

Crimson Red

Olude Sunmi

Which is better, to remember or to forget?

I remember, I choose to remember how I died even though I don't want to.

I was named Dide and my life ended not how I imagined it would. I thought I would grow old with a couple of kids and a library of books. I was a singer. I was considered an enigma and my voice was said to travel to the heavens and back. I knew I could sing, I heard how melodious my own voice was. A newspaper once wrote that my "voice retained the same melody as birds." Reading that made me feel like one, I felt like I was drifting through the sky. I was among the stars faster than anyone imagined, faster than I imagined and that terrified me.

At nineteen, I won my first award as the best female singer in the country for my album. It put me in the spotlight, it came with fame, with money and irritatingly, more men who just wanted a taste of me. The music I loved, that saved me from a terrible childhood, suddenly scared me. I became overwhelmed with everything. It was in that moment of my life that I met him.

I met him at a party that was held at the rooftop of the intercontinental hotel. It was graced by the men and women whose wealth reeked of questionable sources. People favoured by the government regime. His father was one. Ordinarily, I hated parties like that but I was billed to perform. They paid really well. I decided to stay behind to the surprise of my manager who was used to me hurrying away once I was done at any event. I wanted to enjoy the party with those people whose houses nestled at the edge of the lagoon that ran through the city with dainty gardens and helicopter pads.

I lied to myself, I knew I stayed behind because of the man I noticed staring intently at me while I was on stage. Men did that all the time, but he was different. I recognized him from a couple of movies and thought he was cute. I was not surprised to see him at a party like that. I saw him walk towards me where I sat sipping from a cup. I enjoyed the breeze that blew unbridled from all sides under the open sky. I was enjoying the night, the cold and wet night.

He stood before me and I decided to take a moment before acknowledging him. He asked if he could sit next to me and I patted the space next to me on the chair. He went on to introduce himself and when I tried to return the gesture, he burst out laughing.

"Dide, no need for that, eh. Anyone who does not know you lives under a rock," he said to me with his laughter escaping in muffled sounds.

I laughed too, slowly at first and then earnestly as we got talking. I could have resisted him, I could have forgotten about him after that night but I did not, I could not. I was lonely and wanted someone genuine to share my time with. He felt like the right man.

His name was Tolu, an actor who had a wealthy father who owned oil field south of the country thanks to his relationship with the government. Tolu told me he had always admired me from a distance. He said he loved my voice and listened to my songs before going to bed. I guess like a million other people did that but it felt good to hear something like that, to hear it from him.

We were cute together and blogs had a field day with our relationship, we had the image of the perfect couple. We had date nights in the best restaurants in the city. We spent holidays walking the streets of Paris and London, enjoying the art of Florence, going through the gold souqs of Dubai and the luxury of Milan where I bought a dashing crimson dress. It was all too good and fast, too fast. Just a year and a half into our relationship, Tolu went on his knee and how on earth could I have resisted?

I accepted his proposal without a fraction of a doubt in my mind that I had made the right choice. I was excited that I was with the perfect man. I convinced myself well enough even when my manager told me she had friends who partied with him and saw that he used drugs. Even when a friend showed me a statement where his ex-girlfriends accused him of violence.

I ignored the warnings that were right in my face. I accepted the excuse that he was drunk when he hit me for not answering his phone calls one calm evening. When he slammed my leg in his car door because he claimed I was making us late for a charity event that his father was hosting, I told him I was fine even though my knee hurt.

We got married one glamorous April day. Magazines were filled with sights of our fairy tale wedding. We were finally together. I would come to realize that I walked into a trap, one that slowly snuffed the life out of me.

The slaps that Tolu gave my face as often as he took my body by force, the insults that made me feel less and less of a human being, less of the stage star that I really was.

He hit me as hard as he pleased only to apologize when I threatened to leave. We had to keep the illusion of perfection going. Tolu was adoring one moment and turned into a monster the very next. I new he was having affairs with other women too, I smelled it on him every day. He made me act like everything was great. I wonder why I stayed.

When his mother once noticed a bruise on my arm, one that he gave me, he quickly waved it off as nothing.

“No need to worry, Mum. She just grazed her arm against the door,” he said as he planted a kiss on my forehead and I just stood there, smiling. I saw that acting came to him artlessly.

If only I had seen the future, I would have left that party earlier rather than staying long enough for our paths to cross. If only I could read minds, I would have thrown the ring that he put on my finger right back into his smiling face as his knees kissed the sand at the oceanfront with a band playing in the background illuminated by the receding sun.

But I couldn't do those things, nobody could. That is why I spent the last moments of my life lying on a plush rug in a sequined crimson dress breathing heavily as blood flowed from my mouth. A standing ovation from the crowd as I performed with broken ribs.

The night before, Tolu smashed a stool on my body when I asked for a divorce.

The audience thought my sudden gasp for air and collapse was part of the show. I blacked out with the applause still thundering in my ears. I took my final breath as my blood made the wine-coloured rug turn red. The heavy curtains closed in unison signaling a perfect exit from stage as usual, but his time, from life as well.

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