

# THE RADIO AT MIDNIGHT

A short story  
collection

CLARA JACK

# FOREWORD

*This above many things is a collection of nine stories. Stories I had the courage to tell and stories I fell in love with in my mind I had to immortalise them. It took me nine hundred days but I am finally letting you read them all at once.*

*These are stories of you and of me. If while reading any of these stories, you see yourself even in the tiniest reflection, thank God and the universe that I got to tell your story. I loved doing it. I will always thank the people who were there at 2 a.m when I strung each word together. I will also thank everyone who read this collection in bits until it is the one hundred and ten pages of artistic goodness that it is.*

*I will thank the muses. Every piece I read that influenced this and every soul that lived brightly enough for me to pen down. Also the Owl Canyon Press prize for the opening paragraph of Kalian's art. Finally and most importantly, I will thank God for being an artist so great I could learn from and could inspire me in the most beautiful ways my imagination could carry.*

*On behalf of all my pencil marks, I send you my gratitude with this gift. All my love, Clara, x,*

# *THE RADIO AT MIDNIGHT*

## *A SHORT STORY COLLECTION*

- Twenty five months
- Young man
- One more glass of white wine
- Uncle Silas' wedding
- Koboko
- The man from old Nigeria
- The radio at midnight
- Kalian's art
- With love from the south



# TWENTY FIVE MONTHS

*For Mimi, I have missed you every day of these one hundred and three months.*

An old woman like myself should not be dressing up to go to a Friday night Christmas party. I should be in my house with a big bowl of plantain chips and popcorn all mixed up together. Later, when the movie is almost done I would drink that five alive pulpy drink I like to drink which is not exactly natural but I like to tell myself is. However, I am wearing jeans from a lifetime ago and a bright red top which says *vintage* in rather messy ink and it is sprawled across my breasts. So much for the Christmas spirit my mind says. I am a widow and my husband has been dead for 25 months. I like to count it in months because that way the numbers are high and I do not judge myself so much when I look at other men. The other day at First Bank, the line to deposit cash was so long that I started fantasizing about the man who stood beside me on another queue. He was very tall and had a hint of age. He had no ring on his finger. He could be single, a widower or a smart cheater. None of that mattered in my fantasies. All that mattered was that he was fine and I was a widow.

Oh no matter how much I fantasize and try not to judge myself I still know that I loved my husband so much that now it is very hard to cope. He was a fine man. The kind of fine they used in old English novels. The way Austen had described Darcy. He was handsome and

of good character. Too good he was sometimes. I miss him all the time, but then his presence lies with me on very cold nights when I have cried myself to sleep. We have a baby girl. However she argues that she is not a baby anymore. She is 24 and has a very nice job in one of these upcoming IT firms that I do not understand what exactly they do. Abigail is the reason I am going to this party this 6:30pm. It is at a very nice small restaurant a little bit far from the house. I cannot remember the name but I know where it is. It is her office Christmas party and I am her plus one. She says all I do is stay at home and sulk for daddy who is never going to come back. I do not like when she says it because it is skin piercingly true. I miss him and deep down I am very angry at him for him leaving me in this life. He had promised till death did us part and now it had. The last days he spent on this earth were all too horrible. Cancer had taken my soul mate and left my soul in half. I had prayed that he would just pass so that he would no longer feel such grave pain. But that is the thing about death. It does not take the pain away. It just passes it on to someone else. Suicide, mercy killing, shooting, whatever takes your life just passes the pain to someone else who loves you more than you may even love yourself. In this story, that person is me.

I am forty six years of age and I am already retired. The first three weeks after my husband had died I did not go to work. The fourth week I was still not up to it so I put in the letter. My twenty years in government service did bring forth a decent gratuity and even more satisfying pension. I had used a chunk of it to travel that first month.

Calabar first, then I left the country. Paris was good, so was Rome but even Greece which I had longed for, for so long could not heal me. When I was tired of spending money and showing up at embassies rather reluctantly, I came back home to a waiting and expectant Abi. Her eyes had been so bright and full of hope. Hope that I was going to be healed of the sorrow but I was not. I was like beige. Plain but somehow passed for approval.

My husband wanted to be cremated and I had to give him his wish. Getting a cremation was not easy but Abi had a guy. He gave us the ash in a nice urn and I keep it in the wardrobe. On really really bad days, I take it out, hold it to my breast and just sit cross legged on the bed and cry. Abi had caught me doing it on Saturday and that is why I am going to this Christmas party.

I am dressed and sitting in my car turning on the ignition to start going. I am secretly praying the engine fails me but before I can say *Amen* I hear the *vroom* and I am horning for Isaac to come and open the gate. He is very fast to open the gate these days. Apparently, all the odds are in Abi's favour. I drive out of the gate with the same meticulousness as I have done in the past seventeen years. I should be fast by now you would think but I am not. I still drive slowly and gently. I am out of the gate and on the road going to the nice small restaurant. There is no traffic on any of the roads leading to the restaurant and as I drive in my meticulous manner to the restaurant, I see Abi outside the restaurant with a man who has his hand on her

waist. She has added weight. I am glad. She is laughing at something he is saying but as soon she sees my plate number, she takes his hand in hers and walks briskly towards me. As they come closer to the car, I see they are wearing matching red sweaters over varying shades of blue jeans. It is nice to know I am in sync at least. She opens the door just as I unlock it and she is smiling. She lets go of his hand and hugs me as I get out of the car.

“Mummy hi”

“Hi darling. You did not need to welcome me and keep this young man ransom”

She laughs and then goes on to introduce Bunmi to me. Apparently he is the head of her department but I know he likes her. These are things you can tell when you have lived as long as I or you're a writer telling a story. She continues talking about how she thought I was not going to come. She talks a lot and now I have a headache. Finally I see the name of the restaurant and say a little hmm. Abi finally finishes talking and the three of us walk into the restaurant. It does not feel the same way it did the last time I was here. It is where we had collected my husband's ashes. Then, it felt really hot and tight even though there were only a maximum of twenty people in it. Now it feels cold, comfortably occupied but there are at least fifty people inside. As soon as I get inside, I find an empty table and sit down. The headache I already have is starting to double and I am feeling sleepy. As soon as I sit, I vividly remember that day we took the urn and I wonder



how I have survived for twenty five months when that day I thought I was going to die. That night Abi stayed with me because she was afraid I would commit suicide. It was hard not to. Life was really lonely now.

Life had never been busy because both my husband and I were only children. Just like Abi now. Apparently a long line of difficult conceptions. We kept no deep friendships and no strings at all. It was just my husband, Abi and I. Then it was good because Abi had friends who had mothers and I had nice colleagues. However, none of them stayed long enough to be my friend so soon enough, they faded and passed as temporary acquaintances.

I stare pass the tables and people in front of me till my pupils dilate and my vision becomes blurry. Now I am staring at nothing in particular. Soon enough, my husband's smiling picture pops up in my head and I am smiling.

“Mum, this is my boss. His name is Michael. He went to Nottingham just like you”

I look up and the person standing and looking at me does not look old enough to be any body's boss. He looks like a child whose father has a difficult to pronounce amount of money. Abi is smiling broadly and Michael has his hand out expecting a handshake. I shake his hand and then he says the same thing everybody has said for the past twenty five months.

“Good evening ma. I’m really sorry for your loss. The Lord is your strength”

I give him a subtle smile and a Thank you and Amen. He smiles and he sits down opposite me. Abi sits beside him and she starts;

“Michael wanted to meet you because he lost his mother as well. He said his dad was even sadder than you. I did not think anyone could be sadder than you but then he said his dad was so maybe you guys could meet each other. It would do both of you some good. Instead of just being you know- alone”

Abi keeps talking and soon she diverts and starts talking about something else but I still nod after every five seconds. Abi was a good girl but she always talks a lot and she does not even know it. Michael however knows it but he does not stop her or interrupt. He just keeps looking at me while I look at Abi and him. Abi finally stops talking when Bunmi comes. He says that she is needed. She asks if she could go but that she’d be back. Of course I nod and she leaves. Michael however stays behind and he looks at me with a smile that makes me smile too.

“So, do I call you Abi’s mum or Mrs Abiye”

“Elizabeth’s my first name”

“Ok then but I don’t think I’d ever get up to calling you Elizabeth so Mrs Abiye is fine by me”

“Ok”

I start tapping the table with both my index fingers. I was bored and I was hungry. Michael just stays there and looks at me. Abi returns with Bunmi and four plates of food. Jollof rice is here. I am excited even after all these years. She places the plate in front of me and then I wait an exact 10 seconds before I pick up the spoon and start eating. All four of us sit on the same table but the three of them talk about something I am not paying enough attention to. They laugh a lot but I just eat. I eat, drink the water the waiter brought and start counting in my mind. When I get to ten minutes I would get up to leave. Abi will probably stop me but I will still try. I had become the topic of the conversation but I did not realize it until Abi calls me the third time. I was still counting.

“It’s getting late mum and you’re making that face you make when you’re feeling sleepy so we will let you go. However, you’re meeting Michael’s dad on Friday in this same restaurant. I hope you will come”

I simply nod and smile. I take my bag and get up to leave. Michael stands up to walk me out. Okay then. I give a rather unclear and only I can hear **Merry Christmas!** and leave the restaurant with Michael behind me. The walk to the car is silent but the silence is not surprising nor uncomfortable. If anything it is soothing and needed. When I open the door and get in, Michael closes it and reminds me about Friday. Ok I say simply and put on the ignition. He waves as I drive out and I smile in return.

I get home and fall asleep immediately. That night as I lay in bed I don't think about anything or reminisce I just sleep for a long time.

When I wake up the next morning it is 11am. I cannot remember the last time I slept this long so my body feels weird. My eyes have a hard time opening and all my muscles tighten up. I stretch and just lay in bed staring at the ceiling. I hear a horn and soon I can tell that the car has driven out of the gate. The whole compound is empty well except for Isaac and I. Now the compound is empty I can play my country music loud and not get any knock on the door telling me to 'please turn the volume down'. I pick up the CD from the rack and put it into the player. I go to number 5. **All shook up** by Elvis Presley. My husband played this song so much I eventually liked it. Whenever I play it I can still hear my husband's whistle somewhere in the background.

The music makes my eyes open completely now and I get up to clean the house. Since the soot came to town I clean the house every day. It has become a routine. As I pick up the broom another of Presley's classics plays. **Wise men say only fools rush in but I can't help falling in love with you.** I cannot listen to this song. It is all too painful so I look for the remote and change it. But I am not fast enough because tears have started dropping from my eyes even before I can hear **She was afraid to come out of the locker... she was afraid that somebody would see... an itsy bitsy teenie winnie**

**yellow polka dot bikini...** This song is more bearable. It even helps me sweep better.

The rest of the day goes by fast and before I can overthink it I am looking for a dress to wear for my dinner with Michael's father. I have none of those dresses anymore. I gave them all out the month after my husband passed. The expensive ones, the gifted ones, the ones I wore just once and even the least expensive ones. I put them all in a big bag and gave them to Abi. She knew who needed them. I couldn't stand the memories that the dresses held. After looking through my wardrobe which is empty now compared to twenty five months ago, I find a midnight blue gown. It is short with a generous cleavage. It is a date. It should be appropriate for the occasion I say trying to convince myself. I go to sleep early that night. I do not watch **My heart beats for Lola** nor **Fearless heart** or even **Tinsel**. I simply have my bath and go to bed.

The next day I wake up earlier. I am sorely disappointed because now I have to be awake for a longer time. This time I put on the television and watch the re-runs of the shows I missed last night. While watching the last re-run, I realize I did not eat the day before. I walk to the fridge but there is nothing to eat. Abi has been telling me of these new restaurants where you can order and they bring the food to the house. I want to try them because now I have no strength to leave the house and I have more money than I care to account for. I place the call to Abi on directions on how to go about it. She picks on

the seventh ring and her voice is high as always. It calms me and I give a little smile.

“Hi mama”

“Hello Abi my dear. How are you today?”

“Oh mama I’m okay. How are you though? Have you eaten? I hope you are not holding daddy’s urn and crying?”

“Too many questions at once Abi dear. I am actually calling you to ask on how I can order food and they bring it to the house. I have nothing in the fridge”

She takes a short pause and I hear her talking to someone else. After her conversation with the person I cannot see, she says she would come to the house and we would have lunch. Saves you the extra money she says and ends the call. Abi comes over and we have lunch. We talk about my husband and other things like we always do. She spends a generous amount of time I am worried she would loose her job but then she says its ok. She confirms my suspicion about Bunmi. I am pleased that it has been 35years and I am still good at predicting love interests. Abi finally leaves and I watch the TV and fall asleep in front of it.

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Dinner with Michael’s father is in twenty minutes but I am already at the restaurant sitting in my car considering if I should call it off or not. I decide not to because I have nothing better to do. I come out

and walk into the restaurant. Considering the fact that I do not know what this man looks like, I keep an extra eye open. Before my eye muscles can pop, I see Michael standing as though he is waiting for someone. I walk towards him to ask him of his father. He is smiling as I'm approaching him. He is really smiling and it makes me smile too.

“Good evening Elizabeth”

I am impressed that he can remember my first name. He goes on about how his father cannot make it tonight because he is ‘not yet up to it’ in his words. I look at my dress and the shoes and think to myself how stupid I must look now. I can totally understand why Michael’s father cannot make it. I had the same excuse an hour ago. I do not want to interrupt Michael because he is in the middle of apologizing for what I think is the 11<sup>th</sup> time. I simply wait until he says he has said so much and it is time for me to talk. I simply say “Its ok and that I know exactly how painful it is to lose a spouse”. Michael nods and before I know it, we are sitting down and talking about grief. Michael has a mature mind I quickly remark.

He tells me of how his father broke all the CDs in their house because he could not listen to any of them and not cry. “Death is a bitch. A fucking bitch” he says and I could not agree more. He misses his mother. It is there in his eyes and he does not even bother to conceal it. I gather throughout our conversation that his mother was all too young to have died. Also that his father blames himself

because they had a fight the day before and she had stormed off and never come back. “I’d give anything to have them bicker one more time” he says. “It was annoying but her death is more unbearable”. He does not need to say anything for me to know how much pain he is feeling. He however smiles before he says “Well you must have it worse don’t you?”

