

# **THE ONE YOU BROKE**

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CUE: Play Molly Drake's 'I Remember.'

### HIM

The pine tree was almost lifeless, nearly bare. A carpet of fallen needles and leaves with a chestnut hue had formed a rough bed that covered its shallow roots.

The gardener said the tree was alive, "It heeds your desire and grants them. For a time"

You bought a padlock, carved our initials onto its golden pelts, and locked it to a branch. You tramped the ripped barks and wished for the dying tree to outlive that season's harmattan wind.

'To decide when our love dies,' you said.

That was nine years ago, six months and twelve days. It was the Thursday we met to birth our affair. Your heart bore the scars of four lovers, while mine longed to be free from the bonds of marriage. You offered pleasure, I offered warmth. A fine bargain. We proceeded to the lodging, a dark mansion with tiled walls and squishy floors. A perfect place to cloak sin. The housekeeper offered us salted abacha and chilled zobo and hung around to make small talk. We climbed up the stairs and headed to a room. The room was cramped; two small hospital beds were positioned at each end. We agreed on separate beds, sat across each other – an arm's length away – and breathed the room's musky scent. For hours we stayed in silence, eyes locked anywhere but at each other, as the burden of our planned sin weighed heavily on us.

At last, I opted for a bath. I hid as I peeled off my three-piece suit of clothing then wandered to the bathroom. The bathtub creaked at the introduction of my weight; the pump handle groaned at my touch; the water pressure was lazy. You called out to inquire if the water was cold. I shouted a frightened "No." Then you entered the bathroom. You have a pear-shaped birthmark below your abdomen and a

frightening round scar on your right thigh. I see you and my soul stoops.

You hopped into the shower, armed with the information of a not-cold-water. Your scream was hypnotic, your laughter was ecstasy. I heard it and fell in lust for the first time. I took your hand, and you took my breath. I felt your breasts, and my tongue softened, my mouth parted to the embrace of your lips. We were transcended to another world. And there, nothing mattered. We sailed to my bed and then yours, and then mine. We descended into the deep ends and only resurfaced to watch the full moon.

In my arms, you said the words that have always caused you heartbreak. "I love you," it rolled off your lips, easy and true. Like it was a slip of the tongue, a casual declaration that comes as a release after great sex. You didn't even know you'd said it. The night was dead quiet save for the whistles of the pine tree. The wind tickled the hairs on my chest and drew tears from your eyes. The beauty of our moist naked body mocked the dazzling night sky. When you spoke of this moment, you spoke of our radiant smiles. What I remember is regret masquerading as a smile. With you I felt alone; you are a country that has lost all of itself, like this one; too nostalgic to let go, too broken to move on.

## **HER**

Despite the discomfiture, I folded myself next to you, on your bed, thankful, my hands interlocked with yours.

Despite exhaustion, I kept awake, too frightened you'll be gone the next day. It was an affair after all. I drifted off to sleep before long and found myself dreaming of you throughout the night, with your smiling face watching over me.

On the morrow, you had not left, had not picked up your bag and clothes and my purse, and disappeared like my previous lovers. You

were the one who stayed. I rushed to the pine tree, prayed my thanks, and cried my request.

“Please, let me keep this one,” I whispered to it, and it whistled its approval.

You were shy. Still avoided my gaze. Still hid to dress. Still got nervous when our skin brushed. I loved it.

We agreed on a trip to the marketplace; I was determined to cook you a proper meal, with red meat and cocoyam and stock fish, not the stale bread and tea the housekeeper offered. You were clad in your familiar grey three-piece suit, the same one as the previous day, and I couldn't help but notice that you had initially intended to stay for just one night. I wore a sunlit flowery gown with a skirt that was full and billowy.

“No make-up,” you advised after complimenting my beauty. In response, I gently kissed your chin as you tried to conceal your boyish grin. Perhaps it was the sincerity of your emotions or your inability to disguise them, but with you, I found security.

