

# LOVE AND DESPAIR

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## Love in 60 minutes

It was 1989 in Katsina, Nigeria. It had just been created two years back, Lawrence Onoja was the governor but I told mum he'd be caught in a coup.

He was. Dude lost his job.

The new governor, Madaki, wasn't as nice. He was more of Babagida's puppet. My Christian parents really thought it'd be the "home of hospitality". There were nothing but whispers about the sharia law then, all I had to do was keep my head down and not disrespect any of their religious bullshit. We went to classes at the Katsina provincial secondary school, they segregated us Christians to a particular area of the school, hospitality my foot. I sat like I did every other day of the week, it was barely even lunch time when bullets flew through the open and close wooden windows in my class room.

"Jesus! Jesus!!" me and my mates were screaming, the more shooters heard the name, the more they tried to shoot. There was a rampage and I ran the hell out of there with zero hesitation. I made my way to the other side of the building, yeah, where the Muslim kids were eating 'kuli kuli' and drinking 'kunu' like our lives weren't being attempted. I hid in the bathroom, I had only been there 10 minutes when a girl came running to seek cover too. She came right for my spot, I knew she wasn't expecting someone there, much less a boy.

One little thing, it was the girls bathroom, don't judge me, I was afraid for my life.

She was so shaky when she barged into me, my arms just had to stable her. "Hey, hey!!" I said whispering loudly "you're safe here, you'll be fine. They won't kill their own people, talk less of their future mothers." she didn't trust me, how'd I know? She punched my stomach so hard, my rosary fell out my shirt. I could immediately see the remorse on her face and that was payment enough, she was as pretty as dark girls come. I knew people were in danger but we were hiding till we didn't hear gunshots anymore. That didn't seem to be soon, so I took a little liberty.

"I'm Abraham" I blurted and waited a bit. "Faith" she finally said back, shame still plentiful in her tone. "I apologize for hurting you earlier, I was raised better" she didn't know that I was just grateful she could speak English. "I understand wanting to defend yourself, I blame the country!"

I shot back, She maintained my gaze a bit longer this time, her eyes were hazel brown, they looked like they'd seen too much. In that moment all I wanted to do was wipe her past clean, her eyes would be even more mesmerizing without all the pain it carried. Faith had such a small nose. How did she breathe with that thing? She looked scared but still arrogant somehow.

After some minutes her breathing had steadied, she was even prettier now. I really hoped she liked herself as much as I was starting to. We were in a bathroom, we had hidden under a sink like basin for washing hands, not like anyone really used it. There wasn't much wiggle room under there.

Her hand would brush against mine carelessly and I could feel the arrogant girl get shy each time. I'd catch her gaze and she'd blush, we were getting comfortable in the midst of the crisis. I couldn't let the silence kill, I noticed her left hand had a scrape. Icebreaker? Obviously.

"May I?" I calmly asked like I bagged that doctorate years ago, stretching out my hand to take hers. "okay" she let me. It was a bit bloody, but I knew it wasn't fatal, she had small fingers that fit perfectly into mine.

I checked.

What was this uncanny calmness? Maybe it was shock from hearing so many gunshots. "Why don't they like us?" Faith asked as tears gathered and then fell down her slightly full cheeks. I just wanted to comfort her, to understand where she was coming from just so I could best lift her spirits. "They're just jealous! They know we're going to be greater, they want to stop it before it can manifest, it'll all be over soon" I drew her in for a hug, I can't lie I braced myself for another punch, but there was none. Just a tired Faith sobbing softly into my chest.

I made no move to stop her, I just let her get it out of her system. Faith had lost two siblings to them already and I could totally relate. Those no good people took my father. Messed up as it may be our tragedies brought us closer. I simply cradled all of faith as she told me about their deaths, I didn't try to console or show pity. I could tell she was the type of person to hate that, she'd look up from time to time during the story and I'd just smile reassuringly. She became my friend right then, I knew I wanted more. Scratch that, I knew there was going to be more. She accepted me only because I never rejected her in the first place.

"Gba\_ghaun!" went the single strike school bell, the next one hour period was about to start. The hour seemed way longer, we'd felt so much, said so much. I was starting to enjoy the mystery that was Faith.

