

February 14th, 2012.

Dear ****,

I will get straight to the point.

Do you remember the first time we met? I do. I will never forget, and I always told myself that I would tell my kids (if not ours) how I met my first boyfriend, with whom I did most things for the first time.

I promised myself at the beginning of that semester that I was not going to fall into the traps of lust and feign affection for any boy, neither was I going to tolerate unnecessary company in the guise of friendship but just waking up to the pool of my sweat due to the poor air conditioning, I knew that day was going to be a different day, but I could not put my finger on it. Maybe my soul was anticipating and dreading meeting you— the bane of me.

Houston was a new environment for me, but I did not expect to be attacked by the inconsistent weather. I woke up drenched, and in the evening, I was freezing. I forgot my jacket in the dorm and since then, I have never forgotten to take something to keep me warm (you already know this). I didn't have a car, and I just needed warmth; home was a place where I felt warmth— Lagos. I liked it in all of its dignified disasters and hurt. My family was there, and I was here, in a foreign land with no familiar faces but those of my fellow expatriates.

I walked into a coffee shop on campus and was hit by the addicting smell of coffee beans and pastries that gave me love handles that I have yet to get rid of. The goosebumps on my skin and the incessant shaking of my right leg wouldn't let me focus on the menu, not to mention ordering something, so I sped to a free table for two, hoping my body would cool down before people started to notice this dark foreigner. My fingers were still cold, I started to miss home, and my eyes stung with tears of regret and confusion. Why in the world did I decide to go far away from home when I've never spent a night away from home?

“Madam, hold your tears! This is neither the time nor the place,” I remembered my mother. “You're a big girl, and big girls don't cry”. Quick memo: Big girls do cry! I managed to hold in my tears and was ready to order a cup of coffee with a name so unhealthy yet so addicting, and then you came. When I saw you, I knew that even white people can be ashy; you were so dry you needed more than moisture, but when you opened your mouth, I felt the warmth I was missing.

“You're shivering,” you said caringly.

“You don't mean it,” I responded with a dash of sarcasm in my Nigerian accent, unashamed.

“Ah... You're new to Houston. Here we dress accordingly. Where are you from?”

“Lagos, Nigeria,” I responded, hoping you would have a jacket to offer.

“Ah! I see. I have a friend, Chi, who is from Lagos, well, her parents. She is from S.W.A.T, and she tells me that Lagos is not her favorite place in the world, she’d rather live her whole life in Alief than go back to Lagos...”

I did not want to be rude by cutting you off from your storytelling. I honestly did not care about your friend “Chi” or that she was from a place in Houston that is nicknamed after a law enforcement unit or that she hated Lagos which is understandable but also debatable. I was getting tired of hearing you yammer on and on about how you’ve been on the continent, but the next time you do visit, you want to go to the real parts that no one talks about; “the parts that you see on TV, the dirty parts,” you said.

“I apologize, I don’t even know your name,” you realized.

My name? You wanted to know my name while I was shivering? At this point I was getting warm but where were your manners?

“Where can I buy a jacket? Surely, there must be an outlet mall around here that sells good jackets.”

I could tell you weren’t expecting me to give such a response; you were used to girls falling for you instantly, weren’t you? I guess you didn’t know the girl my mother raised and the woman my father forced me to become. “I can buy you a jacket,” you offered soberly.

“No, thank you. I just need directions.”

“I insist.”

“And I decline,” I killed your pretense.

You paused for a moment which agitated me so I picked up my keys and started for the door, but you followed me. Why did you follow me?

“How about this?” you proposed, “I drive you to Ross and buy you a jacket?”

I completely ignored you and kept walking to a place of no destination.

“Come on, you’re obviously new to the country, you’re shivering, and you’re declining my offer? You must be one stubborn goat.”

I came to a quick halt and wanted to slap the living daylight out of you but I said, “What did you just say?”

“Isn’t that what Nigerians say when they’re insulting each other?”

“*Ọdẹ ni bobo yi sha*,” I said in my uncontainable laughter. You just stood there, completely confused, like the stupid boy you are, watching me pause mid-laugh to shiver.

“What’s so funny?” you asked.

“You have courage o. Just because your friend, Chi, says things in front of you does not give you the permission or audacity to experiment on others. If you were on the streets of Lagos, there’s no saving you.”

“Understood,” you said like you didn’t hear what I said, “Here, take my jacket,” you said while taking off your jacket, just for me to see you were wearing another one underneath.

“You had a second one?”

“I just wanted to talk to you. My name is ****. What’s yours?”

“My mommy taught me not to talk to strangers,” I said as I put on your jacket, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

“Mm-hmm, you’re playing hard to get. You’re a Rice student?”

“Yes, I am. Thank you for the jacket, ****. I have to get going now,” I sauntered away hoping you were watching me and I know you were. You’ve never seen something as exotic as me, of course, not even from Chi; an Igbo girl cannot deliver spices like a Yoruba girl.

“I hope to see you around, mysterious Nigerian girl,” you hollered.

“Me too,” I whispered in careless desire.

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For three weeks, I carried your jacket around with me, hoping to bump into you and get to know you beyond your name and your need to always get a yes from girls on your first try; I was interested in you, but I didn’t know what I was getting myself into.