As you drove your Mercedes Benz 300 along the bumpy, pothole-ridden road, you spoke of your marriage – of its failures, of your wife's emotional distance, of your growing doubts of the union, and a yearning for an escape. To forget.

We listened to Robbie William, ‘Feel,’ on repeat. And after a long quiet, I offered to be your escape.

You smiled. That smile remains etched in my memories.

We wandered through the bustling marketplace with the sun beating down on our backs. We sucked on dry oranges relishing their juice that did nothing to help our thirst. The meat seller sold us overpriced beef that seemed closer to yellow than its promised red. You purchased three large grey shirts – I chose for you – that would appropriately hide your bulging stomach. You gifted me a bouquet of plastic flowers as a romantic gesture, while you held onto the uziza leaves. We visited the magic shop at the southern end of the market to

hear our fortune; I was to die in a week, and you were to find true love in a month. You did not shy away when I leaned in and kissed your chin in the busy market.

On the way back, we sang along to Fela's *Zombie*, belting out the lyrics with the enthusiasm of truant teenagers. We chuckled at the huskiness of your voice, but you kept on shouting 'Zombie!'

In a quiet second, I whispered "I love you," though I doubt you heard it because you were pounding at the wheel, laughing like you were possessed by the ghost of Fela Kuti. You didn't even pause or attempt to lower the volume on the radio.

I wondered what would happen if you'd heard it, would you turn off the stereo? Would you have pulled the car over? Would you have said it to me? I refrained from repeating those words because telling you posed too great a risk. I merely watched you driving, pounding, screaming.

Back then, I could have sworn I knew love. Love was a naive man who agreed to an affair with me, with the condition that we would end it if either of us fell in love. Love sat across me, crazed from Fela Kuti's signature track, and all I was permitted to offer was my silence and smile.

## **HIM**

We ate. We laughed. We danced. We played. We bathed. We slept. We learned each other's voice in the dark, explored each other's flesh, sought each other's weaknesses, and mocked each other's strengths. We found each other underneath the whistling pine tree at night and taught pleasures that brought the most passionate moans. We created memories as every affair should. I remembered having fun, two longing hearts that beat as one, but you thought we were "we", and I knew that we were just, "you and I."

On the third morning, as you mended my trouser with the needle and thread the housekeeper lent you – torn by the roots of the pine

tree – I told you of my intention to depart that afternoon. I confessed it had been fun. You had helped me resolve the issues I had in my marriage, perhaps I needed to bring my wife to a place like this – secluded, with little technology – while we ruminated on our vows. I needed my marriage to be epic, I'd see a therapist if need be, I'd try new methods of communication, and learn the seven languages of love. Anything.

I'd known you. I'd seen how alone you were, how empty, and I was scared that if I failed to fight for my marriage, then I'd be you: A wrecked soul, a bleeding heart.

## HER

How he shaped his mouth when he cut me. The sparks that ignited in his eyes when he told me of his departure. This man to whom I have poured my soul. The man who has demystified the complication of love to me with every breath, every touch. This man had always been prepared to leave me, just like my previous lovers

I had been ruined in my soul; anyone could tell from my face. I tried to wash off this heartbreak, so I dallied in the bathroom. When I returned, I found you near the pine tree. You had lit a small fire and were burning the shirts I'd chosen for you. I remember the firelights – beautiful colours dancing in the breeze. I remembered the melting grey cotton falling off the stick with which you steadied them upon the fire. I remembered the housekeeper's gaze, fastidious as he added more kerosene. I remembered the smell of smoke, like an incense exorcising my stupidity, my heartbreak.

You approached, avoided my lips like it had the plague. But your mouth kissed my forehead, you sucked on it like you've been waiting to, waiting to drain me of me. Then you entered your car and drove off.

I remembered ash.

## **HIM**

We had an agreement. A bargain. Pleasure for warmth. We were two adults who reached a consensus. You gave me pleasure; I gave you warmth. I remembered us having fun and we could have appreciated the gift of those memories. For it was meant to be just that. Fun.