The bell drew our attention to the silence outside, the gunshots had stopped. People seemed to be walking outside.

I stood to my full height, helped up the love of my life and intertwined one of my hands with hers.

"As soon as we get out, we run. "

# Unexpected

Rima was getting impatient. Time was not on her side but it was Amaka, her best friend we were talking about. Punctual-Amaka, always-keeping-her-on-her-toes Amaka. It had been 4 hours already, 4 hours! Amaka's cell kept ringing but no response.

Her best friend had been in yet another interview but this was taking too long. They had agreed to meet each other by the bus stop after the interview was done, this was the 7th one this month. It was almost always the same routine; take the interview, rendezvous at the bus stop, call each other upon arrival. What was wrong this time?

"Did she forget we were supposed to meet" Rima quizzed, staring at the phone like it had all the answers. Was she okay??

As she was calling Amaka for the umpteenth time she started to remember how she tried to discourage her from this particular interview. Her gut was always right. She found a small bench and sat in a failed attempt to calm down, there she couldn't help but recall her warnings to her best friend..

## Six days earlier...

"At This point, any paying job I see, walahi I'll take it. I wonder if there's even anything else for a graduate in Nigeria" Amaka said half joking. Rima picked up the conversation laughing "I'll keep an eye out. She you see that even having a degree is pointless" "Don't kill my joy abeg, God go do am" Amaka said, walking away to get changed. As she was slipping out of her interview outfit, thoughts upon thoughts kept flooding her mind.

Morals and her strong will would never let her do odd or depraved jobs. She slipped once during her college days and someone was killed, God rest his soul. That was a dark time, she immediately shook off the thought . Amaka was beautiful and she knew it, she always held her head high but inside it she was struggling. She could feel herself slowly become more of a burden to Rima. When would her luck change? She had so much responsibility, she was in no place to slack, the cards fate dealt her were nothing short of shameful. She was out of her father's place but was still squatting with her best friend. She and Rima went way back so she didn't mind her staying for as long as she needed. What were friends for?

If she couldn't change her luck she would at least change her clothes. She slipped into a navy blue nightgown and came to sit with her only roommate, Rima put her head on Amaka's laps as

she scrolled through her Twitter feed, Amaka was pretending to watch the movie on the television, once in a while glancing at Rima's feed.

She saw the ad "Secretary Needed!" it stood above all the necessary qualifications one had to have to be eligible, Amaka ticked all the boxes. The salary was to be disclosed upon interview but it was stated to be a five figure start up. She concluded in her mind because the ad looked professional. "Rima scroll up again, I want to see that ad" she said, collecting the phone from her.

Rima paid no mind to ads, she tried to discourage Amaka saying "I've seen so many scenarios where these ads are just fake, they never amount to any good" "beggars can't be choosers my dear, how do we know this is not the job God wants for me" Amaka chirped back, knowing fully well that desperation had everything to do with it. "It could be it, but my gut says no way. I'll support you because I love you but I have a bad feeling about it" she could hear the distress in Rima's tone but she needed the job. "gut or no gut, I'm applying"

She immediately emailed the agency applying for an interview and sure enough it didn't take up to 2 hours she was emailed back the location and time of the interview "30-04-2021, 9 am prompt" It was all too easy, she kept saying it was God giving her a chance to shine, special grace she said.

Rima kept smelling a rat and not keeping quiet about it.

It was a Friday, Amaka had no sleep the night before due to preparations for the interview. She had a good feeling as opposed that of her best friend. She had spent so much time memorizing responses, practicing speech patterns, simulating every scenario in which a secretary would be needed, she put in the work. A bit nervous but Amaka was ready.

Rima was still in bed by 7:40am, when Amaka rushed in to tell her she was leaving already, Rima had quite the night and was still feeling nauseous "let us pray before you leave na" a half awake Rima said. "I would've but I'm already late" Amaka shot back as she collected the change on Rima's drawer, blew her a kiss and zoomed off in her sky blue sleeve and black knee length slit skirt.