I had the desire to fit in, so I decided to go to the same coffee shop on campus. For some reason, I cannot remember the name of the place that eventually became *our* place; I wonder what that has to say about the memories we have shared together. I joined the line to order some fancy-named, unhealthy coffee drink, but I’m Nigerian, and I only drink tea (fake tea), so I decided to leave the line. As the door and my anterior simultaneously faced each other, allowing the breath of God—manifested air— to touch my face, there you were. Handsome in all of your masculinity and Casanova-like persona. I had played this moment over and over again in my head. You were going to try to flirt with me, and I’d give you the Naija girl response- *a little bit of ako*. It didn’t work out that way because I couldn’t play hard to get with you.

“Hi,” I said as you were in conversation with the lady beside you.

“Um... hello?” you said like it was a question and you didn’t know who I was, so you continued with your conversation and joined the queue for coffee.

I wasn’t embarrassed, I was going to return your jacket back to you. “You don’t remember me?”

The girl beside you side-eyed me with a precision that only Nigerians can get. You smiled and said, “I’m sorry, no.” You had to be joking because there’s no way I could have been that forgettable. *Me ke?*

“You gave me your jacket three weeks ago?”

By now, the other girl was getting irritated, and you were still clueless, so I brought the jacket out of my bag, and that’s when you smiled.

“Of course, I remember you, beautiful,” you said openly.

I was not finding it funny; I couldn’t even smile. I gave you your jacket, smiled at the girl, and apologized. I looked at you and said, “Thank you for the jacket.” I walked out immediately. If I were a

million shades lighter, the embarrassment would have been noticeable. I walked briskly, but you managed to catch up to me you gently caught my arm so I could face you.

“You walk fast,” you tried to make conversation. I didn’t respond. “Are you mad at me or something?”

“Mad? What do you mean?” I said in confusion.

“What else would I mean?”

“Are you saying that I’m mad?” I was ready to go all Ikotun on you.

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to say.”

I walked away *fast fast!* I didn’t want to get in trouble. My mommy did not ask me to cause trouble in a foreign land. You followed me and tried to rectify the issue.

“I think something has been lost in translation. I was just asking you if you’re upset with me,” you said in surrender.

I halted, “Oh,” I said.

“Yeah,” you said in relief. “Let me make it up to you by buying you a cup of coffee”.

“I don’t drink coffee, I prefer tea.”

“Are you joking? You take this hard-to-get game way too seriously.”

“I’m not playing hard to get. I do not drink coffee.” Your brows furrowed as you experienced this culture shock.

“Wow,” you cleared your throat, “so what type of tea do you drink?”

“Lipton, Ovaltine, Bornvita, Milo, those kinds.”

“Are those herbal teas or what?” more confusion.

“They’re chocolate beverages.”

You laughed for a moment like you were repaying the time I laughed at you. Then you smiled with sincere eyes and asked, “What’s your name?”

“I don’t tell strangers my name,” I said truthfully.

“May I at least know your major?”

“I’m a Marketing major, first year.”

“Nice. I’m a Finance major in my second year. Are you really not going to tell me your name?”

“The girl you left in the shop is probably waiting for you,” I started to walk away.

“I’ll find you,” you proclaimed.

“Mm-hmm,” I knew you would.

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It seemed like ever since that day, we had been running into each other without warning. We made small talk, laughed at each other, you even told me things you shouldn’t have. You saw me as a

trustworthy person to share all your problems with, even though I am not God to grant you permanent peace.

We were walking to my dorm, which you liked to do just to ensure I got there safely. Why would you walk with me when you didn't even know my name? We reached my door, and you received a text from your Blackberry, and your mood changed. It's remarkable how a collection of ordinary letters can cause a misalignment. But they weren't just ordinary because they weighed a ton.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I reached for my keys.

"Um... My father just died," you looked into my eyes.

"Jesus! I am so sorry, do you need..."

You interrupted, "My father died, and my mother tells me by text?"

I stood there, nonplussed. I couldn't articulate my thoughts, so all I could say was, "What?"

"My family is ridiculous," you shook your head.

"Do you want to come in?" I asked out of pity, even though this was an uncomfortable move for me.

"I don't want to bother you," you properly protested.

"I insist," I lied. "We can talk about it or not talk at all; we can just be in the vacuum of silence."

We walked into the dorm, and it was pretty much bland. All I had was my bed, a black desk and chair, a window, my closet, a bathroom, and a picture of me and my mom hanging on the wall.

"So I don't have a kitchen, but we can order pizza," I tried to make you comfortable.

As you sat on my bed, you said, "She knew I wouldn't feel anything regarding my father," you blurted out. "My father and I have... had an okay relationship. We don't share the same interests, and he wasn't around often, so I guess I can't miss someone I didn't even know". I didn't know what to say about that because how was it possible for someone not to miss their parents? So, as I sat on the floor, all I could say was, "Hmm."

"Would you miss your dad if he died?" you asked in a tone wanting to compare our fathers.

"You should be weeping about the death of your father, even though he wasn't emotionally available," I tried to change the topic.

"Fatherhood is not limited to just providing especially when it comes to their sons," you said in a dry laugh, but you were wrong. Girls need their fathers as much as boys.

"Do you want to go out sometime? On a date?" you blurted out.

"What?" I chuckled to myself.

"What guy keeps talking to a girl that he doesn't even know her name?"

"My name is Omobolanle," I said casually.

"Omobolanle," you mispronounced. "What does it mean?"

