss on the lips.

before closing for the day, you made some snacks, dropped by at that same spot on your way home, & hoped to god that you see him.

then he came skidding by, kicking a crushed fayrouz can like a schoolboy who had made peace with the certainty that awaited him at home after spending the whole day playing football with his friends. he was whistling cory asbury's *reckless love*, & your fingers drummed rhythm out of your hips as your heart sang along.

he said "good evening fallen star. like say i know say i go see you here. hope you sha dey okay? last night i pray for you, make notin bad apun to my miss independent." followed by that pure, unrehearsed laughter that could put anybody's mind at ease.

you felt your body slacken. you handed him the nylon pack & said thanks for yesterday & proceeded to go catch a cab.

"will i see you again?" he asked. "i dey always dey here 247 but i dey go church saturday & sunday."

he asked if you could come to his church this sunday. that there was this holy ghost service & you'd love it.

later at night, while ogbe watched barcelona vs napoli, your head on his lap & his fingers trailing your ear, random thoughts about him bubbled in your mind as your toes curled. there was something about him that needed only to be touched with tenderness.

when you went to his church, you couldn't believe it. this was you missing thanksgiving service at your church for this.

the church was small, so small that you could smell the pastor's perfume from the last row where the usher had led you. there was a humid light & in that light you saw him, playing the keyboard & smashing various notes.

after service, he came to you & said thanks for coming, did you like it?

you confessed that you enjoyed watching him play.

"ehen?" he returned, head bowed, eyes counting his toes as his two hands tangled.

trying as much as possible to not sound judgmental, you asked why he wasn't doing something a bit more decent. what exactly had happened to him?

all he gave in return was a smile that made you feel like some privileged child who had no idea how the world worked. the sun was nibbling at your skin so he guided you somewhere the heat couldn't touch. he called one of those aboki boys hawking fan milk & yoghurt, asked if you wanted some & you nodded but, in your mind, you said *yesss!*

he said this kind of life was the only thing he knew. not that corporate, vanilla life. he'd been raised in upper sakponba, where dreams went to die & where violence was the currency of life.

"what were your dreams?" you asked.

"i watch my mama die because money no dey. hospital wey we carry am go, light no dey & doctors no care. so she die of heart issues. my papa no send. our community, people just die anyhow because of health issues."

"so you wanted to be a doctor? & provide adequate healthcare?"

“na just dream. right now, i’m just living every day. all of us go die so i just dey wait my turn.”

“no don’t say that. you can still achieve your dreams. there’s always light at the end of the tunnel.”

“why the light no dey for beginning of the tunnel?”

inside of you, some laughter was dying to explode. you exchanged numbers & promised to call him later today.

but you did not call him. he called you during the week, three times, first to thank you for being warm. second to tell you that he'd seen you on your way to work one wednesday & that was the only motivation he had needed to get through that day. third, to tell you that he'd been thinking about you.

the funny thing, though, was that choosing to not call him did not prevent you from seeing him. occasionally on your way from work, you'd drop by that hub close to the globus bank at ring road. that spot with heavy lights & vendors who never died. abokis hawking their suya in rickety wheelbarrows. bini men displaying their thrift wares on spread-out sacks. & those women who sold fruits & fake cloth dye. drivers who would threaten to run you over but would not do it because, in the end, everyone had a bit of compassion in them.

you'd trek from the buzz to that quiet spot where you'd met him for the first time, hand him the snacks or meal you'd made, laugh at the silly things he always said, then let him stop you a cab, pay, & wave you good night. he was gentle, so gentle.

you & ogbe had just finished fucking one night when he took his phone & texted you:

“i can't explain it but you've changed. you don't laugh at my jokes anymore. & sex now feels like duty. would have said it live but i'm not sure how to begin conversations such as this. i love you, mercy.”

in response, you kissed him, ran your fingers along his fat brows, & told him that you were sorry & you'd do better. it was because of work & dad's health. you rested your head on his chest & counted his heartbeat.

but you could not sleep afterwards. there was this heaviness in your chest that made you toss & turn, like the night closing in on you & you had nowhere else to run to. you took your phone & texted him “hi, james” then dropped it face-down immediately, your palms sweaty. you

kept awake to see if he would respond; he did not. you made a little vow in your heart that you'd never call or text him again.

in later days, when you got the news of dad's passing from prostate cancer, he was the first person you called. it felt crazy to you but what could you do? you were about to close from work that day when you got the call from your kid sister, ese.

he asked if he could come & meet you. when he arrived, he looked so sickly that you were compelled to ask if he'd been okay.