I cannot begin to answer that question because pain is not something that can or should be measured. I simply nod to his question and smile my cover up smile. He asks me if I would like to eat anything and I say no. “Ok then but I will have chips and if you change your mind later on you could have some off my plate”. The waiter comes to take his order and it doesn’t take long before the food comes. Michael is very good at eating and talking at the same time.

He is right. I do change my mind and have about 12 pieces of chips off his plate and about seven rounds of laughing too. Two things I did not order but I do not regret . At the end of the night, Michael walks me to the car and then he leans in to kiss me. I don’t move or lean in or dodge. I just stay there like a standing fan. Before it is too late he realizes his mistake and stops. He puts his hands in his pockets and apologizes. I smile and tell him goodnight.

I get home and there is no light. I do not bother to tell Isaac to put on the gen. I simply use the torchlight in my phone to undress and wear my husband’s yellow shirt and then I play the Elvis Presley song. For the first time in twenty five months I can listen to the song without



crying and I can listen to it until the end. I fall asleep with the song on repeat. **Take my hand, take my whole life too for I can't help falling in love with you...**

The next morning when I wake up the song is still playing and it has just started. My battery is on an unusual 37%. There is light now and the time is 10:37. Another late morning. I am pleased. I decide to have my bath and plug my phone in to charge.

When I come out of the bathroom I see I have 14 missed calls from a number I do not have. I sit on the bed and I am about to call the number back when it calls again.

“Hello”

“Hi Mrs Abiye its Michael”

Without him saying his name I know it is him. I know his voice now. It is deep and has an echo with it. It also has a slight accent with it. One that makes his As sound longer. A slight British accent I suppose.

“I am calling to apologize for what happened last night. We had an amazing time. Maybe you did not but I know I did. I am glad my father could not come because I well I really liked it but then I had to go and ruin it”

All of them at that IT company do talk a lot and I smile in response to what he has said but of course he cannot see it. He breathes into the

phone. He has finished talking and now It's my turn but I do not say anything because I do not know what to say.

“I would like to take you out some other time. I know you have a million reasons to say no but that one reason why you should say yes please think of that reason. I am 31 this year if it helps your decision. I won't try to kiss you again well unless you want me to then I would rush at the opportunity but I won't swallow you or anything but I should probably stop talking now and”

He exhales and I still don't say anything.

“Well I have to go now. I have a meeting now so please call me back and say yes. Please”

He does not hesitate now. He hangs up and I hold the phone in my hand. The courage that young man has. I also think of how lonely I have been but also of what Abi would say but then I think of that one reason I should say yes. I think of that reason for a long time. It is the same reason I did not move away last night. It is the same reason I had fallen in love with the Elvis Presley song in the first place. I think of that reason and two hours have passed after his call. I go to the call log and I call him back.

# YOUNG MAN

*For you, if you have ever felt Ari's pain*

“Young man there is so much more to the world than sexual gratification” I said from my seat at the end of the long talk we had that day in my new office and you straightened your....

You walked into my office that day wearing that grey sweatshirt I had bought you. You smiled at Lydia at the *applications* desk. That smile I knew it all too well. It was the smile you gave another girl whom you told me not to worry about. I often wondered if you spoke in irony or you just had a habit of lying to me. I watched you walk your graceful walk past every table. Not slightly bothered because here in the Greek embassy I was the last contact. It was funny really. Much like your face when you finally saw me seated in my very cold office staring back at you with eyes just as cold as my ....

“Name please” I asked with that blank face you said you hated. You then chuckled and said “really, are you asking me my name”. I didn't waver still. Your eyes did not work on me anymore. “Name please”. Smile, you really thought that would make it all better. I don't blame you it worked the first thousand times. Maybe that was the problem, familiarity usually breeds contempt. You told me your name but I had already put it in the system and your application came out. The application that had more of my money in it than yours yet you were the one leaving the country and it wasn't...

“Take a seat please”. You sat down with that smirk on your face. “So, why do you want to leave the country?”

“Ari seriously there’s no need for this”

“Why do you want to leave the country?”

“I see you got the job. You deserve it Ari and you look lovely today well not just today you always look good”. You smiled again. Flattery was your weapon but this morning I had looked in the mirror and said *death, not today...*

“I do not think you are ready for this interview I would like to call on the next candidate. We have a busy schedule today.” My cold eyes were working because you gulped saliva like you did every time your ground shook. I wanted to smirk so I did. You should remember this smirk I had given it to you the day...

“Come on Ari its Greece no one goes to Greece I’m probably your only candidate this week”

“Ok then. Application denied” I was just about to sign on your form when you said “Ari please do not do this. Please be better than me. I hurt you I know I did but please. You asked why I wanted to leave. It is because I got a job waiting for me in Athens and just like I did to you I’ve hurt a lot of people and you know. It would be best if I just left. Please Ari. I need to go.”

“If you have a job in Athens I need to see the employment letter”

You brought it out. *STORKS* with images written underneath. That's all the letter head said. Photography hmm it was believable. If you forged this you would be someone else's problem.

"You applied for three years, is that correct?"

"Ari please stop."

"Come back tomorrow. You can leave now"

"Ari, please talk to me. I know I hurt you but I know that was the biggest mistake I ever made. You hurt me too. You left. You didn't even tell me you got the job. Your things are still at my house you know. Ari please say something.

"You know the day I got the job I was going to tell you. After all, I had been chasing it for all those months you laid in my bed. I was going to text you like I normally did but then I remembered when I told you about my previous job. The way you had dulled my excitement with your unnecessary lukewarm demeanour. Do you remember?" I looked straight into your eyes not because I was expecting a reply. Oh God no. I knew you remembered. I also knew you knew that I knew you remembered. Rather, I was looking into your eyes to see the reason why I had loved you in the first place. Your eyes were a plain black today unlike the brown with honey hints on every other day especially the first day. That day my car had broken down on the lonely bridge under the thunderous rain. You drove by and then stopped. You flashed me one of your smiles and ...

“Ari you were too good for that job and you know it” As you spoke I realized that my problems began with a set of fine teeth and a wet shirt. Too plain now I think of it but with you it was never plain. Nothing was plain not even...

Not even the way you had tried but nothing seemed to get the car running so you offered to take me back into town. There were still good people in this world. I thought that day but right now, it was think again Ari, think again...

“I see you kept the picture I took of you that day at the garden city fest”

Ah, the fest that was a good day. That was the day I had bought you the shirt you were wearing and a day not too long ago. That week you had just gotten your camera and was about to start your studio. Just before we left for the fest, in the car, you had said “Ari darling, say cheese.” I smiled very wide of course I was happy. You took the picture and looked at it. Again, you smiled and said “Your picture had to be the first taken you are after all my muse”

“I kept it. It’s a nice picture”. I replied you as you looked at me in my cold office.

It was indeed a nice picture. In the first week of my new job I had kept it because it reminded me of who I was when things were still good. It was like a metaphor for me but right now I kept it because I

looked good in it and it was in a nice frame. Simple. Without you, things became simpler...

“It was the Monday following the fest that you started your studio do you remember”

“Yes Ari I remember. You bought me a tripod as a warming gift. I still have it. In fact I’m taking it to Greece with me.”

“Hmmm. Hope you can still use it.”

“Ari please do not say anything else please”

“So you are afraid, do they haunt you? Those poor girls that you took advantage of. All they wanted to do was pose for the camera well pose they did.”

I chuckled because now it was funny but back then it was not. Not the slightest bit funny.

Your studio was just above our apartment. You said it was easier for you since we both knew you were the lazy one of the pair. I also remembered always telling you how lucky you were because you had a daddy with a fat pocket if not you were doomed.

A week after you started your studio business was still slow. You stayed home most days. I remember liking to come home from work and see you home doing one miserable excuse of cooking. Maybe you did love me and maybe it was just short lived just like...

The next week however you had recruited two girls. They looked like twins to me. Tall, long legs, pointed nose, sharp cheek bones that never seemed to relax. I cannot recall their names now. You had said you liked working with them they were easy to work with. Easy was the word...

The next week you barely missed work you were always upstairs with the girls taking pictures I guess but now I flinch at the thought. It repulses me. That night when I had come upstairs to remind you of your father's event we had to attend the next day. He called it the...

“Ari, do you remember my father's exhibition. The one where there was wine, art, cheese and music?”

Of course I remembered I was just trying to recall what he called it.

“Yes I recall. One of the best nights we had now I think of it.”

You were smirking. Oh the nerve you had. It was a good night in all honesty. I had a reason to dress up and everything your father was exhibiting was lovely well except cheese. I didn't like cheese. You father what an odd man he is. Although I liked him. I liked him a great deal. He liked me too. I remember the look in his eyes the day it all fell apart. He did not look at me with sympathy as I thought he would have. He looked at me with regret. Like he was the one who caused it. His sad smile spoke volumes that day and how he had simply told me “Take care Ari” and he went back in to...

“Ari, can we fix this? We had it good and you know it”



Before I could even think of it I said “no, we can’t”

“Why?”

Ah the stupid questions you always asked. I didn’t miss that at all. At first they were cute but right now, they were plain annoying even the day I had seen you...

“Ok Ari, if we cannot fix us can we at least talk about all the good times we had.”

“Like when?”

“How about the fest day? Remember how it rained all through that evening and you fell in the mud before we go to the car and and”

You were laughing so hard now I feared you might have been choking. I handed you a bottle of water a laughed too.

“And I didn’t want to sit on the chairs because I would stain them with mud. But I sat anyway and the next day we took it to the car wash and I left my novel inside. Oh I loved that book *On black sisters’ street*. Then you got me another one a week later.”

For that single moment my eyes weren’t so cold. I looked at you and I saw the honey hints.

“Or the exhibition night when you had told my father that often times you couldn’t believe he was Nigerian because of the tastes he had. And then he looked at you and said:

Oh Ari, it is the same taste your father has. Men from the south we do have fine taste.”

You said that last part in an attempt to imitate you father. I do remember your father saying that and I also remember agreeing with him because he wasn't lying. What he however missed was that some of the men from the south had queer taste as well...

“Yes, I remember that night I liked how I looked”

“I liked how you looked too Ari”.

“We had all these good moments but then you still let it all fall apart. Why?”

You looked at me with a blank face and the colour seeped from your eyes and you shook your head and said

“I do not know”

The day it had all fall apart was a rainy day. We were asleep in on the couch because we had watched the whole season 2 of *Brooklyn 99*. There was a knock on the door. A very loud bang. As you were scratching your head I knew you remembered but then you regretted it. I was the one who opened the door. The large man had walked in and yelled “*are you one of them. Where is he? Why?*” Too many questions at once. I was still half asleep and this large man in a faded police uniform was yelling at me for something I did not know about. You then came up to the door and the man put you in handcuffs. I was now awake. I saw your models outside crying. Their ebony skin was

lit by the morning sun. I then called your father because I did not know what to do. I begged the police man to wait until your father got here but he did not listen. Do they ever?

One minute we were watching a TV show about a police station and the next we were in one. Hmm. We spent an hour there before your father could come and in that hour I had never looked at you with so much pain. The girls had accused you of sexual abuse and it was true. Oh the thought. I couldn't fathom it. You couldn't even look at me and I was glad you couldn't. One of the girls came and sat down beside me and said "Did he ever..."

"Ari you know the day after it happened. I saw you come into the police station and I want to say thank you"

"I came in because they called me but you're welcome"

After the one hour came the thirty minutes after your father came. He spoke to the police officers and then he came up to me with that face and then he said "Take care Ari" then he hugged me. It was when I got back to our apartment I realized I had been in the station with my pyjamas. It was funny but then I laid down on the bed and I cried.

I should have seen all the signs but then I saw only honey hints. The next day I left our apartment but I didn't take anything except the picture that now stood on my table.

"Ari, what time do you close?"

"An hour ago"

“I should go then. I’ll see you tomorrow Ari.”

“Ok”

“ok”

Then you looked at me with expectant eyes and then I finally told you.

“Young man there’s so much more to the world than sexual gratification”

You smiled because you knew that all my pain was summed up in that one sentence and because you knew that it was true. You smiled and then you stopped. Then you got up and then you left.

The next day you would come back and we would talk about the bad times we had. The time when you had told me I had a stupid job and when you had dulled my excitement because I had applied for visas for us to Greece. But most of all the day when the large man had knocked on our door and how throughout that day you had said nothing to me and I had felt so...

When I was sure you had left the building I cried. I cried and I cried because no matter what I told myself I would always miss you. We had it. We had it good. We had it really good just like the night we...

# ONE MORE GLASS OF WHITE WINE

*For you, if you like white wine.*

“Ok Diane let us begin”

I looked at the woman I had given a lot of money to just to tell her my secrets. Honestly I felt she was the only one getting a lot out of it. What was I getting? ‘peace of mind’. Hmm you cannot get peace when you’ve met a man like Ethan. His smile, his persona, his smooth words, they all set your thoughts on fire and they consume your thoughts.

“Diane” she called. “Did you hear me” of course I did not hear her. If I had heard her she would not be asking me that question.

“I guess you did not. Well I said may be you’d like to start from the beginning. Whatever is the beginning for you. Just start there” she smiled at me. How won’t she smile? She’s eating a lot of my money for every second I am quiet.

But where was the beginning. I am a grown woman I should be able to comport myself when I want to tell an important story. The story that has every moment I have actively lived in. Should I tell her that Ethan liked to call me Dee instead of Diane . It is important to tell her. This therapist I think her name is Doris. She does not know how to

handle impatience because her face betrays her every time. I should probably start talking and spend my money.

“I met Ethan at the hotel. The hotel where I worked. I was the night receptionist. It was an easy job to get. I had just come out of the university with a second class upper and I was attractive. The pay was good too. I did not like the idea at first but I later warmed up to it.”

“Go on then but if you feel like pausing that’s okay too. You are still healing”

Yes healing that’s the word.