"It means the child met wealth at home," I smiled. "I didn't meet said wealth, but I managed to come here on a full-ride scholarship. It's not like my parents aren't doing okay, but I can't say we're rich."

“Can I take you out for dinner?,” you went back to the focus, and as I was about to decline you said, “before you say no, just think about it because I know deep down you want to say yes.”

“Nice picture of you and your mom,” you commented. “What about your dad?”

“Not in the picture,” I said.

I didn’t want to say yes, not because I didn’t like you— I was slowly enjoying your company. I didn’t think I deserved what you had to offer, whether it was attention, care, gifts, or love. Did I hate myself that much that I didn’t think I was deserving of love? That was a messed-up mindset, but you wouldn’t know why I had this mindset because you never took an interest in me, sometimes.

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I don’t know if you wanted me or not because you gave your bare minimum; there was barely any chase, and you gave no effort. I feel embarrassed that I was that easy to win over to become your girlfriend.

I finally met “Chi,” when you took me to Chili’s. She was the same girl in the cafe with you, and I knew she liked you, but I didn’t know how you felt towards her. You were telling me about how much I’d like her and I would be able to relate to her since we’re practically alike.

“But you don’t even know me that well,” I interjected.

“Of course, I do, B. I know you more than I know myself.” You had resulted in calling me B instead of Bolanle because you were too lazy to learn how to pronounce my name.

At the sight of Chi, you said, “Ah! There she is.” She gave you a warm hug and looked like she was high off your fragrance. I didn’t like her. She looked stereotypically Igbo— light-skinned and everything. I wouldn’t talk about people like this, but I really didn’t like her. You both sat side by side, and I wanted to get her to stand up just so I could sit by you, but I was not entitled to do that. After all, I was not your girlfriend at the time.

You both kept catching up on your small talk, and I was waiting to be acknowledged by you. I sipped my lemonade and cleared my throat. You both looked at me innocently, but I could tell I was not welcome in your circle of two.

“B, this is Chi. Chi, B,” you smiled.

“Nice to meet you, finally,” she said in an accent that had subtle Southern drawls.

“Likewise. My actual name is Bolanle, what’s yours?” She momentarily stared at me because I spoke comfortably in my Nigerian accent, which I am guessing, was something she wasn’t used to. I later found out her parents were raised here, too.

“Chiamaka,” she Americanized her name.

The lunch was excruciatingly boring. You both were just talking and talking about things I couldn’t relate to, and I would often catch Chiamaka giving me a side-eye. Occasionally, you would hint at her

to praise you just so you could win me over, but it wasn't sincere. After lunch, Chiamaka left in her car, and it was just the two of us, finally.

"You had a good time?"

"Not more than you did," I responded.

"What does that mean?"

"That you and Chiamaka were the only ones that went to lunch, and I was a ghost."

"No way! You were involved. You just couldn't relate to most of what we were saying," you said.

"Indeed," I was salty.

"Let's get ice cream, or you don't eat ice cream, too?" you teased.

"I just want to go home." I started gathering my things to leave.

"B, come on! Why are you in a bad mood all of a sudden?"

"Because you took me out to eat food I am not accustomed to just for me to witness you and your friend— who likes you, by the way— talk and not involve me," I burst out. "You're not even trying to keep me interested. When was the last time you called me? Or came to check on me at my dorm? Or even buy me gifts? When was the last time you behaved like a prospective boyfriend?"

"My dad just died, B!" you whined.

"You didn't even like your father! *Wó*, I didn't come here to waste my time. If you have nothing to offer, leave me alone and be with Chiamaka," I stood up and left. You didn't even offer to drive me back to campus.

Later that day, I got a knock on my door, and I knew it was you. I was happy it was you, but I really didn't want to make you feel entitled, so I waited after five knocks to open the door.

"Oh, Chiamaka is not with you?"

"She doesn't like me like that. We are just extremely close," you said naively. How can men be so stupid like this?

"What do you want?"

"B, I really like you. I want to be with you not just because of your beauty, but because I know that you would keep me interested and change me. Please give me a chance to impress you."

I couldn't change you, and that is something I wish I had known then.

"I don't like wasting my time," I replied.

"Just say yes, and I will make it worth your while. Please. One more date, and if you don't like it, I promise to stop trying."

"One more date?"

"One more date."

"And if I don't like it, you'll leave me alone?"

“So what do you say?”

“Fine,” I smiled slowly.

“You don’t know how happy I am right now!” You were smiling and turning red, those passing could see— it was embarrassing. You even stopped people in the hallway and told them, “It should go down on record that I was the happiest man of 2007!”

I liked the date, so we kept seeing each other that we didn’t need to officially say we were in a relationship, but we should have confessed it.

There are so many things that went wrong in our little relationship, but the little that I can bear to remind you of is what the rest of this letter will consist of. I cannot believe that I was in a relationship with a man like you.

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2008

My mother did not raise me to be a puppet, to blindly follow someone— especially a man who cannot lead. I’m sure you won’t remember the summer of 2008 the way I remember it. I was still shy around you and wanted to please you because you always took care of me with your money, and I didn’t have anything, so I always did what you wanted me to do because I felt like I owed it to you.

Everyone was packed the week before summer break, and my mother made plans for me to come back to Lagos because I had been complaining to her about the stress I was experiencing and how the effect of being miles away had a great toll on me.

“If I come to Lagos, I don’t want to be doing any work o,” I told my mother.

