

The Lingerin Man

Ojuelegba smells like a pit latrine, a dingy pit latrine that someone forgot to wash. But she's not thinking of Ojuelegba today; she's thinking of him. By 6 pm today, he will have been missing for five years. Five years. It was wild how much time had passed. In the first few months, she had been admitted so many times that the nurses had reserved her a room at the hospital. But she had moved on eventually, she had to. The gifts had to go first; he had given her so many keepsakes that she had kept a particular section of her wardrobe for them. She had kept the ring though; a small makeshift strung from wire that he had given her as a joke. The texts had been the hardest, and when her phone got stolen, she decided it was God's will that she put the past behind her. Yet today, she's thinking of him. So much so that she doesn't see the *agbalumo* woman wrap six of them, or hear her call "*Sister, Aunty*" while waving a hand frantically in her face, beckoning her to reality. She thanks her hurriedly and goes to the car where Chief is waiting for her.

And then there was Chief. It's easier now, to be in the same place as him, to breathe the same air. Her mother had told her it would become bearable. "Chief is a good man, you'll see. Yes, he is not perfect, but who is?" As far as her mother was concerned, perfection was a myth, a juvenile fantasy she needed to swear her mind off. After all, she herself had done fine without it. So sulkily, Moye took what she was given and was rewarded with two beautiful, excitable boys who called her Mummy. "*They look just like you, Chief*" she had said when they were born, as her mother had encouraged her to, telling her that men liked that sort of thing. But surely everyone could see that they had her fair complexion, and when they laughed, their eyes morphed into slits just like hers did. The rest of it was him, she knew it, her mother knew it. Moye loved her boys,

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but every day, they reminded her of him. It was in the innocent, unassuming things they did. The way they threw their heads backwards when they laughed, the limp that the doctors couldn't explain. But they were Agbabiakas. She hoped that if she said that often enough, it would be true.

She was sixteen when she first met Chief. He was a regular at her mother's store, but the VIP kind of regular that was welcomed with a beaming smile and an anxious wiping and re-wiping of palms to remove nonexistent sweat. She had just returned from the last term of boarding school after what had seemed like a lifetime of watery beans and *feshelu*, eager to catch up on all the home-cooked food she had missed. Her mother had cooked her *ekuru* and palm oil stew, and she had just settled down to it when Chief's car honked outside. Her mother had made a show of emphasising his importance, egging her forward with a small tray of chinchin and a bottle of wine that she had imprisoned in the fridge for this purpose. Chief was an ebullient man with an aura as unmistakable as his white G-Wagon with the "BIAKA 001" number plate, and a presence that could fill any room. Her mother looked at him like he was angel Gabriel in the flesh. He had taken one long look at her and smiled at her mother. Later that night, her mother kept smiling sheepishly until exasperated, she had to ask what the problem was.

"Shebi you know Chief likes you."

In the silence that ensued, one could have heard even the shadow of a pin drop.

"Ma?"

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The women in Moye's family are not like other women. As soon as she had gotten her first period, her mother had sat her down for the talk. She had perched happily on the edge of the sofa, eager for what she guessed was her intro to womanhood, the famed child-to-adult pep talk

"Adedunmoye, the women in this family are not like other women," her mother had said. "You are not like other girls. Moye wanted to jokingly correct her mother, to tell her that there were no girls in this house, but there was a graveness in her mother's usually bubbly face that she had only seen once, and that when her father was buried. So she thought that someone had died; in hindsight, how much easier that would have been.

"I don't know how to tell you this, so I will tell you how I too was told. Daddy is not your father, and someday, you too will have children by a man who is not your husband."

Her mother ignored the disbelief spreading across her face and produced a tired-looking file containing a photo so faded, one may have thought it was originally black and white. Moye recognised the person in it.

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Her grandmother's imposing frame was missing, in its place were a tiny pair of legs and even tinier arms that appeared to wobble at the side. Still, she would know those questioning eyes in her sleep. Beside her was a gangly boy with a look of awe in his eyes. She presumed he was her grandfather.