“sorry about your daddy. if you need me you fit call me anytime. i fit hold you?”

you hugged him & smelled his neck. he smelled of a hard day's labour. that strong smell of strife & hope. you could not explain it but something about that smell made your thighs laugh, & you could feel the moisture build up between your legs.

so you let him go.

at your family house in amagba, where dad had died, the air was tense. mourners gathered to pretend they cared, but who was to blame them? truly, dad had not been the best of men.

after the condolence visits had dropped in numbers, & your two brothers had handled the body, you sat in the garage, wondering why he had looked so sickly. was he ill? depressed? where could you come in? you called his line with your second number, but there was no response. you pinched yourself so hard because now you felt stupid, so stupid yet you wanted to hear him, even if it was a simple “hello, who be dis?”, crumbs of his voice. you turned off your phone & threw it so far from you then blurred your vision into the stars.

ese came to join you later, a joint & a spark in her hand. the night was remorselessly cold.

“at least now i can get high without anyone getting a heart attack from yelling.” she sat on an empty mountain dew crate. “do you mind?”

you shook your head & watched her puff & say funny things about dad. how he’d been a philanthropist to outsiders but a miser to his immediate family. how he probably had 12 other kids with 12 different women.

“don’t speak ill of the dead.” you said.

“if it’s not a lie, it’s not ill.”

you desperately wanted to talk about the madness going on inside your head, but you didn’t want to sound foolish.

“was watching this movie where a wife met some street guy who helped her one night & has been sweet to her ever since.” you began. “it’s nollywood of course. nothing they do ever makes sense.”

“so i’m guessing she falls in love with him?” ese asked.

“not really. she’s just confused. like, she thinks about him all the time even, especially, when she’s with her husband.”

“hmm! sister sister. this one na nollywood movie abi it’s happening to you?”

“that’s ridiculous!”

she laughed. “see, i understand. you’ve always been a soft woman. & you have this unquenchable urge to save broken people. you did with dad & mum & me. but in a battle between your heart & your brain, sometimes, your brain is the one looking out for you. your fiancé is a good man. no fuck up.”

you didn’t understand how serious it had gotten until later in the bathroom when you took your shower & touched yourself with his voice in your head. & you knew at this point that you had to let him go for good.

after you'd called him & had told him that it would be the last time he'd hear from you, he said okay no problem, but could he see you one last time? you agreed to meet the next monday after work.

it was around 8 p.m., & the night was the colour of gloom.

“good evening.” he said.

he looked sicklier now than ever. you wanted to hold him, trace the scar along his neck.

“what's wrong, james?” you asked.

“am fine. no mind my look. just stress.”

but you weren't convinced. you held his hand, squeezed it with the kind of fondness that only a bird building a nest for its chicks in the rain understands.

he asked if you wanted to take a walk. together you toured the roundabout, nearly bumping into speeding vehicles without headlights & the drivers spitting curses at you “if you want die you no go go house go die?”

he bought suya, stole a carton of hollandia yoghurt, & he managed a flimsy smile when you told him stealing the yoghurt was wrong, but you wouldn't stop taking sips of it. you felt so free. you pirouetted, like a child that had never been yelled at. when it was getting late & cold, he suggested you go home.

“thanks.” his voice was slim.

“for what?”

“for everything. before i meet you, every day just be the same. no motivation. noting noting. but since i meet you, i wake up & i know say my day go bright because i go hear from you or i go see you. my nights are blessed. thank you.”

you gave him a firm hug, kissed his neck, & held the memory of his smell in your head.
he did not smell like work today.

& in the coming weeks, you kept your word. you did not call him, well not directly. he called you, twice, & on both occasions, he got no response from you. however, you'd call him sometimes, your number hidden & your voice mute. you only wanted to hear him say his "hello. thank you for remembering me today.", a token of life.

until his line went ghost. you could no longer reach him, so you'd mutter a word of prayer for him. you stopped by that spot one evening, some of the area boys already returning to base. you scanned around for him, but he was not there. you approached the friendliest looking among them, & asked if he knew anyone called james.

& he told you that james had died.

"e sick one time like dat. the tin affect am. but our butterfly don go."

every day on your way back from work, you take a moment to stare at that spot. sometimes you trek there, caress the bannisters, & maybe perch there for a few minutes before catching a cab home.

it's been three months. every time ogbe asks you what's wrong, you simply smile & say in your mind: *i shouldn't have stayed away from him.*

at night you stare out the window. perhaps you're trying to catch death as it prowls about when people sleep. & it hurts you so much a touch could coerce a sob out of your throat. you have so many questions you want to ask. *why are you?*

today you're under that awning. it's sunday evening & the area isn't as busy as it has always been. there's a boy with pink crocs on, one of those kids who hang around begging for money. he's humming a tune & kicking about a crushed smooov bottle. he approaches you when it begins to rain.

“can i join you?” he asks.