“*Ehehn? Oya*, just come first, my dear,” my mother responded, but we both knew I was going to do all the work.

“Mommy, I’m serious o! I cannot be coming back from making you proud, and you will now be treating me like a slave.”

“Bolinto, don’t worry. I will take care of you. I’m sure your little cousins will do all the work for the Americanah!” we both laughed because it was a lie.

“Mommy, how are you now? Any gist for me? I hope you’re answering those men that are toasting you.”

My mother laughed, “Which *yeye* men? I don’t have time for them *jare*.”

“See what daddy has caused now? He just spoiled another man’s commodity,” I joked about my father, but it was true that he was not a good husband or father and hurt my mother so bad that she was too scared to even try again, to allow herself to be loved the way God wanted her to be loved.

“Bolanle, it’s not important anymore. I have experienced enough for a lifetime, so I just pray you choose right. Before I forget, do you have a boyfriend?”

“Hello? Mommy? Are you still on the line? The line is breaking o...”

My mother had me when she was twenty, and that is a huge factor to why our relationship wasn’t entirely traditional, so that gave me the space and grace to talk to her about boys and stuff. But not wanting to tell my mother about you was a huge sign that I chose to sweep under the carpet. If I told her about you, I would have arrived at the conclusion— through my mother’s thorough interrogation— that we did not complement each other. Why would I willingly want to stay in trouble?

Later that morning, I met you at our coffee spot. You ordered coffee, I didn’t. You had a scone, and I had a glazed doughnut with orange juice.

“I told my mom about you,” you blurted after taking a bite from your scone.

“What?”

“Yeah, she wants to see you and everything! Are you available this summer?”

“I am going back to Lagos, remember?”

“Oh, yeah, that,” you said like it didn’t matter to you. “I think you should stay here and get to know Houston or even the States at large. My mother suggested that we visit her at our Manhattan penthouse; she suggested we stay the whole summer if we choose to.”

“Why am I guessing you agreed to this?”

“Of course I did. You’ll have a great time”. How could you make plans without asking me how I felt about it when you knew how badly I wanted to go back home and see my family?

“But Lagos,” I said.

“What about it? Cancel the trip, and I’ll buy you a ticket for December. Chi says December is the best time to visit Lagos.”

“I don’t want you buying me a ticket that my mother can afford, it’s insulting.”

“Can she afford a first-class ticket?”

“Are you mad? What kind of stupid question is that?”

“All I’m saying is that we should spend more time together so we get to know each other, except I come to Lagos with you, then I will get to know your mother.”

“You don’t have to come to Lagos,” I said as I folded my arms.

“Ok, it’s settled then. I’ll buy our tickets for New York, you’ll love it. And don’t worry, babe, your mother isn’t going anywhere; you’ll see her soon.”

Having to call my mother that evening to cancel our summer plans was painful. I’m sure she could hear me sniffle as I lied to her that some schoolwork had come up. I felt the disappointment in her tone. She wasn’t going to see her only child for a year now, and, though I am not a mother, I could only

imagine how scared she was to let go of her daughter to spread her wings and fly so she could reach the skies except, my wings were starting to get chipped, and I didn't even know it.

That summer was terrible. I didn't enjoy myself. New York stinks, the rats are huge, the people are rude, but I hate it because of you. You didn't keep me company; you were off with your friends all the time, and I spent most of the trip playing rich housewife with your mother. Sometimes, my mind wandered to a bitter place: You could have been meeting with Chiamaka for all I cared. ****, you loved her... I think.

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Chiamaka was a constant competition. I like heated competition, but I didn't appreciate it from Chiamaka when I was supposed to be your center of attention. Countless times, we canceled important plans just because she needed you.

During my sophomore year at Rice, you said you wanted to show me your new apartment that you were to lodge in till you graduated in 2010. Assuming the role of your girlfriend, I was happy for you and wanted to do everything for you— except sleep with you. I had it all planned with a surprise party and housewarming gifts; it was going to be magical, and my first friend in the States, Wande (whom you were threatened by), was going to help with the decor and catering since she had some experience. You don't know how important it was for me to do something as materialistic as this for you; it was more important than any academic responsibility at the time. Imagine how I felt when I saw Chiamaka already at your apartment with you and your other friends, partying and having fun. I was not invited. Were you embarrassed by me? That couldn't be possible because you wanted the whole world to know you had a Black, African girlfriend. So what was the problem?

I couldn't even tell Wande to return the things we had come with. She gave me the look of a concerned sister, from African girl to African girl.

“Bolanle, this guy is not for you,” Wande said as you approached us.

“Hey, B!” you kissed my cheek, “Wande,” you said in a dismissive tone.

“****, what is this? I didn't know you had a housewarming party; I already planned to throw you a surprise party,” I tried to hide my hurt.

“I didn't know I had one either. Chi threw this party for me, isn't she great?”

Wande scoffed loudly and said, “When she is your secret girlfriend.” Was she? You must have a fetish for Black women.

“I think I'm gonna go back home,” I said as I headed for the door.

“What? Why would you do that? Come, mingle with my friends and eat something. Wande can leave.”

“For that reason, I am staying,” Wande said as she dropped the party decorations by the door.

I didn't want to stay here any longer, and I think you noticed because you asked, "What's wrong?" You should have known what was wrong.

"Nothing."