"That's my father, your grandfather, but he's not grandpa," her mother interjected, as though she read her mind. "Grandma was a deserter, so was I, and so were all the women before me. One day, you will be too. It's a century-old family tradition that requires you to have a child by a man you love, but then marry another, and this child must be conceived no later than your 21st birthday.

There is a way you look at someone when you think they are joking and another way you look at them when you think they are mad. Moye looked at her mother as the words made their way of her mouth as though she were a mad person making jest. So she did the most logical thing; she laughed, but as she saw that her mother wasn't laughing with her, fear started to soak through her nightwear in giant drops.

'Mummy, what are you saying? Please talk to me, I don't understand.'

"Moye, my darling, I know it's tough, but this is the life that has been chosen for us. Now, go to bed, and sleep on what I've said. Grandma's coming tomorrow morning. We'll talk then."

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Sometimes, when you look earnestly for something, you do not find it. Try as you may, search the earth inside out, it never turns up. Yet at other times, when you aren't looking at all, it finds you, the most unwilling of participants. And so it was that Yekini found Moye. It was a hot Friday afternoon, the kind of heat that made you angry at everything and everyone without reason. They had GES 103 in the CBN lecture hall, and the press of bodies and odours, exacerbated by the fact that there was a test the following Monday, made it even hotter. The class itself was a joke; a small, uninteresting man was pretending to teach a small, uninteresting course to a class that was pretending to listen. Everyone was doing what they pleased but somehow also present enough to provide accurate answers to the man's questions. One had to admire the craft.

Behind her, a group of boys chatted endlessly about God knows what. One of them was pulling her hair intermittently which she didn't mind at first because the tugging soothed her scalp. She unconsciously tilted her head to the side, revealing some untugged parts, and then he started to do it more frequently, as though he had been distracted and could now give it his full attention. She liked it, yes, but she didn't like that he saw that she liked it. Jerking her head out of his hand, she turned to look at him, but then the pretend teacher decided that he would ask her a pretend question. Unfortunately, she couldn't pretend to know the answer and would have gotten an earful if Mystery Boy hadn't whispered it to her, gently tugging her head back by a braid so she could hear him.

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“You never said thank you.”

Ah, there he was. She had been stylishly looking out for him since the class ended, turning around at the sound of a footstep. The lecture hall had brimmed with students that even though he had sat right behind her, he had easily dissolved into the crowd like sugar in tea. But she couldn't give any of that away, so she gave him a dirty look and kept walking. He didn't speak again until they had gotten to Physics. Initially, she worried that she had been harsh and he wouldn't speak to her anymore.

“You're serious.”

Thank God. She paused and then whirled herself around for her retort, the way she had seen it done in movies, but by the time she had turned around, Mystery Boy was wheezing halfway to the ground, clutching at the air and gasping for breath.

“I saved you and then you saved me.”

Moye smiled and then lightly brushed off Yekini's hand. His asthma attack had been years ago, and all she had done was look for his inhaler in his backpack, still, he kept saying things like that. Usually, she would make a suffocated face and flail her hands, drawing laughter from him.

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Today, however, her mind was elsewhere. She would be twenty-one in a few months, and she hadn't found a man to desert. Her mother had been calling her every week since she turned twenty until she decided to block her number altogether to have some peace of mind. But when she had gotten a call from a strange number and answered it to hear her mother's high-pitched voice on the other end, she knew it was a losing battle.

"It can't just be any man, you know. You can't just pick a random boy from the street; it has to be someone you, well you know, someone you love."

Did her mother think this was 80's Nollywood? Where even was she supposed to find a random boy on the street, much less one she loved? All the boys she knew were jerks, except...well her mother didn't know what she was talking about. Why was her first love story doomed to be so unfortunate? She had always thought that she would marry the first man she fell in love with, not make him the main character in some outdated ritual. Okay, that was a little insipid, but still. How was her mother even certain...

"What's wrong?"

"What? Who, me?"

He rolled his eyes. "No, me. Okay, what was the last thing I said?"

"You were talking?"

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He stared at her in mock horror until they both burst out laughing.

“Oya what’s the matter? You were clearly thinking about something. Am I so boring that you had to occupy your mind with something else?”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

“You’re just a goat,” he says, smiling.