“I didn’t meet Ethan on my first day or my second or even my first year. I met him two years after I started the hotel job. That night a lady had come to see him. A woman who was obviously a prostitute. From her clothes and well her everything you could tell. I did not judge her oh God no. I don’t judge people but her being a prostitute was something you could easily tell. I rang his room and he picked up. Frankly I cannot remember all the details of the conversation but he had told me he liked my voice and he would have preferred me come up than the lady who had come for him. Ethan and his words. It was not even the flirting. It was the way he did it. He did it with such passion that you would want to keep playing along even if you knew it was a lie. After a rather improper phone call, I sent the lady up”

“So you did not meet him up until the next day I assume”

“Yes I met him the next night when I resumed work. I did not know he was the one nor did he know I was the one he had wished substituted his prostitute. He was going out that night. It is painful that I can still remember what he wore. He always wore clothes with ease. He was a lot older than me. 10 years if I calculate it correctly but he did not look it at all. He had come to the desk to ask that another towel be sent up to his room. I had replied him with a ‘yes sir’ and he recognized my voice. ‘Sexy voice’ he said, I smiled of course. ‘You work only nights don’t you?’ I nodded. ‘Well you should work mornings too because the girl here in the mornings is an idiot plus I want to hear your voice more often’”

I was smiling now because the memory was still very fond to me. It was as if I was seeing a movie right in front of me.

“I see you do not regret these memories”

“Yet Doris. Not yet”

She nods her head in approval. I was right. Her name is Doris.

“Loving Ethan was easy because it was real. It was not like a Francine Rivers book where it’s all gentle or like an erotic novel where it’s all physical but it is a blend of both like it should be. I loved him purely and emotionally but I also craved him.”

“Hmm. Well the fact that you craved him physically is normal”

“Ethan came to see me every night the following week” I continued. Normally we staff were not allowed to date guests or sleep with them

or even be friends with them so Ethan coming to see me was a big risk to my job. The first three nights he had come he called me sexy voice, he said he did not want to know my name yet and I did not want to tell him either. Sexy voice was a good pseudonym”

I smiled and Doris laughed.

“On the fourth night he finally asked me for my name. ‘Diane’ I told him. He tested the name on his tongue by calling it out over and over again. He finally said ‘I’ll call you Dee. It’s more fun’. That night he asked me to lunch the next day. I agreed without him pressurising me or even a hard sell. We went out the next day and I had never paid more attention to a person talking. The big words he used and the ease with which he used them wrapped me and I did not want to come out. He smiled at intervals and paused for me to talk about myself. I told him my name as if he did not already know it. I told him of my favourite colours and my favourite food and how my parents were dead and I was an only child. I also told him that I did not do much after work and how I hated to read things. He said he had never met a girl who hated to read but then again he had met me. He laughed at some of my jokes and it made me happy. However on that first date we had talked about holiday locations. That was another thing about Ethan. He hated small talk. He preferred to talk about **It’s a wonderful life** and how World War II was one of the dumbest things that the human race ever did. They could not learn from the first one. I did not know much about the things he spoke of but like I already



said, I just enjoyed watching and listening to him talk. It was ineffable. I used that word because that was his best word in the English dictionary. It means something too good to be described in words. He said I was ineffable”

I paused after this statement while Doris commented on what I had said so far. She said it was good that the memories were still fond to me and that it meant my healing process won't be a tedious one. She kept throwing words around and I was busy remembering the day Ethan had told me I was ineffable. It was on our fifth date. We were at this restaurant that only wealthy people went to. The food was not edible to me. Crab was not for eating as far as I was concerned plus I really hated perfumed rice. I couldn't swallow it.

I was complaining to Ethan of how I hated people who picked their noses.

“I really hate it when people pick their noses like that waiter who brought our food. Just look at him now. God knows what is in this plate of prawns now”

“That's a mean thing to say” he replied with a smug look trying to hide his amusement.

“I know it is a mean thing to say. I told you I am not a totally nice person yet you're sitting down with me on our fifth date looking at me with such fondness I am almost tempted to believe that the things coming out of my mouth are more than words”

My mouth felt dry and I felt very that was the highest amount of courage I could muster. He simply looked at me and smiled that I smile I craved to see and unlike me he simply said;

“You do talk too much”

I laughed. I just had to because even when Ethan said things like that I did not feel insulted rather I saw the truth in them.

“I told you that too”

Doris was now closing her book and it meant our session for the day was over. I took my bag and nodded when she said; “See you tomorrow”

She let me out and as soon as she closed the door I knew I was not going to come the next day. Instead I was going to eat ice cream and watch a lot of TV. It had not killed me yet. The walk back home was not new but it was not familiar either. Nothing was familiar without Ethan. The plants looked as though they were just planted and the rain fell in a different pattern. I missed him. I really did. His smile, his laugh and even his frown. I had studied everything about him. From the way he always lied when he was tired and how he was always the first person to laugh at his own jokes. He was a most peculiar man. He smiled almost all the time and those smiles did not hide anything. He was genuinely happy. It was impossible to be happy all the time but Ethan was.

I got home to no light and a lot of heat. I lay down and thought of Ethan. He was all I had thought of since I met him. Without him, I went back to being a loner. Just as I had been before him but now I was jobless too. I laid down for the rest of the day. I do not know how I did it but I did it.

The next day I woke up late. It was quarter to nine. I could not bear the thought of being alone in the house without anybody to talk to so against almost every bone in my body, I decided to go back and see Doris. I put on the same clothes I had on the day before. It would freak her out. I smiled.

As I walked to her office, I thought of rent. I was going to need another job soon enough. I did not have that kind of money to just sit around. I got to Doris' office and she smiled and said; "Welcome Diane". Her eyes quickly went to my top. Aha she saw that I wore the same clothes. Check. I sat down and Doris opened her book. I wondered what she wrote in there anyway. For all I know she could have been drawing.

"Loving Ethan was interesting. He made me do bad things that were good. He knew how to live and being with him made me live life too. He drank a lot of alcohol and I started drinking too. Just wine though. It might not be so sweet but it's careful. I couldn't swallow beer and spirit hurts my nose. Ethan said I made a funny face when I drank"

I laughed after I said this and for the first time in the therapy, a tear escaped my left eye and Doris handed me a tissue. I kept it on my lap

and still used my hand to wipe the tear away. Ethan used to do it and I wanted to feel him somehow. Remembering him was not enough. Talking about him was more sufficient so just before Doris could throw around some disguised pity words, I continued,

“Once, we were at the Ciroc party. I never went for those. The music is all too loud and the alcohol hurts my nose. The music was loud, really loud. It blocked out everything he was saying and I was just looking at his lips move and believe me, my stupid ass was content. The dj was playing one of those songs that I always hear but I don’t know the name and it was resounding in my brain. As I was looking at Ethan I was thinking of him. Of how different my life was before I met him. It was refreshing I tell you.”

Doris nodded and said she could imagine but you could not imagine those kinds of things. You could not imagine Ethan. He was an incredible man in every way. He made me do things that were interesting. He changed me. My mother before she died always said that I shouldn’t let anyone change me but what she did not tell me was that it was going to be hard because with Ethan, it was easy and it felt so damn good.

“I was finally able to make out what he was mouthing. He was saying;

“Dance, Dee dance”

If I can recall very well, both of us couldn't dance but damn, we tried and it was amazing”

There were some more loose tears but I still wiped them away with my hand.

Doris did not say anything this time. She just sat there and watched me push back tears. After about a minute of the tears and silence, she remarked that I did love Ethan, it was not understandable why he had killed himself and that it was the first day of my healing process. I simply nodded and stood up saying only “Bye Doris” and then I left.

I did not sleep that night. Doris and everybody who cared to gossip knew that Ethan had killed himself but that's not the truth. That was what I told them. I thought of what had really happened. What had happened after Ethan had said “Dee, that's amazing news, why not have one more glass of white wine. You like those”. We had just found out that I was pregnant. Ethan had said that we would get married the next weekend and I was ecstatic. The thought of life with Ethan and a baby was divine. I smiled after he said what he said and I went into his room to get the wine. The one we opened was finished. Under the carton, I found it. I found what Ethan was really going to do to me and the baby. I did not think it through. I went back to where he was looking through the window and took the empty bottle. I tiptoed behind him, broke it just inches behind him and as he turned, I stabbed him. Enough times to kill him twice. I killed Ethan. He did not kill himself. After I stabbed him, I ran away. I ran from the hotel

and from the town I had grown up in. It was not hard to leave. I ran and by the next week, I signed up with Doris in the next town. His blood still haunted me and since that day I had never thought of it. I suppressed it hoping it would disappear. It did not.

There was a knock on the door while I laid in bed. It was probably Doris or one of these neighbours who did not mind their business. Rather reluctantly, I got up and went to open the door. It was not Doris nor any of my neighbours. It was him. The only man I had ever loved.

# UNCLE SILAS' WEDDING

*For my soul mate, an opening to all the stories I will tell you and the ones I will write for you.*

Uncle Silas was a man of small stature. Not very lean like he had been in earlier times but still small. He had charcoal black complexion unlike most of us in the church. We had all known him to be the man good with the electric things. Things that normally had a *do not touch* sign on them. We always called him to our houses to fix things we broke, daddy spoiled or mummy scattered.

Apart from having magic hands, uncle Silas was known to be very funny. He didn't have the looks so he had the humour. He told jokes at dedications, weddings and every other reason we had to drive to church. He never laughed at his own jokes. I always wondered why because they were very funny. Maybe it was the same reason mummy didn't like to eat the food she cooked.

With all these good qualities uncle Silas possessed he didn't have anyone to love. However he was one of those rare people the elders didn't bother. Maybe he just didn't have a ticking clock like the rest of us. I remember when big sister Immaculate had turned 22. Aunty Regina the ugliest woman I had ever seen I must say had told my mother in her ear that day in church that my sister was ripe. I never understood it then because Immaculate didn't look the tiniest bit like a fruit. At that time I just thought it was old people talk. I held those in very high inconsideration. It was years later when Immaculate had

had her second son with the parish pastor that I understood what Regina meant.

Pastor Henry with the way he looked at women in the church of course had a scandal. He had slept with a woman who wasn't Immaculate and who didn't go to our church. The woman had come to our church during the midweek service and thrown the test result screaming that just the tip didn't do the trick anymore. The whole church gasped. Half of them believing the woman was a scam and another fraction happy they were right about Henry being a pervert. Another fraction too appalled and probably wondering what tip and what trick she spoke of. I belonged to this group. The last fraction, they were too let down because they respected Henry. My family belonged to that group well except Immaculate. Immaculate belonged to her own group. I couldn't and still can't imagine the pain she felt. Through the scandal Immaculate had come back home with her two sons and cried a lot and was awfully quiet. The woman gave birth eight months later but them both mother and child died. That was a very unusual story.

After the scandal, Henry had said it was the handiwork of the devil. I didn't believe him though. Immaculate was just like her name. With her, even the devil went on a public holiday. Of course they didn't separate but they had no more children. Henry ceased to be pastor and passed the post to Felix. To me he was just another disaster waiting to happen. Well he did but that's another story.



It was after all these tragedies, Uncle Silas had announced he was to marry Aunty Mary Ann. It was just what the church needed. The then pastor Jacob who hadn't let us down... yet announced it just before we shared the grace during a special midweek service. Pastor Jacob was older than Henry and Felix so much was expected of him. Little did they know that sometimes wisdom didn't come with age, rather age which is simply growth came with wisdom. Wisdom itself came from God. Mummy always said and I honestly believed her because daddy had always said I was one of wise ones.

After pastor Jacob who by the way had no wife announced the wedding, the church erupted in different sounds. Pastor Jacob was very distant during weddings. He had performed three and still hadn't warmed up. Rumours went round that he was celibate, extreme ones said he had no manhood and the highly extreme even inappropriate ones said he was gay. I just thought he highly respected marriage and saw it as something bigger than him so he never went in.

The wedding was due in seven weeks. It was to be a Christmas wedding. Oh the joy. The committees had sprung up into action collecting contributions here and there to buy this and that. A lot of people were happier than the couple I'm sure. Uncle Silas and Aunty Mary Ann had simply smiled during the announcement. Well the happiness was due. Aunty Mary Ann was highly kind hearted and as Regina would say *very ripe*.

Aunty Mary Ann had taught me in Sunday school. She had done it for a while a long while. She was very good at it. She had started very young. A good thing that she didn't let her gift die. I admired that. She had a signature hair style. It made her look shy but pretty. She wore it ninety per cent of the time. She was also quite tall and slim but she had a good shape and she was also very very light skinned. She was one of the ones they called *oyibo*. She was very quiet when not in class. After church if there were no meetings she left. She had always come alone. Rumours had always been that she was an orphan with no one but oh I don't know. That's the thing with rumours, you just never really know. No one also knew what she did outside of church. No one knew where she lived. She seemed to enjoy the life she led because never showed otherwise. However if there is one thing Aunty Mary Ann liked, it was to laugh. She laughed loudly, quietly but never out of context. Good thing she was marrying Uncle Silas who liked to make people laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wedding was getting closer and the whole church experienced different emotions. On a fateful Sunday afternoon three weeks to the wedding another elderly lady in our church had had an outburst concerning the wedding. Aunty Abigail or sisi as she was sometimes called was one of the oldest women in our church. She was widowed however her husband had been white and they always came to church together. People had said she was one of the lucky few when the

colonialists came. I just believed what Solomon said, time and chance had happened to them. Aunty Abigail was very beautiful even now in old age you could see the echoes of her beauty when you looked past the wrinkles. Her husband David was a very cheerful man and so was Aunty Abigail. They were a very happy couple. They had five daughters all abroad who only came back for holidays with their own children who had tainted accents. I was friends with the youngest of the lot, Diana. Diana was the most beautiful of the lot. She had her father's complexion with a lean body but roundness in the right places. She was also not very tall but neither was I. She had a very sharp nose and cheekbones. I often told her facial features could slice fruits then she'd laugh and say my flat chest could serve as an ironing board. She was married to some man who was of the country of her father but she didn't love him. She had told me over the phone. We were that close. She had slept with someone else and he had found out and beat the baby out of her. She didn't conceive again and she didn't stop sleeping with her lover. She was planning a divorce but then her father had died. Her mother couldn't know. Oh dear it would ruin ma she often said over the phone but I felt aunty Abigail would want her little Diana to be happy. Aunty Abigail was just that wonderful. That was why her outburst had shocked everyone.

