

"I've fallen in love with another woman, Anu," my throat ran dry, and for several seconds, I believed I had not heard him correctly. Somewhere in between the beginnings of his sentence, my eardrum had failed. As though he knew I had started to doubt my sense of hearing, he stated again, more clearly and meticulously, "I do not love you anymore."

Was that even possible, I began to ask myself. Were feelings of love like a light switch that one could turn off and on at any time? Was it possible to love two people in two years? Well, it was possible, very possible for Nosakare Igwe Collins.

I sought for words, but I ended up opening and closing my lips like a fish gasping for oxygen. My brain had gone blank as shock wrapped its thick arms around my petite figure.

I had begun to plan a wedding. In my head, I had picked the perfect princess gown. I had even chosen the venue. I had started to name our five

children! All of a sudden, had love just flown away?

"Are you there, Anu?" His voice deep and firm, bereft of remorse or even the mildest gloom.

"Who is she?" I managed to ask. "What does she have that I lack? What has she given that I can't give in abundance?" I sat there, burning the tip of my tongue. My mind started to whirl with questions. Questions that came to ignite a fire in me and started slowly to burn a bottomless hole inside my gut. I had so much to say, yet I couldn't will myself to talk. I pressed my thumb against the end icon and hung up.

Nosa and I met at the University of Lagos where I was a final-year student, and he wanted to commence his second degree in statistics. He was talkative, and it irritated me at our first meeting because I detested people who spilled too much about themselves. Like a mouth with no filter, he went on and on. In a few hours, I had known that his father was a polygamist, and his mother died while birthing her fourth child – he was the second. He had three stepmothers, one of which bore no

children and left his father's house after he died of a heart attack. I could have written an entire book on Nosakare Igwe's life story on our first meeting, and I didn't even ask him to tell me about himself because, to be extremely honest, I wasn't interested. Funny, isn't it?

Nosakare wasn't love at first sight or first meet like my secondary school boyfriend. I didn't love Nosakare; I didn't even like him that much. I didn't realize that as days went by and the sun went down, I was falling slowly, very slowly but deeply and madly in love with this parrot of a man. I began to love to listen; I began to crave his voice, desire his long, weird childhood experiences, and man did he have a lot. I began to luxuriate in his presence, his voice, his smell, his touch, him. And even when I realized, it didn't hit me like a moving bulldozer; it softly eased into my system, took over my senses, and I embraced it wholeheartedly.

Nosa informed me that he wasn't going to pursue his second degree anymore because it was going to get in the way of his tech career. Tech career that he had not even begun. He said he wanted to be a

front-end developer, then a few weeks into the talking stage, he told me he wanted to go into interior design.

"What about your coding? Why don't you want that anymore?" I remember being slightly irritated but trying to conceal it in my tone because I didn't want to upset him.

"I had a rethink. I don't think I'm interested in this whole Tech stuff anymore. I'm more of a design person," He told me. He sounded conflicted, not shy, never shy.

"You know you can put your design into use with Tech," I said to him. I wasn't Tech-savvy, but I knew a little and enough to know about the limited opportunities available.

"Interior design is what I want, Anu." He declared with a tone of finality, a tone that slapped an invisible full stop at the back of his words and told me to shut up. I did shut up.

Days before he asked me to be his girlfriend in his

studio apartment, he told me he wanted to explore photography and see if it was for him.

He had been an indecisive person, switching careers like boxers, from the start, but it wasn't a red flag for me. Those weren't the red flags you advised your sister to flee from. It was a pink flag, a flag that wasn't very green but wasn't quite red either, so it is dismissed because it isn't clear. I couldn't possibly have foretold the future and known that the pink flag I had dismissed would have been my biggest mistake.

Nosa and I were pretty opposite in that aspect. I wasn't indecisive; I never did anything or spoke about doing it without having my mind made up and a clear plan on how to go about it. I was hard-wired like that. I finished my Biochemistry degree and moved out of my parents' house with the little money I had garnered from my side jobs, one of which I wanted to go into full-time. I wanted to make clothes, style, design, and sell dresses. Nosa didn't know this until the day he kissed me and asked me what he could do to make me the happiest. Then I proceeded to tell him about my

love for fashion designing. I was elated that someone cared about me, cared enough to want to listen to me, and took out a loan for me to go part-time to a fashion school.

Nosa loved me, or rather, he made me feel loved. From my stubby, thin, relaxer-damaged hair to my short, fat toes, he adored every part of me. He loved my oversized nose, my plump lips, and he would run his fingers over the stretch marks on my thighs at night and say, "You are very beautiful, Anu." And I am left to mull over our best days and wonder if he was doing the very same to his new girl. Has he called her beautiful also? Did I stop being very beautiful? Have I taken a stench that repulsed him?

As it began to occur to me that I had just gotten dumped, I couldn't blame anyone but myself. I had not been careful.

I should have been watchful, I should have caught on early and noticed his slow withdrawal signs, the late nights that started to become frequent, the lack of consistent communication, his cold shoulders, the vague answers... It was all crystal clear. The

signs had been there, popping up one after the other, very brief yet very clear. I had turned a blind eye and made excuses for him.