"Cool," you said and went about your business. The way my mother told me a man is supposed to treat his lady in public was that he should be like her tail— following her around the place just so the whole party could know that he was hers. You were very different from the man my mother and I dreamt of. You never made me feel special around your friends, explained your inside jokes to me, or made me a member of your circle.

I tried to make myself eat something, but my heart was in so much pain, that I knew I would throw up all that I would consume. Chiamaka came into the kitchen with two red plastic cups to refill.

"Hi, B!" she said with her annoying, cheesing smile like she didn't know she was pushing all the wrong buttons.

"My name is Bolanle," I responded. "Did you know I was throwing **** a surprise-housewarming party?"

"What do you mean?" she dropped the alcohol-filled cups.

"Listen, don't play with me. I was raised in Lagos, not this *yeye* Alief you're always representing."

"I didn't know you were planning a surprise for him," she said and dramatically placed her hand on her chest and gasped, "I'm so sorry I got in your way."

"Chiamaka, I hate to break it to you, but he didn't choose you as his girlfriend. Again, we were raised differently, so you better not try me." I took the two cups and poured the drinks into the sink just to prove that if she wanted trouble, I could give it to her.

Back at the dorm, Wande took it upon herself to give me a lecture that I knew I needed.

"Bolanle, you are wasting your time with this idiot! Do you know who you are? If not that I just gave my life to Christ, I would have called him all sorts of names just so you can get the point. This is not life! This is not God-ordained, Bolanle! He allows that nonsense Chiamaka girl to walk over your relationship like the welcome mat that it is— anybody can just come in. When was the last time he treated you to a nice date and not talked about having sex with you? When was the last time he asked about your folks in Nigeria? Does he even know about your estranged father? *Orę*, you better run for your life..."

She went on like water flowing from a river because she was telling the truth, and I just sat there, listening and contemplating what my life had become in just a year. I really liked you, and you were a safe option for me, but in search of sanity, I became empty.

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2009

We were supposed to watch the Inaugural Ceremony of the first Black President of the United States together. At first, we were supposed to go to D.C. together to witness it, but you canceled, so I settled to watch it on TV. An hour before it aired, I called to check where you were because we were supposed to host some of my friends in the campus' common area. You canceled, again. I was slightly irritated and wondered if you would have called me to inform me. You didn't know how important it was to me to witness history as a Black woman living in a foreign country. I chose to let that slide and enjoy the Inaugural Ceremony of Barack Obama with my other Black friends.

I wanted you to be there to watch Elizabeth Alexander recite her poem, "Praise Song for the Day." I wanted you to watch the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, sing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." I wanted to talk about the Ball and Beyoncé's performance of "At Last." I wanted you to hear Barack Obama speak eloquently and intelligently as he addressed the nation for the first time as the first Black President. I wanted you to give me tissues as I teared up at the sight of Michelle Obama, whom you knew was a huge inspiration to me. But you didn't show up. Since then, you never showed up.

I left campus to visit you and rave about what you missed, and, thankfully, I knew exactly where your spare key was. I unlocked the door and entered the apartment, but there was a certain energy that seemed strange and intruding. I was thirsty and opened your fridge to get a drink. I heard footsteps and thought you were trying to sneak up on me, so I turned to face you, but it wasn't you.

"Chiamaka?"

She was wearing your shirt. My shirt. That was the shirt you told me I'd wear when we finally had sex, even though I told you I wasn't interested in this disgusting culture of giving myself to someone I didn't have a clear future with. Nevertheless, that was my shirt.

"Why are you wearing my shirt?", I asked her.

"B, I can explain..."

"The name is Bolanle, and I asked you a simple question. Why are you wearing my shirt?"

You finally came out, and when you saw me, I heard your heart drop on the floor.

"****, why is she wearing my shirt?!"

"Babe," you came closer, "I can explain."

As you stepped towards me, I stepped backward.

"B, allow me to explain, please."

“My name is Bolanle!” I yelled as I reminded everyone and myself. You still walked towards me, and now I was close to the knives. You tried to hold me, I drew out the santoku knife and sliced your skin. I was shocked, but you needed to feel half of what my heart felt at the moment.

“What the fuck?!” you inhaled sharply. That hoe ran to check if you were okay. I was livid and pointed the knife at her.

“Is this girl an idiot, *nii*? If you know what’s good for you, you better run. Before I open my eyes, you better not be in my presence!”

You were losing blood faster than the blink of an eye; you started to look blue, and I thought you were going to die.

“Where the hell is your first aid kit?!” I yelled in panic.

“Bathroom cabinet,” your breath shuddered.

“Oh, Jesus, help me!” I cried to the One I had not taken seriously in my lifetime.

I did the best I could with the first aid, but you were becoming bluer. “Call 911, I won’t get you in trouble,” you said, and somehow I interpreted that as love. I called 911 and felt guilty, so I stayed in the relationship with you.

*

2011

Even in guilt, one should not remain in a place of bondage. Oh, to be free and remain free is all I yearned for while in our relationship. I don’t believe I was in love with you. I don’t know what I was doing with you for four years. I wasted four years of growing and getting to know who I was, what I liked, detested, tolerated, and preferred. I could lie and say that your wealth kept me, but it wasn’t. What is it about willingly staying in a toxic relationship? I couldn’t give you anything, especially what you wanted.