That day the head of the food committee had asked her for yet another contribution towards the wedding. Abigail had given freely twice to the seven committees. Abigail then said NO. She however didn't stop there. She went on and on about how the wedding was

costing too much and even said that uncle Silas hadn't given a dime. Uncle Silas amongst other things also didn't have a fat pocket. It was one of those things we all knew but never spoke of. Well until Aunty Abigail had. She said that Uncle Silas shouldn't marry Aunty Mary Ann because she was used to better. No one knew what Aunty Mary Ann was used to but then deep down we all knew it wasn't what uncle Silas had. Apparently playing with wires didn't pay quite well.

After the outburst Aunty Abigail left the church and of course the gossips began. Aunty Mary Ann was present but even sadder, uncle Silas was too behind the curtain. The next Sunday no one spoke of it as expected and it was said that Aunty Abigail apologized to aunty Mary Ann in private and even gave uncle Silas a huge amount of money but he declined it. All these to ease her conscience ... or not.

Aunty Mary Ann had decided to have just a chief bridesmaid and two other bridesmaids. Some said it was because they couldn't afford more but I felt it was because she just didn't like a crowd. As the wedding came closer Uncle Silas came to church less and Aunty Mary Ann too. The women in church didn't notice this. They were too busy sharing *asoebi* and other things that could be shared. My mother bought the *asoebi* and gave part of it to Immaculate and I. I didn't sew mine though. It went to the back of my wardrobe and had the company of seven others just like it.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wedding day came and against every bone in my mother's body I wore a simple beige gown. She had called Immaculate the day before to sleep over at the house so she could assist her tie her *gele*. By 9 a.m my father and I waited in the car for mummy, Immaculate and the boys. We waited for half an hour though. It wasn't our wedding mummy said when she finally entered the car out of breath although with how high her *gele* was, she didn't completely believe that. My mother was a woman simple in knowledge. She had finished school up to her university level but did nothing about it except marry a rich man. She didn't strive to get work or anything she said that Immaculate and I were enough work already. She was very chubby in recent times and somehow her round face glowed more and more with time. She was very beautiful and would probably be like aunty Abigail with time. She talked a lot too and laughed just as much. The only time I had seen my mother cry was when Henry had the scandal. Her baby Immaculate didn't deserve such a demon man she said but then she still told Immaculate not to leave him oh well. Immaculate who sat at the other end of the seat was a shadow of herself. Eight years my senior she had been a model to me. She was very beautiful, fair with a lot of flesh. She was very quiet but had that thing for laughing like my mother. Now who sat with me was a lean and dark woman with shadows beneath her eyes. Her boys looked like Henry. They were dark and pleasant to look at. My father who drove us was a man of very few words. Tall like his father before him. Dark skinned too and wore bottle like spectacles. My mother said he was quite the

athlete in the days. He had woman hands my mother said this meaning he had very soft hands. I knew this because he had held my hand a few times. He often smiled when he didn't want to say anything but somehow I felt he was quiet because he missed someone maybe his twin who had died in the university during a riot or his wonderful mother who had died giving birth to their last child or maybe even himself. The man he used to be before all the tragedies happened to him. He had a cheerful side to him I had seen it once when he and my mother were together on their anniversary. That day they spent the whole day together and alone.

My father drove us to church with the radio on. We all liked the radio in my house. The radio anchor was talking about the recent kidnapping that was happening and was open to suggestions and phone calls. As if my father sensed the dislike in the car he switched the station to one where old songs were being played. We liked those better.

We got to church faster than usual and then we went in. Aunty Regina was outside arguing with someone. There was nothing new about that. Her huge figure was very intimidating coupled with her unpleasant face, her opponent was close to tears.

We walked into the church together. We weren't late at all. We sat down together and soon Henry came to join us. The only people excited to see him were his sons. The rest of us including Immaculate

didn't just care. He mumbled something like hello or good day or hi but no one replied him.

Pastor Jacob walked into the church looking sharp as always with his nicely built body. His caramel skin shone and his white teeth were on display. He mounted the altar and simply said; 'It's a good day to get married isn't it brethren?'. The church mostly cheered and soon enough uncle Silas walked to the altar. The altar was nicely decorated with gold and red. There were those iron chairs which we normally used for weddings and they were decorated very nicely. I had to give it to the decoration committee this time around, they had outdone themselves.

Uncle Silas looked very sharp. We had never seen him look so sharp. His suit looked very expensive with a lot of useless buttons on it. Gold lined the hems and his shoe was a shiny black. I was in the middle of admiring uncle Silas when aunty Mary Ann walked in. Oh that veil! Long and white with lacy hems. Her gown had an extremely long train as well and her bridesmaids carried it. We couldn't see her face but I could feel her smile. She walked towards the alter and before long she sat beside uncle Silas. Pastor Jacob started the ceremony and it didn't last long. The kiss was good. Uncle Silas had opened her veil with such gentleness and brushed his lips against hers. The church of course cheered. Pastor Jacob then announced that the reception was to be at the top notch event hall in town. Everyone wondered why it wasn't just done in the church but then no one said it

out loud. That was part of the things everyone knew but never spoke of.

The couple left before everyone. My family including Henry left shortly after my mother and Immaculate had exchanged pleasantries with the women of the church. They didn't like it much but they always did it. We arrived at the venue and it exceeded our expectations. Very nicely decorated but not by the church members. The outside of the venue was the least as the interior was beyond me. It was beautiful. The venue did reflect the beauty of Christmas but it gave an expensive vibe you couldn't overlook. Again I wonder how they were able to afford the place but like the rest of the guests I said nothing.

Aunty Mary Ann had some family members present at the reception. It was a beautiful event I must say well until it happened. The food and drinks being shared and who served them had that same expensive vibe with it. Maybe Uncle Silas had won the lottery and decided to go out but no one ever won the lottery in our town. It was one of those fairy tales. However the money came he put it to good use.

It happened during their couple dance. The dance had started slowly to Celine's Beauty and the Beast. It was magical and aunty Mary Ann couldn't stop smiling. Uncle Silas however held a forced smile. The dance had gone on for a while and just then somebody shot uncle Silas dead. It all happened so fast and no one caught him nor did they



know how had entered the premises. Of course everybody gasped and Aunty Mary Ann's white dress was stained with his blood. She screamed and screamed and then cried. Her bridesmaids took her out of the place and no one ever saw her again. People left one after the other my family being one of the first to leave.

That was probably one of the greatest tragedies our church suffered. That year we had a very very cold Christmas. I narrated the story to Diana when she came home in the new year. She has divorced her husband and left her lover. She had come home for good she said. When I told her the story that day she said; 'Oh dear! Uncle Silas I never met a nicer man'. Everyone said similar things and it was just too painful. Diana then said she wanted us to live together in our own house. I was seriously considering it but then I would miss my father.

It was much later when I and Diana had even moved in together that we knew what happened during the Christmas wedding. Uncle Silas had borrowed a huge amount of money to put into the wedding and the man had no patience. It was a death trap I had told Diana when I heard the story. Everyone shook their heads for different reasons. I had seen a woman who looked like aunty Mary Ann once in the market but it couldn't be her. This woman was a shadow of everything aunty Mary Ann was. Or maybe it was her. The aunty Mary Ann whom life had happened to.

It was on a Sunday the story had surfaced. The day before Immaculate had decided to leave Henry for good half because she

couldn't take it anymore and half because she had met someone else. I was happy for her. On that Sunday after church had ever been so busy. People talked in groups. Pastor Jacob avoided the story as much as possible. He kept a blank face during conversations and gave a blank 'The lord knows best' to every statement that needed an answer. On that Sunday with everything going on, aunty Regina still had the time to call my mother and tell her in her ear that I too was ripe.

# KOBOKO

*For every last one of us*

*There's no graver pain than pain felt in the heart and wounds so deep take longer a time to heal...*

My younger sister had always been the stubborn type. From the day she was born. A three year old I was then I held her in my hands and then she sneezed. Not only she sneeze but then she laughed. She's a tough one the doctor said and he wasn't wrong not for one day.

Considering the fact that my sister almost died at birth nothing scared her. She took on adventures and danced with risks. I was never brave enough so I simply watched her like a wallflower. She was pretty, wild and stubborn. The recipe for an unforgettable persona. She laughed with her heart and frankly the whole of her body.

With this kind of attitude, she was no guest to the koboko. She was like a bull. Taming her was only a waste of time but mother never budged. The whole family except them saw how alike they were. Amongst five of us Nicole the youngest had been flogged the most. She was relentless and she only smiled more when mummy scolded her. She was not outright bad but she was naughty. She was the only person in our house who never went for confession. She always said; 'I can't have father Timothy looking at me like I was some rotten egg. I still have a crush on him and by the way he already knows a lot of secrets I don't want add to his burden'. At first, mummy still forced her to go in but later she learned that it wasn't worth it because Nicole

only went in and wasted the time. She told Father Timothy no absolute truths but no outright lies.

Nicole was very smart but being smart was my thing. Nicole was every other thing. She had not only passed in school but she was above average. She was very street smart. She was very easy with people and so were they with her buttons. She didn't seem to mind but she always said 'Nevy you worry too much. I'm still full on the inside. There's nothing wrong with a little sharing. After all we are the world'. I never completely understood that but she said it anyway.

At thirteen, Nicole had seen all of the fifty shades movies made and when I had caught her in her room watching the third movie, she said; 'oh don't look at me like that you read them' it was true I had read them all at least once, reading was my thing. Nicole never cried at least no one had ever seen her cry.

The year Nicole turned thirteen, daddy died. Nicole turned 13 January 12<sup>th</sup> and daddy died February 10<sup>th</sup>. Mummy had become so sad and very few things excited her. Our elder brothers had gone off to the university one after the other and left Nicole and I to grieve with mummy. They rarely came home the month daddy died and when they did come home, they brought home girls. I had mistakenly walked in on my eldest brother Nathaniel and his girlfriend doing some sharing as Nicole called it. They were in his room and I forgot to knock or maybe I didn't forget I just didn't want to. They had been naked and oh dear Lord I had been terrified. The girl threw a pillow at

me and yelled; ‘close the fucking door’. I then told Nicole what I had seen and she went to see it for herself. To my surprise but Nicole’s delight they were still at it. When the girl threw a pillow at Nicole and yelled at her to *close the fucking door*, Nicole laughed. This time it didn’t take up to five minutes and the girl left our house frowning.

I don’t think Nathan cared because the next day he brought Ivara who he would later marry but she would later die leaving him a daughter.

That year was a dark year for us. I was in ss3 about to write my WAEC when daddy died. That day we were having jamb practice in the hall when I saw my mother at the reception telling the teacher to call Nicole and I. We would go home for a while. I missed my jamb exam and Nicole missed some tests. Every time we tried to tell mummy that we had to go back to the boarding house she would say that we couldn’t leave her alone. She would cry then we would eventually not go. Finally after three weeks of this vicious cycle, her sister aunty Obakam had come to stay with her. Aunty Obakam was my mother’s youngest sister. She was a nun. She had decided to become a nun when she was raped at 16. She had been in the convent for seven years now and this was the first time she left it after she joined. Aunty Obakam was very quiet. I often thought it was because she was a nun but later I realized it was because she was in love with father Timothy and she could not do anything about it. Well except run away with him which she later did on the year that Nathaniel got married. That day everybody in the convent was furious and we

stopped going to mass at that particular church. I did not care if we stopped going to mass there frankly I didn't care if we went to mass at all because I did not like mass. Everything was all so sacred and only the priest could touch it. The same priest who had the same amount of body parts that I did and the same priest that fingered Ebere when she went for confession. It was all too inadequate for me.

Since the day I had heard Ebere say '*right there yes just right there*' and other gory things I cannot quite say, I could not allow Father Timothy spray holy water on me.

After those dreadful three weeks Nicole and I had gone back to school. WAEC was now more of a ritual than an exam to me and like every ceremony, I could not wait for it to end. Nicole had met Emmanuel or *E smooth* as his idiot friends called him. Nicole was mad about him but he wasn't mad about her. I would tell her that but then she'd say 'Oh Neavy that's not true. You should see the way he brags about me'. I felt like slapping Nicole every time she said that because it annoyed me but that would only drive her away. I did tell her not to share with Emmanuel. He wasn't going to share back. She laughed and said; 'We do share and he is very good at it'. I do not know how Nicole became to be so sharing but most importantly how I was the only sibling who had never shared.

WAEC ended but Nicole and Emmanuel did not. She had said that they planned to still be together when September came and ss2 called. It was no surprise that they did not last nor why they did not last but

what was the surprise was that Nicole honestly believed that they would have.

That holiday was one unlike the ones we had ever seen. Mummy did not do any of those exercises she did to keep her *summer body*. When Noah had asked her why she said that daddy was no longer around to look at her hips as she exercised and to lie to her that she was loosing weight when she might as well had been adding weight. Their relationship was one of those that made you want to get married. Mummy smiled that sad smile after she talked to Noah and for the first time since daddy died, Noah cried for him.

The holiday did bring some joy as I graduated and Nathan also graduated from the university with a 2.2. At least he did it. Aunty Soso the *scar* of my family had scorned and frowned her face when she heard that Nathan came out with a 2.2. Of course she did not approve and of course Nathan was the one who still employed her son who had come out with a first class. ‘It is not of him who runneth’ mummy had told aunty Soso over the phone two weeks after the graduation and aunty Soso in reply said that of course it wasn’t of him who runneth because unlike Oriante her son, Nathan didn’t run at all. My mother simply laughed not because she found aunty Soso’s pun funny but because even after all the oil money and exposure aunty Soso claimed to have experienced, she was still as daft as she was when they were children. After talking about things mummy did not care about with aunty Soso, she hung up then murmured something

which was either ‘no wonder her husband killed himself’ or simply ‘that woman’.