She sat amongst about 22 other applicants, male and female alike. They all looked prepared, confident even. She got nervous as she let her eyes scan the room. A certain ebony beauty stuck out.

Their eyes met.

She stared at Amaka like she knew her. Her face was glorious, but those eyes, they definitely held contempt. Amaka blew it off and continued practicing the little French she planned to impress the interviewer with. She'd raise her head to meet the gaze of the same brown eyes. Why's she looking at me? Amaka asked herself.

Her name was called and she immediately stood and entered.

An unsure Amaka emerged 25 minutes later, looking all shaken up, she didn't know how the interview went, the interviewer let nothing slip. For now, all she wanted was rest and Rima's gossip. She started to walk downstairs, so did the ebony beauty. She stopped briefly to call Rima, the reception in the building was terrible. Those eyes met her on the ground floor, this time she didn't look, she didn't want to.

The route to the bus stop was not always this quiet, Rima lived on the other side of town, cost of living was cheaper there. "if I get to the bus stop I'll call Rima" Amaka said to herself.

She was halfway down the street before she noticed it was a wrong turn. She hadn't finished that train of thought when her eyes went all the way up into her head, she felt sharp pains from her back, more pain, then much more pain. All she could think of was how she wouldn't get to enjoy anything she so strived to. She was getting stabbed, time after time after time. She remembered Rima.

Amaka shouted in anguish, she was already loosing so much blood, the stabbing didn't stop. She turned to meet those brown eyes. The ebony beauty was in tears, eyes sore from so much crying. She crouched over what was left of Amaka and kept stabbing...

"You took my brother from me."

# Overflow

“Evening everyone, can I have some attention please?” Mr Jethro shouted into the small crowd gathered outside his house, clinking his fork against his tall Glass. “Can I have your attention please?” he repeated this until the noise died down. “I see you Camille! Stop being funnier than me” the crowd gave a small laugh. “Definitely not my intention” the mother of his kids shot back.

It had been years since Jethro wanted his own place, it was finally happening, friends and family gathered to celebrate his accomplishment. He was raised in a Christian home, his parents thought it only right to give him a Hebrew name. Jethro, meaning overflow.

He was a hard worker, a family man, a provider, everyone “loved” Jethro. At least the version of him they knew.

He had only one problem.

He believed he worked too hard to share the goodies he earned in life. Whatever he valued, he over valued. Camille, his twins; Janet and Jessica, his psychology degree... and now the house.

A beaming Jethro started the little speech he’d prepared since the foundation of the house was built. “seest thou a man diligent in his works, for he shall dine with kings and not mere men. Proverbs 22:29. I tell you today, everyone sitting here, including you, are kings” he said pointing at Nneka’s baby. Jethro let out a big smile and was about to continue when he noticed Camille laughing yet again. It was because of Tobi. “If anybody had told me I’d be this successful, I totally would have believed them. I dey try na, arbi?” he asked rhetorically. The crowd gave another laugh. “I know and truly hope that greater success will find each and every one of us. “Except Tobi” he said in his head. I need you all to know that I’m grateful for the support and for the roles you all played, I would be here without you but Thank you anyway.” small laughs and solemn nods of acceptance filled the gathering.

He was cocky, as expected of a man so intelligent. Jethro fed off these little responses. They were assurances of what he already knew; that he basically had them eating out of the palm of his hand.

He let his eyes find Camille. There she was, grinning end to end as Tobi told his own jokes in her ear. Jethro was getting ticked off. He quickly rounded up the speech and headed down to where they both sat.

Before he could get there Tobi said “Jethro, my man, come join us!” A fake smile came to Jethro’s face faster than data plans expire. Tobi slipped his hand around his wife’s waist, pulling her closer to himself. The smile on Jethro’s face struggled to stay.

Why did she not complain?

“Congratulations on the new place, it’s quite convenient that it’s so close to our place. I mean, the man’s basically our neighbour....” Tobi went on and on.

Our? What audacity! Was he rubbing it in his face? If only he knew that each word he uttered to Jethro was perceived as foolishness, he’d talk less. Jethro chuckled it all up to ignorance.

“I’m sorry, you will have to excuse me” Jethro said, cutting off Tobi. He looked at Camille and subtly signaled her to come outside as he was walking away. “Such a rude man” Tobi said, not reading the room, yet again.