Graduation was months away, you were now working in your family’s company in New York so I hadn’t seen you in months and I was relatively happy. After the incident, you never spoke about Chiamaka, and I never saw her again, which made me feel like I was a monster, but my consolation was I had the title of girlfriend and there was no agreement on side chicks. I wouldn’t say that you became scared of me or that you changed due to my moment of hurt, but you did become more vocal about what you wanted from me as your girlfriend. Even though I was only a Sunday Christian, I knew there were certain sins I was not going to play with.

I waited for the chauffeur to bring you to the apartment you gifted me, and when you came in, I was elated to see you. You were, too because you carried me, turned me around and kissed me, and kissed me, and kissed me until your breath and hands got out of control. I knew you were strong, but I didn’t

know to what capacity because as hard as I tried to get out of your grip, you held on to me like shackles and strongholds. I was scared of what I knew would happen, but I didn't want to hurt you again.

“****, stop!” I cried. You didn't stop.

“We might as well do it now.”

“STOP!” The tears flowed from my eyes as I thought of what the hell my life had become and the stranger I was now. I thought of my mother and all the pain she went through with an inconsistent husband. I thought of Jesus and His saving grace. I wanted to live and to live life to the fullest. So, I didn't care if I hurt you again, so I used my fingers to claw your neck, but God... The chauffeur, with your suitcase, walked in without knocking. You hurriedly let me go before you went too far.

“Ah! Thank you, Jesus!” I said in relief and ran out of the apartment.

The chauffeur lost his job, and I didn't leave you. I'm sure God shook His head in disappointment.

*

Aunty Tolani, my mother's sister, was living in San Diego with her husband, Uncle Kwame, for three years, and they moved to Houston because Aunty Tolani got a good job with better pay and benefits. I finally had family around. I hadn't visited Lagos since I moved, and the only chance I got passed.

Aunty Tolani was not like my mother; she was more traditional even though she was seven years younger than my mother. I was terrified to let her know that I was dating a white boy, even though I still hadn't told my mother about you— it felt like I was betraying my mother's trust by not telling her about my romantic affiliations with an *oyinbo* boy. I wasn't sure how she'd take it. Would she laugh, cringe, or be indifferent about it? Even though my mother was unconventional and a humane Nigerian parent, this was not something I could tell her about. Was I scared that it would open old wounds or that it would release an angry side of my mother that I don't like to see? Honestly, it could have been both. My mother would have found out the kind of boy I was with; she would just know.

I had to tell my mother about you before Aunty Tolani found out.

“Mommy, I have a boyfriend,” I finally broke to her in the middle of our one-hour conversation.

Silence.

“Mommy? Did you hear what I said?”

“I heard you.”

Silence.

“Are you fulfilled, Bolanle?”, she asked, not as my best friend, but as my mother— the one God assigned to take care of me.

“It's not a serious relationship, ma,” I lied. Why should I be lying to the woman who can decipher the tone of my voice even though I'm miles away?

“Bolandle, relationships should not be recreational. I’m not saying you have to marry him because you have a life to live and a purpose to fulfill, but you cannot be wasting your destiny appointment by moving around with just any boy on the street.”

I sighed. I was in hot soup. I was wasting my time with you. I wasted four years! “Ok,” I responded to my mother.

“Is he Black or White?” my mother asked as a confirmed *amebo*.

“He’s purple.”

“Bolandle, answer me, *jare!*”

“He’s white.”

“As long as you’re happy, Bolinto. If he tries anything, call me, and we will show him pepper!”. She was serious; she would have killed anyone who tried to mess me up. “I don’t want you to go through what I have gone through; it’s not your portion.”

“I know, mommy, I know,” I said.

“Good. So, how is your thesis going?”

“It’s going well. I hope you’ve bought your plane tickets for graduation?” I reminded her.

We kept talking about everything and anything. From graduation, future plans, and Iya Khalid, the old groundnut seller on our street.

*

“Bolinto baby! Omobolanle *mi*, Agbeke *mi*, *oko mi owon*, *ayanfe mi*,” my aunty praised me as I walked into her house in Katy.

“Aunty mi!” I ran to hug her. I hadn’t seen her since I left Nigeria, and I never got the opportunity to visit her in San Diego because I had some “schoolwork” to do.

“Come in, my dear.” I was in awe of her house and what she had made of herself; I always knew she was going to be the rich one in our family. Looking at me in awe, too, she said, “Ahahn! Bolinto, you are looking fine o! *O ga ju!* Small girl of yesterday, you’re now a twenty-year-old! Your body is looking hot, *faa!*” I laughed but was grateful she noticed because I thought I wasn’t putting in any work when you never noticed.

“Aunty mi, *ko easy*.” It truly wasn’t easy trying to get a compliment from you, but it was seamless to get an insult from you.

“Kwame! Bolinto is here!” my aunt held my hand as she led me into the living room. “*Se* you will eat *waakye* or Jollof? Don’t worry, I handle the Jollof, and your uncle handles the Ghanaian food,” we both laughed.

“As long as there’s meat and plantain.”

My aunt raised her hand for a fist bump, “*Chop knuckle!* You’re truly our daughter. Sit down, sit down, I’ll bring your food and drinks, okay?” she left for the kitchen, “Kwame! Bolinto is here!”

*

A week to graduation, an hour after my last final exam, I had not heard from my mother. I know she didn’t want to bother me since it was the last stretch of my academic journey, but it was unlike her not to call to check in on me for so long. I called Auntie Tolani to be sure everything was okay.