“What do you mean you don’t want anything for your birthday?”

“I don’t understand, is it your birthday? *Gba ran mi deleru.*”

“It’s our birthday, besides you know why I couldn’t celebrate my birthday this year.”

“And that is my problem how?”

“I don’t get you. You had a get-together to celebrate the fact that your hairdresser got the style you wanted for your braids. How can you not want to celebrate your birthday?”

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He was right. She had thrown a party in boarding school to celebrate her 14th birthday. If she had her way, she would celebrate waking up every morning. To her, life was supposed to be an endless celebration, one big party. But this was different. In six weeks, she would be twenty-one and she hadn't found anyone for, well you know. There wasn't even one bearable person, and she couldn't even spend too much time away from Yekini without him thinking that something was up. Once, she had determined that she would start avoiding him. It was hard, but she had enough excuses up her sleeve to last the first two weeks. Eventually, she ran out of steam and sought him out herself. They were rewatching *Twilight* when he revisited the issue of her birthday. Why did he always have to mention it?

“My cousin died in an accident on her 21st birthday,” she finally told him.

Yikes. All her cousins were still very much alive, but did she sound convincing?

“Ade, I'm so sorry. I didn't know. ”

Yup, she definitely did. He only called her Ade when it was important.

“Still, you shouldn't let that steal your joy.”

Um, maybe not.

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“She was my only cousin. How can you say that?” she said in what she hoped looked like anger, then she got up to leave while his voice trailed in the background as he called out to her.

Moye was used to her mother’s unsurprising surprises, but showing up in her apartment a day before her birthday was new.

“Mom, what are you doing here?”

“Happy birthday, darling,” her mother answers with a smug smile on her face.

“It’s tomorrow,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“A mere formality,” her mother says, still smiling. Why was she smiling so much?

“I met your friend, Yekini,” she said with mischief in her eyes. I thought you said you hadn’t found anyone.”

“Because I haven’t. Mom, I care about him.”

“Which makes him perfect.”

“Mom.”

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“Look, I already kicked things off and you’re welcome, by the way. Now, all you have to do is get him to sleep with you before the end of tomorrow”

“Mom!”

“Adedunmoye, your father is dead. You’re all I have left. Who knows what could happen if you refuse to do this now? You do know he’s not going to die, right? Nothing will actually happen to him, you realise that, don’t you?”

“Mummy, I love him. He’s the one I want to marry.”

“Darling, love is a bird that is always in flight. You’ll find someone else.”

Moye has been to Tejuosho market many times but each time always feels like the first. There’s an out-of-placeness that she can’t shake off, and it’s not just the market. She hears her phone ring as the driver turns into their estate and sees that it’s her mother. She sighs and returns it to her bag. It’s better now; ordinarily, the sigh would have been a long hiss. Her mother would be fine, mostly. She, on the other hand, was permanently undone. Everything had changed when Yekini disappeared. When a whole year had passed with her still trying to cry herself into a depression, her mother had confessed that the men they deserted were doomed to not remember anything

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afterwards, so she could cry until there were no more tears in her, but to Yekini, wherever he was, she no longer existed. “We do it to keep them from coming back for the children. I’m so sorry, Moye.” She quite hoped her mother was no longer expecting forgiveness, perhaps tolerance. There are some sins that you forgive and others you absorb, that you carry with you. It made sense now why the relationship between her mother and grandma had been so strange. “So much for moving on,” she thinks to herself.

There’s a homeless man by her gate that she likes to give her *kue kue* change. Sometimes, she sends her maid to give him food. He’s always buried under his big Coca-Cola umbrella and never disturbs anyone. She wonders if he got lost, and how. Sometimes, she feels sorry for him. It must hurt to be alone in the world. She wondered for a moment if he, like her Yekini had someone back home longing for him, willing him to return, if she too, had a mother she couldn’t forgive, a husband she couldn’t love and children she couldn’t raise. Her mother was wrong; love isn’t a bird that’s always in flight. Love is a fish out of water; without strength, without hope, without purpose.

Underneath the umbrella, Yekini opens a small case engraved with an A and takes out a small wire-strung ring.