I unlike Nathaniel did manage to graduate with good grades. It was nice, it felt really nice. At that time, I was still bright and eager to go to the university and become a lawyer. It was five years later when I was cleaning up my one room apartment that I found that picture and I remembered that instead of reading Sociology as I was doing, once upon a time, I wanted to be an esquire.

The graduation ceremony was very lively. Mummy snapped me at every interval and Nicole kept telling her classmates that I was still a lot prettier than Tari the valedictorian and that I deserved it more. I told her later at home when she had mentioned it again that pretty didn’t matter but I was only lying to the furniture because it did. Mr Hart had picked Tari because she had firmer and rounder breasts than anyone in our class and she smiled and had a sharp mouth. Her result was not better than mine either but then there were some things that were just better left unsaid and not thought of. All my brothers had been there and junior my second brother highlighted by a ray of the sunlight in front of the canopy, hands around mummy’s shoulders as he smiled for the camera, looked heartbreakingly like daddy. Mummy did all she could for me that day ranging from the expensive jewellery she put on my neck to the delicious jollof rice and chicken bigger than my fist. She had called me *my baby* throughout the ceremony. Somehow even with everything being about me that day, all I wanted



to do was go home and sleep. Frankly I did not care if I never saw my classmates again. They had all been very distant towards me after my father died. I took a picture only with Akunna and Uchenna. They were after all my family friends.

Of course the day ended and we went home. Nicole had been sober because she wasn't going to see E smooth for at least a month. I was happy she wasn't going to see him but my brothers couldn't care less. That is why that day it happened, and Nicole for the first time ever had cried, they only said one after the other 'I did not know'. They were all too self-involved some times and those times it hurt.

The holiday marched on and mummy sank more and more into a melancholy state. She barely came out of her room. She was still grieving and it was when Ivara had died that I learned that we were all still grieving and would grieve for longer just differently. Also to Nicole's delight, that holiday mummy did not use the koboko. She did not even yell when Nicole disobeyed she just looked at her and said nothing. It was junior who yelled that holiday at everything that was considered something. He was always the most mature in everything. He was the only one however who didn't have a child in later times. Even Nicole who acted like a child had one. It was painful and on some level, mocking.

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It was the ending of August and everybody was back to real life. Like mummy said the sun was setting. Nicole, Junior and Noah had to go back to school whilst Nathaniel and I had earned a year at home. Nathaniel because his name was not on the list this year for service and I because I did not get an admission. Nicole was already preparing to go for E smooth's birthday party on August 25<sup>th</sup>. She had asked mummy for permission and because mummy wasn't really concentrating she had said a simple yes which really meant just leave me be. Nicole by 11am had come to my room to tell me something. I had however for the first time found a boy who liked me and I was on the phone with him so I couldn't listen to her. The only part I heard was when she said 'I am giving the whole cake to Emmanuel. But I am worried I may not like to share that much. I don't want to end up a nun like aunty Obakam'. I then replied with a measly if you don't want to then don't. I should have said more, I should have convinced her not to even go but then I did not. I felt bad that night as she cried in my arms not just because of what had happened but because I felt responsible. Nicole just said before she left as she always said; said 'Neavy you worry too much. I'm still full on the inside. There's nothing wrong with a little sharing. After all we are the world'.

It was Nathaniel who had dropped her off at the party but did not check out the environment. He dropped her off and before she could say the second bye he had zoomed off. Ivara was waiting for him. Nicole didn't come back for a while and it was by 9pm she had staggered back into the house. Of course mummy was furious and

without pausing she brought out the long time no see koboko and gave Nicole a good beating. Nicole didn't cry when she was being flogged but this time she did not laugh. Mummy flogged her because she had been so worried about Nicole and Nathaniel had gone to pick her up but she wasn't at the place he had dropped her off. After mummy flogged Nicole, our brothers yelled at her one at a time then altogether. I did not yell at Nicole because the Nicole standing there was not the one I knew. It was later that night when Nicole had told me and I told them all that Emmanuel had raped Nicole because she did not want to share. They all then echoed 'I didn't know'. To me the rape was not the worse part. It was that he had broken her heart and they did not see it but Nicole was not the same girl she was when she left the house that morning. They all tried to talk to her but Nicole wasn't talking to anybody that night except for me. She had told me that the only reason she liked Emmanuel was because he laughed like daddy. Nicole only liked Emmanuel because she was grieving. I understood her perfectly because the only reason I had read newspapers that holiday was because daddy read them and that was my own way of grieving. Mummy grieved more outwardly than the rest of us but nonetheless we grieved and now Nicole had one more reason to grieve.

And that night she smiled a sad smile. It did not fit her face at all but she still pulled it off. And on that same night she cried an awful lot not because mama had flogged her or because E smooth had broken her hymen but because he had broken her heart. In the middle

of her cry she sneezed and laughed like she had done on the day she was born. It made her head ache her so I said stop doing that. Then she said ‘oh Neavy you worry too much but maybe you need to because I’m empty on the inside there’s no more sharing and the world is gone. She yawned after she said that and then she cried again.

The next day and all the days before that year ended were basically the same, they were dull. The next year would be better. Emmanuel was arrested for something else he did. Noah graduated and I gained admission. Nathaniel got into NYSC and Junior got a book deal. Apparently the surname was still working for us it was just silent the year daddy died. Nicole gradually became Nicole again and mummy met Greg. A man who had queer facial features and a ridiculously long laughter. This man had robbed us the next summer. Aunty Soso had said that she never liked him but then again she never liked anyone. He had taken my new boyfriend’s phone as well but at least on February 10<sup>th</sup> of the next year he had made my mother happy. She was out with him that day at his friend’s wedding instead of sitting on her bed deep in that melancholy state staring at the side of the bed my daddy slept on. Thinking that if she cried and stared hard enough my daddy would come back.

# THE MAN FROM OLD NIGERIA

*For David, because kind words never go out of style...*

It was a day I had not lived before. Not remotely close to it. My normally meek and smiling husband of six years had suggested bondage sex out of the blue. He said he was noticing that our bedroom life was not quite there. Where did he want it to be? We had had children. Obakam and Preye. We did not need to start tying each other up. What we needed was something that would make the girls sleep all night but wouldn't kill them. I had tried slipping a tiny amount of whiskey into their golden morn but it didn't work. Instead they stayed up that whole night. It was really hard these days. Four and five were too ages not easy to merge. I was busy thinking about these children and work and the book club and every other thing my cerebrum could carry and my darling husband was suggesting tying ourselves up. Uncle to what aim.

I just looked at him with eyes that neither of us had seen. I simply told him I would think about it but I was really thinking of the traffic on Aba road by this time. The children were going to be late once more. This week they had gone late every day. Thank God it was Friday. Their principal was going to look at me like I was lousy I was going to shun her and we were going to start over next week. Ah the cycle.

On our way out, my husband told me to think about his suggestion then he smiled and drove off to work. The lesson to take home, fear

the quiet ones. Fear them. In all the eight years I had known my husband nothing like this had ever come out of his mouth. His idea of naughty was when I give him a part of my mills and boons to read. He would giggle for a milli second, shake his head and not say anything. That same man was suggesting that we flog each other in bed. OK.

It was still an odd day up until I dropped the girls. When I got there late due to the traffic I had expected on aba road, their judging eyed principal was not there at the gate. I let them out and waited for a whole two minutes but she did not come out. After not seeing her I drove back into the traffic. This time, the line did not seem to move. It stretched so long that I did not even know if I was going to get to the office that morning. I then called Sandra. Told her to cancel everything today. I was supposed to meet with the new writer for the love column but it was not going to happen today from the look of the traffic.

Sandra answered with her half hearted moan as she always did. One of these days, I was going to fire her. Her initial fire was gone and now what she brought to the office was just the cold stove. It was provoking really. While I was thinking of the easiest way to cut Sandra off, the familiar *Oh Cecelia by Simon & Gurfunkel* came up on Rhythm. They never let me down. A familiar favourite was what I needed. Good music always made everything easier and better. I started my rhythmic drumming on the steering wheel and started my side to side waving and nodding of my upper body and head while

singing along... *Cecelia you're breaking my heart. You're shaking my confidence daily. Oh Cecelia I'm down on my knees, I'm begging you please to come home, come on home.*

That song would always remind me of my husband, he loved it but he denied it which made him like it more. Soon enough it started raining. Light showers. I didn't budge. I loved the song on the radio and I was in the car with the AC on. I loved where I was. Soon enough I started thinking of the book the book club would read the next month. Since the line was not moving, I reached to the back seat and took the books I had just gotten to complete my vintage collection.

*The Secret Lives Of Baba Shegi's Wives*

*The Great Ponds*

*Yellow Yellow*

*Everything Good Will Come*

*The Thing Around Your Neck*

*Say You're One Of them*

I could not help myself it was going to be *Yellow Yellow*. Kaine had November. Father Uwem was going to have December. I remember the day I had met him at a book signing and book club meeting at the Presidential hotel a while ago. He had smiled a graceful nonetheless wide smile while he signed my copy of the book and asked my name. That was what I took home. To a house of crying children and a

confused clueless husband on the verge of crying too. The smile. I read the book *Say You're One Of them* three more times in the last 700 days. It was new every time.

It was in the river of my nostalgia, the now heavier showers and the chorus of Diana Ross' *This Magic Moment* that a man knocked on my window. He had on his head a rather odd hat. One I had only seen in the movies that told of the colonial days. His bottle shaped glasses were also very strange. He then wore a plaid shirt underneath his suspenders. Looking at him, you could tell that time had done him well. He looked like white sparkling wine. I rolled down the windows at the passengers' side and till this day, I tell you that I do not completely know why.

He then looked me straight in the eyes and said;

“Good day, fine day don't you believe so. The good Lord has blessed us with the rain. Please could you take me to the nearest bus stop?”

These were not good times. Letting a stranger into your car did more harm than good. However, that day I had let the odd man in. He brought with him a beige box. The box the size of a box that an electric iron normally came in. Especially the Philip models. He gave me a rather satisfactory “thank you” and a smile just like the one father Uwem had given me. He then asked me what my name was. I looked at him and then turned the AC down. He was evidently cold. He smiled in appreciation. By this time, Wyclef's *Perfect Gentleman* was on the radio.



*Called up my mama said I'm in love with a stripper yo.* I loved this song. It reminded me of simpler times. Also it made me want to dance. However, dancing even if it was just with my upper body in front of a complete stranger was a whole new level of candy crush I was not ready to unlock just yet.

The man looked at me with expectant eyes as the song ended and *Westlife's World Of Our Own* came on. *You make me feel funny...*

“My name is Clara” He smiled and said in return,

“Jeremiah” again with that smile.

He held his box on his leg while I listened to and smiled at *we got a little world of our own I'll tell you things that no one else knows...*

“May I?”

I turned to him with a ‘what do you mean’ face.

“I saw the books sprawled on your laps. May I see them please?”

He looked at each one as though they were children. With time, admiration and pure fondness. The last book he held which he held the longest was *Everything good will come.*

“Sefi ...”

He said her name with such fondness it warmed my heart. There were some tears in his eyes, a sad smile and I knew that combination so well. They were the tears I cried when I had missed my storybook

romance and a smile I had given when Tonye had said *I do* but not to me.

“Would you believe if I told you I knew Sefi”

“She is a human being isn’t she?”

“Hmm a magnificent one at that”...

The line had moved a bit and *Queen Of my heart* came on the radio.

“Sefi liked this song”

“She’s right to. It’s a wonderful song”

“I prefer *I do*”

“Me too.”

“These are not good times are they?”

“No they are not but once in a while we get these hints of hope like when someone sends a jersey two continents across.” He smiled at this.

“But you still let me into your car” he said this with that father Uwem smile and I smiled at him back because I do not know why I had let him in.

“Why of all the cars did you knock on mine”

He looked at me. He did not know why either. We were even.

“Indeed, are we near the bus stop ?”

“Yes, we are but where exactly are you going to?”

“I’m going to Jos”

“At this time, you are not going to meet a bus going to Jos. Its way too late.”

“Ah, I see”

“You might want to try again tomorrow”

“Yes Clara, I might”

I smiled and then took a U turn at the wide G.R.A junction. Going back to mile 1 was something I had not planned to do today but then for Jeremiah I had. The way to mile 1 was not as tedious as the way to the office.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome”

“When the white man came he came with a good heart but do you know what tainted that heart?”

“Greed” he said simply and surely.

I looked and nodded my head at him.

“However when he left, some people missed him. He brought good things whether or not people admit it. My mother was white. She died at childbirth and my father never remarried. The white man gave me

my mother that is why I am grateful. My father said you never met a woman as cheerful as she. But I like to believe I did.”

At this point I did not know what to say or if I was supposed to say anything so I just nodded again and he continued.

“Old Nigeria had its perks but it was a simpler time. Books were everywhere and people were good. It was a time for a person like you Clara. One who would help an old man like myself”

“Well I met part of old Nigeria. It was indeed a simpler time. Now I worry because my girls did not meet her and it breaks my heart”

“They will be fine. Old Nigeria is still around. She has just been covered but she is still around. Old Nigeria did give me Sefi in the year 1983. It was a good year. I had met her at a trade fair in England. She was beautiful but most of all she was cheerful. I did go up to her and I told her the simplest things I thought. I told her how I liked her smile but I spoke too soon because I liked her laugh more. I bought her a copy of *The name of the Rose*. A week later when I had seen her she said it bored her. I laughed but did not object although I liked the book very much. Sefi made me smile and more so she made me a better person. It came as no surprise when she excelled at what she did in school but it broke my heart when she married someone that was not me.”

“One of the Ransome-Kutis. That family is a brilliant one. One from the buds of Old Nigeria”

“Indeed. I really hope Sefi is happy” Jeremiah said this with sadness but mostly with regret.

“Did you ever tell her you loved her?”

“I did. But it does not count because she never got the letter.”

“Oh dear,”

“Its ok Clara. I too did marry again but I fear I never loved my wife nearly as much. Its no wonder she left. Our only daughter is whom I am going to meet. She has a fine family I am grateful to be part of” he smiled again.