I should have known that I was failing and done better.

Maybe I should have been insecure and worried a little bit more about the fact that Nosa could be snatched from my loose grip.

Though Nosa was not snatched, a grown man could not be snatched.

Maybe if I were more observant, I would have known that it was like a little malignant tumor metastasizing across my body system, and in the twinkle of an eye, my days were numbered.

Maybe if I had known, I would have said 'I'm fine' when I wasn't.

Maybe I had burdened him with my many troubles, and he found comfort in the arms of another

woman.

So, for all the times I bellowed louder when he yelled, I blame me. I should have been quiet.

For all the times I didn't say 'I love you' back in anger, I despise myself. I should have said it regardless of the fire he had fueled in me.

For all the times I didn't do as he said, I curse myself for I had not given enough, said enough, done enough, and been enough.

Hot tears began to fall from my eyes. I wanted to call him. I wanted to apologize and say more than I am sorry. I wanted to tell him that I had reflected on my actions and I knew where I went wrong, I knew better, and I would do better. I wanted him back. I wanted to kiss his lips and laugh at his silly jokes. I wanted to hold his hands and introduce him to my parents. I wanted to call him, husband, and wake up right next to him. I wanted to bore him children. I wanted him.

So I picked up my phone and dialed his number

with my heart pounding, trying to force its way out of my chest. He picked on the fourth ring and a feminine voice reached my ears.

"Hello, Anu." She sounded calm, too soft for a person speaking to a woman on her man's phone. Crazy.

"Hi, Good day." I found my voice matching her sweet and calm tone. "I want to speak to Nosa, please." I didn't give space for her response.

"Nosa isn't here. He went out." She replied. Her tone still held the softness with which she used to begin. It suddenly struck me that she sounded like an Igbo girl.

"My name is Anne," she introduced unasked.

"Please tell Nosa I called and he should—"

"He's here." She cut me off sharply like she couldn't bear to hear another desperate pathetic word from my mouth.

"Anu," Nosa spoke, and fresh tears filled my eyes.

"Nosa," I called. "it's a prank, abi?" A short humorless laughter prised from my lips.

"What is a prank?" He asked, sounding utterly clueless.

"The break-up and who was that girl? Your cousin?" I needed to be right.

"Anu, Are you good?" He was questioning my sanity. I could question my sanity as well.

"I'm very good. When are you coming over? What do you want me to cook?"

"Please let's just make this thing easy..."

"I slept with your brother. Marcus and I had sex, and it was good. A lot better than the five-minute rubbish you do in the bedroom."

"You what?!" His tone rose to an octave.

"It was a mistake, but I wanted to let you know that I enjoyed it. I enjoyed every bit of it, and if you leave me, I will go back to Marcus and live happily ever after."

"You cheated on me?" The shock was so evident in his voice it made me throw my head backward in laughter.

"Yes. It was at your birthday party. Your brother was probably drunk, but I swear I was wide-eyed, and that was the—"

"You stupid whore!" He seemed more angry than hurt.

"YOU CHEATED FIRST!" I boomed into my phone as tears dropped from my eyes. "You cheated first because right when I was in love with you, you went ahead to love another woman. What does she have that I lack?!"

"EVERYTHING! EVERYTHING ANU!" He yelled right back. "Also she has not smashed my brother."

"Oh, she soon would when she sees the rubbish underneath your trousers."

Silence was his reply. I had hit, I thought until he responded.

"Bye, Anu. I'm so glad I broke up with you and found someone better."

Then he hung up.

A deep feeling of regret and loss awashed me, and I knew I had lost Nosa. I had used my own hands to build my house and used the same hands to burn it to the ground.

I dialed his number again. He cut it on the second ring. I tried again, and his phone was switched off.

What have you done, Anu?

I walked to the wine cabinet, poured my stale red wine into a cup, and started to down cup after cup until I couldn't feel my chest trying to explode, and the pounding in my head had gone down. I picked

up my phone and played the first music on my playlist. It was a fast-beat rap. Raps were Nosa's thing, and I had only started it out because he claimed it was so good. As I bobbed my head, twisted my waist, and jumped on my feet to the melody of the playing music, I felt like my life was coming to an end, and all I had was that moment, so I didn't stop. Even my arms began to tire, and my feet were hurting, I didn't stop. Even when the pounding returned to my head, I pressed on. I had just that moment. All my dreams and goals, every desire I ever harbored had gone with Nosakare Igwe, even the desire to keep living. I had built my life to revolve around him, and when he decided to go, my life went with him. I was left to wonder who I ever was without him, if I ever had dreams that didn't involve him, if I could live a life without him. What has Nosa done to me? I was dancing vigorously, drinking like a drunkard, and tears wouldn't stop falling from my eyes. If anyone had walked in at that moment, they would have taken me to a psychiatrist. Is it my fault that I had given too much of myself, yet it wasn't enough? Is it my fault that there was someone better? A prettier girl? A hotter girl? A smarter person? My life had lost its

salt, and it was my fault.