“Everything is fine. I just spoke to her yesterday,” she clarified.

“Are you sure? I’ve called her all day, and she hasn’t been picking up my calls.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Ok, I won’t,” I believed.

2 DAYS BEFORE GRADUATION.

I received a call from Auntie Tolani. She didn’t say anything; all I could hear was her sniffle. Wande is seated across from me at her apartment. I stood up because this issue seemed private, and regardless of how close Wande and I are, my family’s business is strictly our business, but I was not in the mood to receive any bad news.

“Auntie mi, what is going on?” I asked in fear.

“Hmm,” her voice shook in the mix of her sobs, “sister *mi ti lo!*”

“What happened to Auntie Bolu, where did she go to?” Auntie Bolu was my mom’s elder sister, the eldest.

“She was sick, the doctors said they didn’t know her appendix had burst and the peritonitis had spread into her blood. She died last night, in the morning Nigerian time.”

Auntie Bolu was living in London. My mother had two sisters. London doctors could not be that stupid. Which sister did my mother have that I didn’t know about?

I took a step back and leaned on the wall.

“Where is my mommy? Shouldn’t she have arrived by now?” I queried.

“Bolandle, sister *mi ti lo!*”

I wish she would just stop speaking in parables and talk to me like the adult I was.

“I haven’t seen my mother yet, so there’s no way she could have gone back to Naija now! Auntie Tolani, stop telling lies.”

“Bolandle, your mom has passed away.”

What is it that Christians usually say when someone has passed away... it is well? God knows best? Who are we to question Him? These weren't my thoughts...

"Aunty Tolani, it's wrong to joke about death like this."

"Agbeke, I wish I was joking," she sobbed and even choked on her tears.

I started to panic. Why would my mommy leave me before seeing me? She must have been in so much pain. Did Aunty Tolani lie to me? Did she know my mother was in chronic pain? God.

I fell to the ground and screamed, Wande probably got complaints from the neighbors because I screamed, yelled, and threw things for hours. I did not cry. "Big girls don't cry," remember?

I laid on Wande's bedroom floor for seven days without food, water, or a shower. I didn't show up for graduation. You called me, left voicemails, and sent texts, yet, I failed to respond. You didn't call Wande, my aunt, or even the police to report my absence.

"Babe, I'm sure you're good. I have something special planned to celebrate this milestone. Anyway, call me.", you texted.

On the seventh day, I arose from my stench. I showered, wore a nice dress, put on make-up, and put on "the sexy perfume" that you liked. I cleaned my make-up. This couldn't be my life. I ignored Aunty Tolani's text concerning funeral arrangements (the funeral was in two weeks), reapplied my make-up, and left Wande's apartment— I saw her look at me with pity and confusion, and I met with you at a fancy French restaurant. I don't even like French food, I told you this before.

The scenery of the restaurant was... very French; it had the flag of France and everything. You reserved a table for three, which brought flashbacks of Chiamaka, and I started to worry again. Would I look better than her? What did her hair look like? If you were to choose, was I your first choice? Did you like me more than you liked her?

"Hey, babe. We've been worried sick about you," you said as you stood up to kiss me.

"Oh?" I said as I sat on the opposite side of the table.

"You smell great. It's that sexy perfume, huh?"

"Mm-hmm."

Your mother came to join us, and I swear I let out a sigh of relief.

"B, you made it. My goodness, we were worried sick about you," she feigned a British accent. She smiled, and her eyes wrinkled, giving her that pretentious, caring face we give people we tolerate. Your mother didn't hate me, she didn't like me either. She's the woman who feels the need to remind the people that she's compassionate but will never extend a hand of service. She was all talk and no action. Bless her heart.

"How are you feeling after graduation?" you asked.

“Okay. ****, I have to tell you something,” I responded

“Before you do, I think you’ll like what he has to say,” your mother intruded.

“What is it?” I said with no emotion.

“B, you are the woman of my dreams...” Oh my God. You were proposing marriage to me. As you kept going with your memorized speech, my face was expressionless, but my mind was tired, I was thirsty, hungry, and wanted to sleep. I took a sip from the water glass; I felt the coolness of the water flow to my shoulders, chest, and every part of my body. I don’t know why, but I remembered a sermon from my childhood Sunday school about the living water when Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink because He was thirsty. Maybe, just maybe, the Lord knew how I was feeling at the time— after all, He was God in man... surely, He knew how I felt at that moment.

“Will you marry me?”, you finally asked and put the ring box in front of me. The ring was huge, not to my taste.

“What do you say, daughter-in-law?”, your mother asked.

I looked around the restaurant and back at your mother. I smiled, and wore the ring— it was not my size.

“You’re going make a cute and iconic couple!” your mother exclaimed. Now that I reflect on it, your mother probably entertained the idea of having a drop of color in the family.

“****, my mother died last week. I’m leaving for Lagos in three days,” I said flatly. I don’t remember much, other than you not offering to go with me.

*

I still hadn’t shed a tear. My mother of twenty years had gone. She was forty. I still wasn’t eating well, but I truly wasn’t hungry. Everyone was crying and mourning my mother. It was worse the morning of the burial. I never realized how I adapted to the comforts of America quickly; I was constantly annoyed at the lack of electricity and the unavailable hot water, which I had to boil first. Ah, Naija!