## **HER**

Fun? Just fun? That night, in that poorly lit room, with the stars and the moon and all the hosts of heaven looking down on us, I gave you all that I have, all that I could give. I gave you my heart, my soul, my love. I gave you all of me and you accepted with glee, thankless, sought for kerosine, hung it on a stick for display, set it ablaze, and watched it burn. Watched the ashes fill the sky. Watched them thaw.

And in return, you gave what? Warmth?

Who decides where warmth starts and where it ends? How do you know I had it? Warmth?

## **HIM**

I gave what I agreed to give, and I had none of these things you claimed you gave. I was vulnerable, you were vulnerable, and we agreed to use each other as a fix. I never asked for your heart, nor your soul, nor your love.

## **HER**

After you abandoned me, I bent and wept the weight of years of heartbreak at the foot of the pine tree. Then I exorcised you, one memory at a time. As your touch and breath and sound rolled past, it felt as though I was dying.

It was difficult, perhaps my most difficult heartbreak, but this time I yearned for vengeance. And beneath the rustling pine tree, I demanded it. With my tears and spit and broken heart, I requested that the tree ‘heed my desire and grant them for a time,’ as the gardener had said.

I desired you to return.

We already had a padlock with our names on it, it wasn’t a difficult desire to grant. You would be mine for as long as that padlock hung on that branch. The pine tree answered. It granted my desire.

Not long after, you came back to me with a smile I recognized as a form of grief. But you stayed. I’d consoled myself with that knowledge, ‘he stayed.’

The tree had put you in some kind of spell that bound you to me as a slave-*ish* lover. For seven years you stayed but you were not with me. I’d hoped all of you would be mine, that someday you would give all of you to me as I had done, but you never did.

In the mornings, you woke me up with a lucid kiss. In the afternoons, you moped, awaiting instructions from me. At night, you croaked when we bonded. Only when you drifted to sleep did I see the man I knew, the man I loved. For seven years, I had a prop stalk my movement. And when I could not bear it any longer, I hacked off the branch and set you free. Because that is what my love is – freedom.

After seven years, I left that town. For good.

You are the one I let go. The one I set free. The one I loved. Still love.

## HIM

They said my wife held a burial two years after she’d declared me missing, which was a week after you’d bound me in your demonic spell. Everyone thought I’d died. You bound me to you for seven years.

Seven years!

Four seasons have sailed since you freed me. I have attended my annual memorial service, twice. The words on my epitaph expound on someone I don't know how to be, everything you have stolen from me.

‘A Son, Brother, and Friend. A Husband.’

I watch my wife sob, each year. I look forward to it now, it's therapy. I want to go to her, scream her name, beg her forgiveness, but I cannot let her see me like this, ravaged by insanity. One day, perhaps. After you're dead. After my vengeance has you.

I have wandered places searching for you, and have finally made home where you held me captive: the place you abandoned me after you freed me. It's the only place I don't feel lost in time. I have learned to decipher the meanings of the pine tree's whistling. I have learned to whistle back.

Most nights, I dream I am trapped in a room with wooden walls and I scratch and scratch until my fingers bleed, my nails fall off and wooden spikes inject themselves into my flesh. Some nights, I break free and find I've been stuck inside the pine tree's trunk, then I wake. Other times, you are there haunting me, attempting to pull me into my wooden prison. It's worse if you're there because I give the housekeeper hell when I wake. I thrash the place. I convulse; I see shadows. I see you.

A few times, I dream of my wife, we are arguing – screaming at the top of our voice. I start to walk away to head for the bar where I met you. Someone screams at me not to leave, to continue with the fight. I think it's 'me', the 'me' you did not break. I leave anyway, but I wake calm, no shadows.

I pray you visit, in the flesh, then I can end the shadows.

Two weeks ago, I set the pine tree on fire. A week ago, I used an axe on its trunk. I did the same yesterday. The housekeeper came to get me after I had exhausted my strength. Tomorrow, I'll try the roots.

I am the one you broke: come visit.

Come lay beneath the tree with me one last time before I succeed  
in uprooting its roots. The pine tree is almost lifeless now, nearly bare.