“We’re almost at the bus stop but like I said you might want to try again”

“Exactly, might”

“Hmmm”

“Do you want to hear the letter I wrote Sefi all those years ago”

“You could never go wrong with something old”

“Indeed Clara”

This time we both smiled and he began reading;

“*Sefi,*

*How do you today. I understand you have been having a busy week and I thought of sending you this letter. Sefi just as sure as I*

*was at the trade fair and as sure as I was at the dinner and as sure as I am everyday that I see you, I love you. I do want to marry you but would you want to marry a man like myself. I do not have much but I will give you all I have and if need be I will borrow just to make you happy. Please say you love me back and would marry me. I would wait until you finish school and are ready. Please do write me back. Take care.*

*Jeremiah, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1983.*

“Why did you not send it?”

“I was too afraid”. His face sunk and by this time we were at the bus park. He smiled at me and told me thank you and came down.

I rolled the windows down at the passengers’ side and then he asked me one simple question;

“Why did you let me into your car today?”

Once again I looked at him and gave him an honest and simple answer

“I do not know but I am glad I did.”

For one last time, he smiled the father Uwem smile and told me not to be afraid like he was.

Alas there was a bus going to Jos. It was 10: am. An odd day indeed. I waved goodbye to him and drove off. The whole journey to the office I had just thought of all Jeremiah had said and how 1983 was the year I was born. Soon, *Tina Turner's Something beautiful remains came on* and before long I started to sing *for every light that fades, something beautiful remains...*

# THE RADIO AT MIDNIGHT

*For Evelyn, thank you for the music...*

**“Andante, Andante oh please don’t let me down”**

## THE GIRL

It was going to be a tough day at school today. I knew that. Even James’ *Naked* was not going to make it better. Mrs Richard had her baby last night and she was not going to be in school today or for a long time. Mrs Richard was the school’s counsellor. I liked her very much and I talked to her every day. I had a lot of problems I liked to talk to her about. She listened to me all the time. Every day for three years now, I spoke to her. Either in person or on the phone. The opening up of my issues had seized after the first year and now what she was doing for me was being a friend. We had one of those very weird but wonderful relationships. When she got pregnant I was too excited as though I was the one who after seven years of trying finally got a bun in the oven. Now the baby had come. I was probably going to see her when she got back from the hospital but it was not going to be the same. I was not the shiny vintage item anymore. I didn’t have any other friends apart from Mrs Richard.

Walking through the school corridor never felt so empty like it did today. I felt like turning around and running back home. I was failing anyway. One absent day would just add to the pile. I was honestly



going to turn back when I heard it...**I'm walking around with just one shoe.... I miss everything we do. I'm half a heart without you.**

I walked up to the boy singing without thinking it through and he smiled and continued singing while I just stared at him. I wanted to smile but I did not. When he finished singing, he was about to say something but then I walked away. I shouldn't have walked up to him in the first place. I was not good at talking to people but that song. I loved it too much to just hear it and pass. That song needed to be savoured.

I walked to chemistry class and sat down in my seat at the far end of the class. I couldn't wait for school to be over. Like really over. I won't go to the university. It was a waste of money to me. I was probably going to get pregnant like Mrs Richards. Maybe finally I would have someone to stay in my life. Obviously my mum would fight me about it but then I'd do it anyway.

“Hi”

I turned to see who had just said that to me. No one ever talked to me. I turned and it was one shoe guy.

“Hello” he said for the fifth time and finally against every bone in my body I answered him.

“Hi”

“You know when you watch someone perform you pay them”. He smiled. He was trying to be funny. I did not like funny people.

“How much then?”

“I’m joking” he laughed. It was a surprise the teacher did not send us out because the laugh was really loud in my ear. After he saw that I was just staring at him blankly, he cleared his throat and said;

“At least you could tell me the name of my biggest fan”

“Dani”

“As in Danielle?”

“I suppose”.

“Ok. My name is Jonathan as in Jonathan”

He smiled. He was trying to be funny again but I did not have the strength for it. All I could think of was going home to watch re-runs of **HAPPY TOGETHER**. The fine boy with an accent made me happy and he reminded me of One Direction in a good way. I missed them. Apparently, Jonathan had been talking to me but I did not realize it. He was saying something about his favourite album. I had to come out clean to this young man. I am not good with people because they always left and I was done closing the door after they left so I locked it.

“Jonathan, I will be honest with you. I am not good at talking to people or being with people so I am going to save you the trouble”

I was expecting him to stand up after that but he simply looked at me and said;

“Well I’ve always liked trouble”

I smiled.

## **THE FATHER MAN**

I’ve always imagined Wednesdays as a day where a man opens the windows but the really old windows. I think they are called louvers and they are really sharp. As he opens the window, the ray of sunlight penetrates and makes a nice mini rainbow on the glass. However his joy is short lived because trouble is about to hit. Maybe all Wednesdays are like that to me because it happened on a Wednesday. Nancy and Dani left on a Wednesday.

The young girl who had been spending all my money and really wasting her life with me was lying down beside me groaning. I suspected she was already awake but then again she might have still been asleep. She was a pretty little thing but she was not an intelligent person. She laughed at the silliest things and she talked too much for such a small mouth. But she had kept me sane and had tried her best to fill a hole 10 years deep. She was roughly five years older than Dani and every time I looked at her, I felt the pain in my chest grow. I would send her away one of these days and drink myself to death. Maybe Dani and Nancy will come to the funeral. Maybe then I would feel some sort of peace.

I was right. She was awake. She rolled over and in her high but surprisingly soothing voice said;

“Morning”

She was smiling. Just like Nancy used to smile when she woke up. She was up on her feet and she was naked. She went over to the chair and wore one of my Tshirts. Her slender figure was covered easily by it. She then did what she did every day when she woke up. She took her speaker and played the same song.

**‘I should ink my skin with your name and take my passport out again and just replace it... But maybe I’m just in love when you wake me up’**

She hummed it while she picked up the things on the floor. It was a wonder that she did not know the words as she played it everyday. Even I knew the song and every song on the album. That morning unlike the other ones, I didn’t get up and go outside to smoke. I simply laid down on the bed and looked at her while she moved her body to the songs out of the side of my eye.

“You should go back to school”

She rolled her eyes and then sat on the bed just inches from my feet.

“I already told you. I’m not cut out for it. I want to be a singer”

“Well you’re not doing anything towards it. All you do is wear sweatpants, eat popcorn and watch movies made before you were born. I don’t think it works like that”

“My darling old man, people who do all what you just said, those are the people who change the world”

She reached forward and kissed me then she got up and went into the kitchen singing along to **It’s no sacrifice at all**. She was dodging the truth again. I knew exactly what that was like. I smiled.

## **THE OIL COMPANY WORKER**

I saw a beautiful woman today. She was telling a young man what to do but he clearly was not getting it so she looked pissed. I was the next person she would talk to after the daft young man. I did not want to receive the remaining anger so I switched places with the woman behind me. The woman was grateful. She was saying something about having to pick her children from school. I nodded at what she said and smiled. The young man left and then the woman in front of me did not waste any time. It was my turn. Her name tag read *Nancy*. She smiled and told me all I needed to know about why I was on the line. I had to ask her out but she might have been married. She had a ring on her finger. I was still going to ask her anyway. **There’s a fire starting in my heart...** her phone rang.

She put up one of her index fingers to excuse herself and went to take the call. She talked for a short time and returned to the table. Her mood a little shaken. I could not ask her now so I smiled and left the line only to join it again. I was now the last person on the line. The line did not move fast but I did not mind. What however bothered me was the odour from the man in front of me. It was like he tried to use cheap perfume to cover up sweat. It was horrible and it made me dizzy.

After what could only be described as a long time, I got to the table again. Nancy looked at me in an odd way. She called me by my name which I did not recall telling her.

“Peter, it is nice to see you after all these years. How have you been?”

It was then I realized why Nancy was so beautiful to me. It was because she had been beautiful to me for two decades. However the last time I had seen her was at graduation, I was going to ask her out that day but I had heard that she was to be married to one of our younger professors. I did however hear some years later that the marriage fell apart but by then I had married. Now my wife had died and I had met Nancy again.

“I am very well Nancy. How have you been”

“Oh well, we thank God”

Indeed we thanked God but as I was looking at her smile back at me, I was more thankful than she was. I was going to ask her to

dinner. I finally had enough money to thrill her. With the kind of money her ex-husband had, she was used to superior things and that was what I had to give her.

“We should talk more some other time, I have to go now. Bye”

“Bye” I said and I watched her walk away into her car and I even watched her drive away.

Some other time was the next day for me. I walked to my car. Merely thinking of her presence, I smiled.

## **THE GIRL**

Jonathan was taking me to the new ice cream place. I was glad but I was also scared. I was always scared because Jonathan could leave at any time but I did not want him to leave. I couldn't bear it if he left. Not another one. I had even started picking up in school. He had taken me to see Mrs Richards and her baby. It was a girl and she was named after me. I was pleased. I was very pleased. Mrs Richards told Jonathan to take care of me and he said he would. I hoped he would.

We got to the ice cream place and it was really nice. **Old friend why are you so shy. Ain't like you to hold back or hide from the light.** One of Adele's finest was playing and I closed my eyes just to hear it play. Jonathan left me to it and when I opened my eyes, he was

looking at me with the widest smile and a look of awe in his eyes. I simply smiled back and reached across the table to hold his hand. He held mine tighter and sang the chorus for me. I was still not very good at talking but he did not care. He understood. He sang all the songs I liked for me. Every last one.

The ice cream was even better than how the place looked. We sat down in the booth for a long time and when it was night and the shop was closing, we left. We went back to my house and my mother was all dressed up. I remember she told me she had a date. I was glad. She never went out. We only had the time for a quick goodbye and then she left. Jonathan was going to spend the night. He had for the past three days. He took off his shoes and said something that was either ‘I am hungry’ or ‘I am starving’. He went into the kitchen and ate something. I went into my room and took off my clothes to have my bath. By the time I came out, Jonathan was taking his clothes off too.

Sometime after bathing and me talking a lot for the first time in my life, some minutes after midnight, Jonathan put on the radio.

**...But I still need love cause I'm just a man... I don't want you to leave, would you hold my hand. Oh won't you stay with me cause you're all I need.... Darling stay with me...**

That song had more lyrics obviously but those were the ones I picked out. That was all I wanted to tell Jonathan. And as he held my hand, I knew he heard it.



## THE FATHER MAN

I had finally convinced Amanda to go back to school. I had paid a big amount too but I owed her that much. She had done her best to fill a hole she didn't make. The day before she had come to take all her things. I sat down on the bed and took out all my liquor. If it was possible for alcohol to kill, I would find out. I was hoping it was possible. It was 10 pm and I wished to be gone before midnight. I started and all the songs Amanda ever played on her teal green speaker played in my head. I downed the first bottle and the tears were coming out. I had failed Nancy. She had left. I promised to always love her but I had failed her and up until she left, I was too proud to admit it. I had not seen her once since that Wednesday. I only remember her by our pictures. I was a terrible man. I drank and drank but death did not seem to be coming.

I heard the door open. It was Amanda. She did not say anything. She simply sat beside me and put on the radio. She put on music when she did not want to talk. She helped me lie straight on the bed and opened the windows. The midnight air was cold. I liked it. She got naked and laid beside me under the blanket.

**Guess it's true I'm not good at a one night stand but I still need love cause I'm just a man. These nights never seem to go to plan. I don't want you to leave , would you hold my hand... This ain't love, its clear to see but darling stay with me... but you can lay with me so it doesn't hurt...**

With those words and some more, the man on the radio had said all I wanted to say but I was too proud to. Amanda heard it so under the blanket, she held my old weak hand. I did not die that night and I was glad I did not die the next morning either.

## **THE OIL COMPANY WORKER**

I had asked Nancy out the day after the day I met her. She said yes and now I was at her house to pick her up. Her daughter just passed by the car but she did not notice me. She was with a young man. My phone beeped. It was Nancy telling me to give her five minutes. I would give her a whole day if she asked. In less than five minutes she came out. She looked beautiful in her red dress.

“Hi” she said smiling with a confidence like none other. With what she had been through, it was a miracle how she still smiled like she smiled twenty years ago when none of it had happened.

“Hi. You look beautiful”

“Thank you. So, where are we going”

“You will see”. I took her hand and kissed it.

We got to the restaurant and when we got in, I could see it in Nancy’s eyes. She was in awe. I could not have been more satisfied. Nancy still talked the way she did twenty years ago. With a grace that always kept you interested in whatever she was saying. In the background, a song was playing ...**if no one ever hears it, how we gonna learn your song, come on, come on... You’ve got a heart as**

**loud as lions so why let your voice be tamed...** The song calmed me and I was going to look for it later. Nancy told me all that had happened to her in the last twenty years but the most interesting part of the story was how she still smiled after it all. That was all I heard.

The date went better than I had even planned it to be. That night, I did not want Nancy to go back home but I thought of her daughter so sometime past eleven I drove her back home. Nancy had put on the radio on the drive back. We got to her house after a while.

**...these nights never seem to go to plan. I don't want you to leave would you hold my hand... stay with me...**

That was the song that played as we got to Nancy's house. While it played, she looked at me and I could see all the pain she held back and I knew that what the song said was what she wanted. When the song ended, she smiled, said 'thank you' and came down. I told her 'goodnight' and watched her go into the house. I stayed for a while and when I realised I couldn't leave her, I came down and knocked on her door.

“You don't love someone for their looks

Or their clothes or their fancy car,

But because they sing a song only you can hear”

**-Oscar Wilde.**

# KALIAN'S ART

*For the voices that are speaking even though only one soul is hearing. With time, the world will listen...*

Beyond the cracked sidewalk, and the telephone pole with layers of flyers in a rainbow of colours, and the patch of dry brown grass there stood a ten-foot high concrete block wall, caked with dozens of coats of paint. There was a small shrine at the foot of it with burnt out candles and dead flowers and a few soggy teddy bears. One word of graffiti filled the wall, red letters on a gold background. Rejoice!

They killed him. At night they killed him and they were happy about it. They had killed the man whose truths terrorised their dreams. Rejoice! What a damned word. For all Hannah knew, her mother would jump into the river just to follow him. What hurt Hannah most was that the people he fought for could not even show their solidarity now that he was gone. He fought for their truths for seven years despite the fact that half that city was on his trail.