I felt the heaviness of my emotions as I was carrying the shovel and pouring the dirt over my mother’s coffin. My mind was racing and calculating so many things at once. How can it be possible that a human being can leave the physical realm and never be seen again till the Resurrection morning? How did the doctors not catch this? The cause of her death, to me, was embarrassing, and I covered my face at the thought of it. She’s gone for good now, and I still didn’t cry. For the first time in a Nigerian mourning setting, someone was being forced to cry instead of trying to stop them from crying. I just couldn’t cry. My body could not interpret how I was feeling. The tears wouldn’t come because my brain didn’t believe it.

About to alight the car in my mother's compound, I hear a nostalgic and annoying voice singing, "*Boli Boli Boli Bolinto to to!*". I turn to the sound of the voice and see my childhood neighbor, Dolapo. We called him Dolipop because his head was bigger than the rest of his body, which made him resemble a lollipop.

"Dolipop!" I gasped as I hugged him. As much as I hadn't cried for weeks, I hadn't smiled either, but seeing Dolapo made me smile. The tears were coming soon.

"Boli Boli, how far now? I'm so sorry for your loss; this isn't how we were supposed to reunite. Your mother was the whole neighborhood's mother, and we feel her absence."

"She was a good mother. It doesn't feel real, you know?"

"It doesn't. How are you holding up?"

"Just fine. I don't want to talk about this. How are you now, Dolipop?"

"Boli Boli, nobody calls me that anymore. You know I'm now a big boy in the streets of LASU."

"Na so! How is LASU *sef?*"

"Bolinto, you escaped o! *Oloun!* We're just suffering. Every time strike strike strike! *Kilode?!* I even heard you graduated. I wish I had that opportunity."

His talking about the opportunity made me feel ungrateful and the struggles I faced as a foreigner, and your girlfriend were irrelevant, still, I didn't say anything.

"How are you, too?" he asked me.

"I'm good. I haven't told anyone this but I am engaged."

"Ah! Boli Boli is going to be a wife? *Iyawo wa!*"

"Shut up your mouth! You want the whole world to hear?"

"You should shout it to the world if you're truly in love with this *bobo*. Is he *oyinbo?*"

"Yes, he is white."

"O ga ju. Congratulations. What about your plans?"

"What plans?"

"To become rich and have properties around the nation?"

When Dolapo and I were growing up, we shared our dreams with each other. He wanted to be a great Mathematician like his grandfather, except that the world would know his name. I wanted to own affordable houses and apartments around the nation for people to live in, especially single mothers. How I would get that money? I didn't know, but I had sympathy for single parents.

"Dolapo, that dream is not going to happen o. I don't have the time."

"Hmm... Bolinto, whatever is making you think like this, you have to drop it so you can move forward and fulfill your dreams. Our dreams can't remain dreams."

Our dreams can't remain dreams.

*

I stayed in Lagos just to catch up with the things I was supposed to do with my mother after graduation. One of the things we were supposed to do together was to visit my childhood church. My mother was a believer, but I cannot say she knew Jesus intimately. There was a sense of urgency within me to go somewhere peaceful, and there was no other place I could think of except where I was most happy and satisfied. I remember running into Sunday school just to play with my friends, dance and sing all the praise songs dramatically, eat the after-service snacks, and pray to God that my mother would get married so I could have a young brother. I don't remember much about the church after age twelve because my mother was no longer a consistent attendee, and that was perfect for me— a full weekend!

I got to church late. The service was pretty normal, almost lukewarm. But as I was leaving, I was handed a flier by one of the ushers who told me, like he knew, “Who is he that is holding you back from being with Jesus?”.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“The Lord told me to ask you that question,” the usher replied with a faint smile, like the Lord was telling him more.

“If God cares so much, why is He ignoring what I'm going through?” I really wanted to know.

“Some of the things you're going through may be a result of your actions. We have a bad habit of blaming God for things we didn't even involve Him in.”

I hissed and walked away.

I got home that evening and decided to clean out my mother's room. She was not a hoarder, so that was not going to be hard on my emotions. I dragged a box she had in her safe, and it had a lot of outdated documents and information. What are the odds that the paper I picked out was a copy of *my* trust fund? I didn't know my mother had been saving money over the years. She didn't have a lot of money, but she was smart. I sat on the floor and stared at the document and felt tears flowing from my eyes. I cried silently. Finally.

“I don't know what to do with my life,” I said to no one. “I don't think I'm ready either,” I said to God.

*

Anytime we talked on the phone, there was no sense of urgency for my return in the tone of your voice, so I couldn't tell whether you missed me or not. I asked Aunty Tolani, Uncle Kwame, and Wande to help me pack my things from your place. While I am still contemplating answering what feels like a burdened call from God, I know staying with you and marrying you will end in tears, so I'm obeying the voice that keeps telling me to run.

Please, don't call me or try to look for me. I've changed my number and information. Maybe you should look for Chiamaka, you seemed to love her. I don't know that you love me, but I don't love you. You know, we've never verbally told that to each other. I will be turning 21 soon, and I cannot keep living my life with my head buried between my legs.

It's not your fault, I should have left sooner. Still, the problem is not me, it's you. I guess you can say I am breaking up with you if you're looking for a way to articulate this long letter. Your ring will be with this letter, and my things and myself will be gone before you even notice.

Live well, ****.

Not yours,

Omobolanle.