He picked up a bottle of tequila with two glasses. Camille wasn’t a drinker, both glasses were for himself. He sat by the balcony and observed everyone buzzing and enjoying themselves whilst he was waiting for her to come out. He had time.

Realization crept up to a half drunk Jethro right then and there. Everyone present wasn’t there because they loved him, they were there out of obligation. His eyes met Nneka, she wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t helped both her sons get into college. Stanley was here with his wife whom he had paid off her hospital bills about two years back.... they were all here just to repay favours, he was alone.

At least he had Camille and the twins.

“Hey, you wanted to talk to me” a familiar voice spoke as it got closer to where he sat. Camille sat on the chair opposite Jethro. Noticing the two glasses she said “enjoying yourself I see. You look really nice in this sleeve by the way” a compliment or just shade, Jethro didn’t dwell on it.

“Why haven’t you told Tobi yet? I don’t get it! I thought you said you were miserable” Jethro started to say, pulling his seat closer to Camille’s. The eye contact was too intense, Camille looked away as she tried to explain herself. All she said was “it’s too late to leave him, it’s just too late” two of her fingers pressing against her temple. A confused Jethro kept looking for Camille’s eyes, she kept escaping his.

“What changed?” the tone in his voice grew threatening. “Camille, tell me.” he said quite calmly, placing both hands on Camille’s laps. She shivered a little and said under her breath

“I’m pregnant and this time it’s actually his.”

‘Nothing! You have absolutely nothing’ a small voice in his head immediately affirmed his suspicions. He was so angry, what happened to eloping, he even found a place close to her so the transition wouldn’t be stressful. He wasn’t going to get anything he wanted this way. She was going to break her promise to him. Did words not mean anything anymore?

'Not nothing! , the twins are just 34 months old. I can still make them love me, after all I'm their real father ' he continued in his head. Confusion, anger, frustration.... Jethro didn't know how to feel.

"At least say something" Camille was getting disturbed by his unusual silence. His grip tightened around her laps. "It's fine, I totally understand. You're in a tough spot and you should take your time getting through it. Where are the twins by the way?" he answered her, sounding even calmer than before.

Something was definitely wrong but she didn't want to rile up Jethro anymore than she needed to. They weren't done talking, that much was obvious. It also was obvious that the twins were a deflection. She let it be.

"They're in the garden, I left them with Stanley" shame didn't let her speak up. "I'll be back. Please have everyone gather in the living room, I have something to show everyone. Thank you." he didn't take a second glance in her direction before he stood up to leave for the garden.

"They're my kids, no half man dressed as Tobi is going to take them from me" he kept muttering to himself sharing a fake smile here and there. Telling everyone to gather for the show case. He was heading straight for the garden, he stopped by the kitchen and turned on the propane gas cooker, the gas quietly escaped and was diffusing round the whole house.

"None of them love me, they all lie, they all pretend" more and more muttering. "Really nice place you have here" someone said from a distance. "Thank you" Jethro shot back not even turning to see who it was. He needed to pick up his twins.

Jessica and Janet would be His redemption. The rest of them were snakes.

He met Stanley sitting by the barbeque, the girls were revolving round him till they noticed him and came rushing to hug their 'uncle Jethro' as they knew him.

"Stanley, could you help me set up for the show case. People are already gathering in the living room" Jethro said, holding both girls against his thighs.

"Sure thing, I'll be expecting you" was all Stan said and he went in.

Jethro had a Benz parked out front and wasted no time taking the girls into it. It was uncle Jethro anyway, harmless uncle Jethro. He locked the back door, shutting everyone in. The house had three exits and he had shut two closed. The windows were barred to standard. He picked up the gas lighter Stanley was using for the barbeque and headed for the front door, the last exit.

He was muttering Psalm 101 VS 7; No one who practices deceit shall dwell in my house, no one who utters lies shall continue before my eyes."

He crossed the living room, everyone was laughing between themselves. They didn't notice his absence. Why would they?



He just slid past them, locked the front door from outside it and “click” went the sound of the gas lighter.