Hannah remembered the first day he said he was going to fight. As she sat by the flowers and held the teddy bear in her hand, she saw it like it was yesterday. He had woken her up and said; "Hannah, I'm leaving. Where I am now, I cannot do enough for the people who need me. We need to express our art on a wide scale and right now, I cannot do that here" He carried a satchel that looked like it housed just two shirts. He was so full of life that morning and he was willing

to give that life to everyone who needed it. He smiled at her, kissed her on her forehead and he left.

Hannah couldn't understand why he left that day. She thought she would understand with time. But right now, she was sitting at the edge of the curb with a teddy bear in her hand, surrounded by flowers that were kept in her brother's memory and she didn't still understand it. He could have fought from home. He could have kept sending those emails he sent anonymously but no. He had to go and fight for these ingrates who couldn't keep marching in his honour.

Their mother did not know he was dead yet. Telling her was going to be harder than coming down to this shrine. After he left, she had not been the same. She was hanging on by single thread but this, this would kill her. She had died a thousand times since the day he left but this time, this day would kill her.

Hannah wiped her tears and got up. Her tears still made her vision blurry but she started walking down the lonely street. She heard the whispers of her brother but none of that mattered now. He was gone and they wouldn't bring him back. If they wanted to talk they should have done that in places where people would have heard them and maybe her brother wouldn't be dead. But they didn't speak alongside him. That was why he was the only one who died.

When she got home her mother was lighting candles. She wore her robe and let her hair flow. Even now she was beautiful but it was nothing compared to when her son was still home and when her

husband had not left them. Then, people told her she was beautiful without any strings because she had that kind of beauty that needed to be talked about. It was not enough to be seen. It had to be praised. But now, after life had happened to her, the beauty just echoed.

Hannah closed the door as quietly as she could but her mother still knew she was back. She paused for a while and blew out the broom stick she was using to light the candles. “You’re home darling. How was the world today?” She tried to smile but her eyes were bloodshot. She knew her son was dead. Even though she never left the house anymore, she knew. “Mum, hi. How are you?” “Well Hannah, your brother is dead. I don’t think I am alive anymore”

Hannah ran across the room and hugged her mother. She stroked her hair while both of them cried for the soul they had lost. Her mother began to speak, “I thought he was just stubborn but this bothers on stupidity as well. He should never have left home. Now the people he fought for don’t even appreciate what he did. He’s dead. He’s gone but nothing has changed. I don’t think there is a greater tragedy than this”. Hannah held her mother for what felt like an hour but five seconds at the same time. How they would deal with this loss, she did not know.

The next morning her mother was sitting outside. Just inches from the sea. Hannah saw her from her bedroom window and she got up and went to sit beside her mother. They both stared out into sea. If they were going to go through it, they had to do it together. Away

from the house and the whole world, they felt his soul. They felt it in his entirety but that was still enough.

In agony, Vivian got up and stared up and she cried. She shouted, she cried and she cursed every last person in the city. Even her son. “How do you want us to go on Kalian. How do you want Hannah to go on. How do you want me to go on Kalian. How? Curse the day you left this house. Curse the day”. She started to tremble but Hannah caught her before she fell down into the sand. “Come on Mum, let’s go inside. A storm is about to come”. “Let the storm come Hannah, let Mother Earth weep for my son”

Vivian was already crying when the rain started falling. Hannah couldn’t carry her mother inside the house and the rain fell on their weary bodies. The rain washed their tears and soaked them. It fell in a thunderous array but they still did not leave the sea. The only sound that prevailed was the rain. It drowned their sobs and even after the storm had passed, they still sat by the sea.

Vivian sat because she was hoping to feel her son’s soul again now that the breeze had blown the cold sea wind into her face. Hannah sat because she couldn’t leave her mother and on some level, she was going mad too. Her brother was her best friend and now he was gone, half of her soul left with him. People often said they had a weird bond for brother and sister but they did not care. Maybe they should have cared. Maybe now he was gone, she would not have felt like letting the sea take her to him.

There was a voice behind them. It was feminine. “Excuse me? Please I’m looking for Vivian. I, I was told I could find her here”. Against almost every bone in her body, Vivian turned back and faced this woman whose face she could not see clearly because after the storm, the night had fallen “Who are you?” “I’m sorry to take you by surprise and I am sorry to take you at an odd hour as this but it took me a while to find you and I had to see you”. “Young lady that still does not answer my question” Vivian was not even bothering to be polite. She just spoke the words without any emotion. “I’m I’m sorry, my name is Grace. I am well I was Kalian’s wife”

Neither of the three women spoke for a while until Vivian acknowledged that the other woman who was not her daughter rubbed her arms in a motion of cold. “I suppose we could go into the house. It appears your brother’s wife is getting cold”. The three women went into the house. Hannah first, then Grace and then Vivian. Vivian set a cup of tea in front of Grace and sat across from her. “I don’t particularly believe you but if you came to kill me, do it. I would not mind”. “I did not come to kill anybody. I am your son’s wife and I am carrying his child.”

Vivian laughed. Then Hannah laughed. Grace simply looked at them confused. Confused at a lot of things. The laughter being the least. Hannah then looked Grace straight in the eye, “Where were you when the news pronounced him dead? Why now? I’m pretty sure if my brother had a wife, we would know. If you’re coming for money,



there's none. You can go home now". "I am his wife and I can prove it"

She brought out some pictures, paintings and papers. She slid them across the table for them to see. Vivian didn't look. Hannah however did. They were pictures of Grace and Kalian and paintings of Grace that Kalian probably painted. Some letters too. With a rather exhausted sigh, Vivian got up. "My son is dead, you're not his wife and I don't have time for this". With that, she walked to her room and slammed the door shut.

The two women looked in her direction but then Hannah interrupted the long stare "Look Grace, I believe you for some odd reason but my mother does not. It's going to take so much more to convince her. How far along are you?" "Five months. It's a boy. I don't have anywhere to go Hannah". Grace was crying and Hannah felt sad for her. Here she was mourning for her brother but then there was Grace who loved him more than she did her own soul. "Please don't cry. You can sleep in my room until my mother accepts that well you're you"

They walked to Hannah's room and both laid awake staring at the ceiling. Each seeing what they wanted to. Before long, Hannah spoke. "Tell me what Kalian was like to you" After a pause and a sigh, Grace started, "Well he was an artist. Like all artists, he was charming. He did not speak much most times. He only smiled and he painted me most of the time" "That could be anyone. Tell me what

made him Kalian. What made you fall in love with him?” “That’s a story I enjoy telling. I met him at a rally. One where he was speaking about how art should not be banned by the government on the basis that it was vulgar. He said that art was so much more and he was right. At the time, I was seeing this painter. He was horrible at what he did but he did it anyway and called it art. I didn’t argue with him because on his level it was. What I hated more about the artist I was seeing was that he was not just a bad artist, he was a bad muse. I stopped painting when I was with him.” “Must have been a mediocre level” This made both women laugh briefly before Grace continued telling her story. “The day I saw Kalian speak, I knew that the man I was with had no idea what he said was art. What Kalian knew, what he said, that could only be born out of passion. As Kalian always said, passion was the only pure fire in the world. I wanted that fire” “But fire burns, doesn’t it?” “Not Kalian’s fire. His fire only lit me up. Illuminated what was there in a way only he could. Me being the muse and him being the terrific artist he was”. Grace was smiling as she recapped the story. It was a beautiful story. A story between an artist and a muse is always beautiful.

Grace continued her story about how she walked up to Kalian that day and they had fallen in love. She more than him at first but by this time, Hannah listened intently as she hoped to feel her brother somehow. To feel who her brother was after he left home. To feel those seven years through Grace’s words. “How old are you Hannah?” “Seventeen. How old are you” “Twenty seven” “That’s an

odd number of years” “So is seventeen but ok. Did you ever go to Kalian’s rallies” “I went once. To tell him to come home. He didn’t like it so I never went again. But right now, I wish I went and he yelled at me” “I know”.

The next morning Vivian was cooking. She hadn’t cooked in seven years but she was cooking that morning. Her daughter could not believe it but Vivian said she cooked that morning because the child Grace was carrying was Kalian’s and she could feel him. Cooking was the first step. Vivian was finally healing.

The first day of the next week, a box came. Inside the box were some painted pictures of Kalian and a letter addressed to him. The letter commended him for his works and his bravery. Nothing the ordinary admirer wouldn’t say. The letter made Vivian sick so she threw it away. The pictures however, she hung those around the house. Apart from words, she had another thing to remind her of her baby boy.

All three women needed the pictures to be hung. They needed to see their brother, their son and their soul mate. So amazing what one human being could be to different people but then it was Kalian. “These pictures look too upfront” Grace remarked while holding one of the pictures up close. She continued, “They are not merely admiration pictures, a stalker painted this”. Hannah laughed and said; “Kalian had a stalker. Oh that would make him glad” “It would”

Vivian added. “Such a queer boy”. “That’s why I married him”. All three women nodded because they knew it was true.

The next day there was another box. This one bigger than the previous one. It contained an admiration letter, some paintings and also a letter informing ‘all who love Kalian’ to stand firm in this tough time. It was a touching letter so Vivian kept it and Grace kept the pictures that came in this box. Two of the six of them featured her laughing alongside her husband. That night, Vivian said that she needed to see the shrine built for her son.

Three days later an automobile pulled up and parked beside the concrete wall. The driver opened the door, but did not get out of the car. Although her face was in the shadow, it was easy to tell she was sad. There was something about how she turned away from the sun and rested the weight of her hands on the steering wheel, something about her silent composure, that caused Hannah to sigh. The young girl watched the driver lean out of the car and stretch her hand out towards one of the burned candles.

The tears had already choked her voice and now it sounded like a croak. “Kalian, you had to leave us didn’t you?”. Hannah tried to pull her mother back into the car but it was becoming futile. Her mother still yearned and cried for her brother who would not be coming back. Grace simply existed at the back seat. She more than anybody wanted Kalian to come back but he wasn’t going to. All they could do was

cry at his shrine and go home and still cry. They could look at his paintings to spice the tears up.

They stayed at the shrine for the whole day. Some other mourners came to join them. They all mourned silently and in different degrees. That night, as Hannah and Grace laid in bed, Hannah asked Grace to tell her about the day Kalian had died. “It was the night we went for the first ultrasound. We had come out and were walking home when the mob rushed us. You see the red paint on the wall, that’s his blood. I was too stunned. I still am. It had happened so quickly yet so slowly at the same time. After he was dead, the mob chanted ‘Rejoice! the rebel is dead’. Those unimaginative idiots. My husband was killed by idiots Hannah”. “Where is he buried”. “He’s not. Kalian wanted to be cremated. His ashes are in the shrine. I spread them there. Felt like the right thing to do” “It was”.

The next week there was another box. One that had pictures of Kalian taken by a camera and a poem written about him. Grace was the one who picked the box up from the front door. She opened it expecting the regular painted pictures but the poem took her by surprise. A wonderful surprise. It was a lovely poem.

She held and read it seven times or more. **‘Kalian a man in art’s truest form. With a fire that does not only burn. A fire that illuminated and regenerated day by day. A fire that gives and gives away. Kalian, a man in art’s truest form. The earth never beheld such fiery passion’**. When she read it the last time, she held it

to her chest. She cried for her husband. The words on the paper seemed to bring him to life. She missed Kalian and would always miss him. The poem just reminded her why she would miss him every day.

She picked the pictures and hung them in her room. Kalian's former room. She kissed each one and hung them on the wall. Vivian walked in on her hanging the pictures and watched her from the door like a hawk watching its children play in the valley. She watched with immense dedication and a tint of emotion. She saw why her son had loved Grace in the first place.

After watching her hang some of the pictures, Vivian spoke. "I see another admirer package came today". This startled Grace and she almost lost her balance. Vivian rushed to aid her sit on the bed. "I'm sorry darling. I did not mean to startle you". "I know you didn't. I was just hanging the pictures that came in the box today. These ones were taken by a camera. Most of them were taken of him at one rally or the other. They also came with a poem". "Well the beauty of art my darling is that it takes more than one form and has many voices"

The two women hugged and talked about the child that Grace was carrying. How she was due in the next four months. Hannah joined them soon and Grace read the poem to them again. Hannah liked it more than the rest of them so she asked to keep it. Grace finished hanging the pictures and the rest of the evening ensued.

Weeks after, when Grace had started to show, she was attacked on her way back from the hospital. The same place her husband had been killed. The man who attacked had said before he ran away, “No spawn of that evil man is going to live. His vulgar ways shall die with him”. She was found by another man and taken back to the hospital.

The attack diminished all progress made by Grace in her healing process. Neither Vivian nor Hannah could help her out of her depressed state. She sat by the river all day and thought about Kalian. She thought of how he painted her and how he smiled at her and how he held her and how he kissed her. How he liked to paint her naked and they would make love on the bare canvas when he was done.

On a particular day, she thought of him as she sat by the sea and she started to drift away. “Come on Grace, you are never going to find out how good it is until you try it” “No Kalian. I cannot eat worms” “Oh my beautiful wife they are not worms. I love you far too much to do that. Now put them in your mouth. There you go, now give me a kiss”...

Grace opened her eyes and it was only her. Kalian was still gone. She didn't cry. She didn't want to. No matter how much she cried it didn't bring her Kalian back. She stood up, wiped her bum and went into the house. She didn't cry for him anymore. She simply brought out a paper the next day, used whatever she could find and she started painting.

The days became easier to deal with for the women. Often times, Grace told mother and daughter stories of she and Kalian. They always listened to it for various reasons. None of which the reason why Grace was telling it. They kept this pattern for a long time after Kalian's death and soon, they started seeing the words for what they were. Mere words.

The day Grace's baby came, none of them were ready for it. Hannah was at the shrine, Vivian was at the store and Grace was painting at home. As her water broke, Grace was all alone. She screamed like all women in labour do but nobody came for a while. She yelled and she started trying to have the baby by herself.

The head of the baby was already out when Vivian came back. Of course Vivian panicked but Kalian's son was born in the end. He looked exactly like his father. He was his father and he was named Kalian. Vivian cut the cord and that night, Grace didn't sleep. She looked at her son and more than ever, wished Kalian was still around to see what they made.

The days gave into weeks and into months after Grace had her baby. The letters kept coming and so did the boxes. After Grace gave birth, she found work at the hospital but more importantly, she kept on painting. Vivian started leaving the house more and Hannah left for college. Life moved on without Kalian and it was getting good.

On her way back from work one day, Grace saw a rally in the alley where her husband was murdered. Seemed like a century ago



when she thought of it. The boy speaking looked like Kalian. He had the same fire. On the far left from the young man, there was a young girl looking at him the way she looked at Kalian. It made her smile. She stared at them for a while and then she walked home with her son.

When they got home, Hannah was sitting on the couch. She was home from college. She brought with her a young man. He was very quiet. Grace told them of the rally that she saw on her way back. She could see it in their eyes. They were happy. Vivian was however the only one who said it. “At least Kalian didn’t die for nothing”

Later that night while Grace was painting and Kalian was asleep, Hannah knocked on her door. “Hey Grace, how are you?”. “Well Vivian said I’m getting chubby so I guess I’m good” “Oh that’s not what I mean. How are you and Kalian?” “We are ok. I took him to the shrine last week. To see his papa. People left painted pictures of him there. He’s not old enough to understand it but at least let him see what a great man his papa was”

Hannah nodded. “How’s college?” “Well it’s okay sometimes. Sometimes it’s not but I have Jesse. So it’s not simple but it’s easier”. “That’s good”. After a long pause, Hannah finally asked. “Hey, I’m doing a write up on Kalian and I have to ask you because you’re the only one who would really know. What’s Kalian’s best artwork?”

Grace had been waiting for the day someone would ask her that but now she didn’t know what to tell Hannah. She just looked at

Hannah, looked at the picture she was painting and at her son. She then smiled and told Hannah, “That child lying down there. That’s Kalian’s best” Hannah smiled but Grace continued, “Kalian had a way of making things. Of instilling fire. That was his art. So his best artwork would be the one which he instilled the most fire and that’s his son.

Hannah went back to school after three weeks and the paper came out in the new year. It was wonderfully written at the end, she said, ‘Kalian’s art was that of instilling fire’. Hannah got into lot of trouble for writing the paper. But at the same time, the people Kalian had inspired started to grow. Grace got a copy of the paper and hung it with the rest of Kalian’s pictures.

Slowly, the rest of the city started to see Kalian’s art and accept it. It was not easy and it took a lot of time. It started with shops starting to sell art materials openly and then one art school. Then another one and then another one. All Vivian always said when these things happened where “Kalian would be proud”

The government started allowing art street by street. Hannah was no longer in trouble for the paper and things started looking better. Seven years after Kalian died, he was still remembered, his fire was still burning and his voice still speaking.

Those seven years later, the shrine was still there. The red paint had however been scrubbed away. It had more visitors every day. More people painted pictures of Kalian and kept it by the shrine.

Vivian visited it every week with Grace and her son. However, as the days went by, they let him go bit by bit. His pictures and the letters written about him were starting to be enough.

The day before Hannah got married, she went to the shrine with Grace, her nephew and her mother, the shrine was no longer there. In its stead was a statue. A statue that captured all of Kalian's essence and his beauty. Clay was at its finest or maybe each saw what they wanted to see and it was just dry clay. What was however seen by everybody was that the voices Kalian fought for were finally speaking in deafening pitch.

# WITH LOVE FROM THE SOUTH

*For Dayo, for reading them all.*

*For Tari, for believing in them all.*

*“Once I was seven years old, my mama told me “go make yourself some friends or you’ll be lonely”. Once I was seven years old. It was a big big world...”*

This was getting to be my favourite song. It told a story and I liked stories. It told a story about a boy who wanted to grow up and he did. He grew up, he grew old, and at the end of the song, he wanted what all of us want. He wanted love from those he had given it to. I was at the part of the song where “**soon we’ll be thirty years old**”. As the days went by it was not getting any easier. Every day came with a new reason why it was not going to get better. On Monday, it was because I had not found a husband. On Tuesday, it was because I had still not found a husband. On Wednesday it was because my landlord with children my age had asked me to marry him. I was now attracting old men. On Thursday it was because I had no children and on Friday it was because my mother had oh so painfully reminded me that I had no husband, no children and that I should consider papa Ib our landlord.

With a week like that there was no way I did not want to do it. I woke up on Saturday very early and drove to the new bridge. Plump housewives and others were going to come very soon to begin their exercises. If I was going to do it, I had to do it early. But then I did not. Not because I could not, or did not want to, or because of a tiny voice. No, but because of a deep masculine one.

I was going to tell you the story that had led up to the bridge but that would make you cry a lot. I am going to tell you the story that happened at the bridge and beyond the bridge.

So where was I? Ah yes I had put one leg across the bridge and one leg on the ground. I did not sit on the barrier because I was giving life one more look with a subtle song like ABBA's *slipping through my fingers* playing at the back of my mind. Rather I was sitting there because I was praying that God would forgive me and accept me. Just before I was about to leap into the river full of dangerous metals and waste products, I hear him say; "I'll jump after you". I turned to look at him and say; "Ok then, but don't jump into the exact spot which I did. I don't want you to drown me. I want the river to take me and drown me at its own will."

"Noted" he said and he smiled. Now this was five in the morning, I was about to jump into the water and drown but then a little humour made me have that last look at life. This time ironically, ABBA's *When all is said and done* was what played at the back of my mind.

My mind had already planned to shut down so that was the closing theme. He looked at me and then said;

“Go on then. We don’t have all day to commit suicide. It is kind of frowned upon you know”

“Please don’t rush me” it was after I had let the words escape I realized that I had contradicted myself. I had woken up this early, driven to bridge, put one leg across and now I did not want to be rushed. Of course he looked at me with a muffled laugh in his throat and his lips slight curved downwards to hide his smile. He knew what I knew. I knew that he knew what I knew.

I came down from the bridge and then told him;

“Why don’t you go first if you’re so much in a hurry”

“But you were here first, first come, first drown or is that not how it goes. I’m new to this and I heard you can only do this once” This time he didn’t bother to muffle his laugh or his smile. He simply smiled and looked at me with expectant eyes.

Now my throat was closing up and cars were beginning to pass. It wasn’t five in the morning anymore. This young man was looking at me with an expression on his face which said “Ok honey, it’s your time to talk”

I searched my brain for something to say. I even licked my lips. That meant I was trying. I looked him back in the eye and said;

“You are oddly happy for someone who wants to take his life”

“Well I believe it was Oscar Wilde who said life is too important to be taken seriously”. He said this with a slight tilt of his neck and his left hand behind his neck. He was very handsome this way. He noticed that I was admiring him so he said;

“Look at me all you want. We’re going to jump soon”

I laughed and remembered why I had met him in the first place. I sat on the barrier this time both legs to the ground and he followed. We kept an adequate and comfortable amount of space between each other.

“Oh” I exclaimed rather quietly.

“I’ll tell you why I wanted to do it if you tell me why you wanted to first” he said to my now downcast face.

I was about to open my mouth and tell him about my horrible week and the three hundred and sixty weeks preceding it when I realized that it was all not so horrible as I had thought.

“Go on, I’m listening”

“Well, I turn thirty today.”

“Well happy birthday. What an odd reason to jump into the river but then different strokes for different folks”.

“I was not done”

“I’m sorry. Proceed”

“Well everybody my age around me is married with kids. I am not. I hate my job, I am attracting old men now as my landlord whose first son is my age mate asked me to marry him” the last part earned an “Oh dear” from him. It earned an affirmative “hmm” from me and I even added an “It’s true”. I felt an urge to keep talking because now I had to convince him why I wanted to jump into the river. It was hard to do that. I swallowed an almost choking amount of saliva and continued talking;

“Well my dad died when I was five. I am the only child and now I am disappointing my mother who gave everything to get me to this point. My first and very well paying job flunked because the boss who was married and I were dating. In my defence I honestly did not know but no one hears that part of the story. It’s a family company so the wife told her father about it and well boom, I was out”

“Hmm. Well that would not have ruined you unless you loved the job or you loved the married man”

“Don’t say it like that. I did not know he was married.”

“Ok. I’m sorry, your boyfriend”

“Yes. I did. I loved the job and the sex was good. The money was good”

“You loved the sex and the job and the money. Sure, that’s enough to break anybody’s heart”



I laughed really this time for the irony and the tone with which he had said it.

“So to draw a conclusion, you want to jump because you’re a beautiful home wrecker who has no children and no husband at age thirty. Seems like a good headline for the news tomorrow on pulse”

“These days anything is news worthy so yes it’s a good headline but that’s not why. Shhh, I’m not done”

“The sun’s coming up and the fitness group has started setting up. If we are going to jump today, your story has to be quick so I can say mine and then we can jump”

I had laughed a lot in this short time for someone who wanted to commit suicide but then again I laughed.

“I was pregnant for the married man. I was ecstatic when I found out. I did not plan on telling him but I planned on keeping it. She was going to be the joy of my life. I picked out a name and everything. Baby Neave. My mother was happy too. Not because she supported wedlock but because she saw how happy I was.”

“Of course she was happy. You’re her baby girl”

“I am. So I had lost my job and I was pregnant but baby Neave had good luck. I found another job in no time. I started to decorate the nursery as soon as I found out it was going to be a girl. Every day I did a little bit while listening to Abba. Neave liked **When I kissed the teacher**. She always kicked when I listened to it.”

“That’s interesting. Is she naughty?”

“On some level she was because she was stillborn.”

I saw the colour seep from his face. The news had shaken him and a tear escaped my eye. He did not say anything. He simply closed the space between us and held my hand. I told you this story was not going to make you cry so I will not dwell on this part. Moving on, I continued to tell him;

“I cried for the first week after I returned from the hospital. I have not stepped into the nursery ever since. The door is shut and no one walks in there. My mum had already come for the *omugwo* so she just stayed. She has been with me since and It’s been six years.

“I wanted to say something but I don’t know what to say”

“Well I’m almost done with my story. Maybe by then you’ll have something to say”

“Maybe” he said and I continued;

“After Neave, I have been in three abusive relationships and after them I just stopped trying. The first one used to beat me. The second one used to steal from me and the last one Tunji raped me once. He died the week after and I was so happy, I drank a whole bottle of wine by myself”

“You deserve that bottle”

“I do” I said with my lips tilted up to represent a face of self contentment”

“Is that the end or”

“Well the last relationship ended two years ago and I have stopped trying. Now my landlord wants to marry me. Oh I almost forgot, my boss is the brother to the woman whom I was sleeping with her husband. You can only imagine how much of hell my job is”

“A small world isn’t it?”

“And yet I never run into Bryan Idowu”

“No, you do not”

“I don’t” I said as though to affirm his statement. I looked at his face and I saw the question so I answered;

“You want to ask me why all of a sudden I want to leap”

“Indeed”

“Well my mother died this early morning. She just slept and did not wake up. She was the only person who still loved me and now she’s gone. I wanted to jump this early so that I could maybe meet up with her. It’s stupid now I think of it but I’m not far from being mad so”

Now, it was seven a.m and the fitness group had come. They were warming up so the place was busy and not an ideal time to jump. However jumping took a split second so we could still jump, if we

wanted to. I looked at him looking at the fitness group. He looked at them with no emotion at all. Not admiration, disgust or even lust. His face just blank. I then tapped him and said;

“They cannot run that fast we can jump and they won’t be able to meet us before we do it. So tell me your story”

“True. It’s my turn. Ok then. I have a good job. I am very good looking. I have had my own array of girls. All with pretty faces but empty souls. I am a funny person. I do not have any children or family. My parents died a year ago. My father first and then my mother a week after. An only child as well. I do not have any pressing problems but why I want to jump is easy. I do not want to live anymore. I’ve seen it all and the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is not there. Nothing thrills me. Nothing excites me. I have no drive to wake up every morning and my soul is empty”

He said this with no emotion at all as though he was reciting poetry he did not write. I saw all that was standing before me for what it really was – A façade. It was obvious he did not even believe in God. Even at your lowest, you had God but he probably did not know that. He then looked at me and said;

“You however, you want to live. You have told me everything that has happened to you but then somehow, you still want to live. You’ve loved. You’re still looking for your Neave. I’ve never loved. Well except my parents. But that’s not really love I chose. I want to know what it’s like to choose to love someone you know. How it feels to get

a letter from someone and at the end, the subscript would be ‘with love from the south’ or something”

I saw the emotion in his eyes. He wanted to live. He just did not know it. That morning I had learnt that it was not enough for something or someone to be there. You had to know it was present.

Acknowledgement people, acknowledgement.

“Well” I said. “I do, so I will not jump again but will you?” I stood up and he followed. We dusted the sand off our bums and I looked at him with both hands on both sides of my my waist waiting for his reply.

“No” he said.

“Good” I replied and smiled. Heading to my car to open the door, I turned and was about to ask him if he needed a ride when I saw only a blink of his shirt. He jumped. The horror, Oh the horror! The colour seeped and my hands went numb. I realized in that instant that I did want to live. Merely witnessing a person jump terrified me. I could not take my own life. I did not even know his name. Soon enough, people gathered and I was interrogated for what I had told him that made him jump.

Of course it was difficult to prove my innocence. Coupled with my mother’s death, people assumed I was a murderer. The 52 weeks that followed were horrible. On my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday I went back to that same bridge. This time I was sure I was going to do it. The pain was agonizing. The tears were nonstop. I put one leg across and sat on the barrier just as I had done a year before. This time I put the second leg

over and I jumped. Well I can't really laugh on paper but you should see your face. If I had jumped who would be telling you this story? This time too I did not jump. Not because of a masculine one but because I finally heard that tiny voice. That one I did not hear last year. It simply said; "Clara, you know you want to live" and it was right. I wanted to so I crossed over, came down and got into my car. I put on my phone and listened to Coldplay's **Viva la vida**. I was at the indigo of my rainbow and my pot of gold was just one colour away.

*...Until next time...*