

*Summer 2024*

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## Foreword

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## Empedocles by Mark Colbourne

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*An unreliable narrator slowly reveals a chilling enslavement to the four elements...*

Mark Colbourne lives in ~~New York/Prague~~/the volcanic island of Tristan da Cunha where he works as a ~~media disrupter/dominatrix~~/shamanic spirit guide. He is not what you are currently looking for.

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## How Now, Ophelia? by Allison Wall

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*Trapped in an endlessly repeating cycle of events, Ophelia decides to save herself by taking someone else's part: Hamlet's.*

Allison Wall is a queer, neurodivergent writer whose work explores deconstruction, self-discovery, and belonging. Her short fiction has previously appeared in *Metaphorosis Magazine*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, and *Electric Spec*, among others. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Hamline University and works in the dusty virtual halls of online academia. Connect with Allison on her website, [allison-wall.com](http://allison-wall.com), and on social media [@awritingwall](https://twitter.com/awritingwall).

## Odontophilia by Isabelle Ryan

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*A young man keeps losing his teeth, so a friend tries to help.*

Isabelle Ryan is a UK-based writer of horror fiction. You can find Isabelle on Twitter [@Ph4ntomR3q](https://twitter.com/Ph4ntomR3q).

## Dawn by Elli Ross

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*Rachael, at sixteen, finds herself dealing with her old, dead imaginary friend as she tries to navigate her first relationship with a boy.*

Elli Ross is a queer woman living in the Pacific Northwest of the United States with her two cats. She has been writing since she was old enough to hold a pen, and writing horror since graduating college. She is primarily interested in exploring stories from a queer narrative, whether “queer” means “lgbtq+” or “strange and mysterious”—or, ideally, both.

*The abortion laws in Nigeria have grave consequences.*

Victor Okechukwu is a writer based in Lagos, Nigeria. His writing takes a deep setting in arresting issues of mental health that have been overlooked in his country. He's an Associate Prose Editor at *Zerotic Press* and is reading mass communication at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

**Please note: This issue includes strikethrough text. If you read via an e-reader that is unable to differentiate the strikethrough text there is an accessible version available here: [Summer 2024 Accessible Issue](#)**

# Foreword

These past few months, I've been thinking about life-changing incidents – the good and the bad. (I know that's a heavy thought, but sometimes life is a little weighty.) I have had my fair share of these, just like you, I'm sure. They're the events that draw a clear line between the before and after. Before the accident, after my father died, before I met my partner. These prefixes become woven into our language and experience, shaping who we are and how we perceive the world.

When writing or creating, we fill in these befores and afters. The moment before our character steps from our imagination onto the page and the moment after. Before we start writing, and after we have written; two separate states of being, connected through the middle space, the creative space where words appear in our minds barely formed and clinging to the next one for support.

Reading good stories is like that too. The before we found our favourite book and the after. We can be changed by good stories irrevocably, such is their power. When we find a really good story, it takes all our self-control to stop from scanning ahead or noting how much is left in the book when something momentous happens. Good storytelling grabs us and won't let us go. The stories in this issue are all shining examples of good storytelling. We had such a wonderful crop of submissions that we wanted to take them all! (If you submitted to us and we said no, please submit again; we might find room in another issue. Never be discouraged.) But when the submissions are that good, you look at the bare bones, the heart of what keeps your attention. What keeps you from wanting to leave the author's world? Which character remains with you after you've walked away from the page?

That's the magic of stories, which is why humans have been sharing them since before we even had words. They offer us an escape, a rush of endorphins from experiencing adventure or emotional catharsis. But they also serve a deeper purpose. They help us make sense of the before and after, the twists and turns of life. We all yearn to understand the world, other people, and our own lives. Stories, in their myriad forms, help us achieve that. Fables teach us lessons in morality, fairy tales give us hope and warnings, and novels provide a temporary respite from our everyday lives and perhaps inspire us to view the world with fresh eyes.

So, as you stroll through our forest, joining the owls hidden in the canopy, happily hooting at each other, think about how you will change after you've read the tree trunks

covered in stories and the leaves slick with words. Will you be the same as before? I don't think you will....

**Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief**

# Empedocles

## by Mark Colbourne

**Content Warnings: Death.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 13 for the next story.

\*\*\*

I watched my first wife die in a house fire. From the wrenching vantage point of my own front lawn, I writhed against the regulating grips of numerous neighbours whilst screaming her name in deranged panic. My ambition, quite naturally, was to rush inside and save her, convinced that I alone was the man to negotiate those light-footed flames and temper their brutal heat. The Emergency Services of Police, Fire and Ambulance had also been summoned, presumably by an onlooker who had managed to maintain a clear head amongst the crisis. Unfortunately, their arrival – a chaotic blur of roaring engines, spinning lights and howling sirens, slicing through the surrounding dusk with no small degree of drama – greeted us just that devastating second too late. Trapped in the bedroom, my wife – I’m reliably informed – would have been rendered unconscious by the toxicity of fumes and smoke long before the fire itself had even reached her. The enquiry that followed lawfully ruled, with little deliberation, that this had been a terrible tragedy. With a bang of gavel and shuffle of papers, the case was accordingly closed.

*Fire.* Fire is such a vociferous creature. So greedy, so insatiable. That’s the impression that remains with me to this day, the horrific image scorched inexorably on my retina. The hunger with which it chomped up the stairs and tore through the rooms held an appalling fascination. Those flames devoured our furniture and demolished the walls. They consumed the fixtures and fittings we had lovingly chosen. They swallowed the glossed skirting boards and carefully fitted carpets. They erased the mantelpiece and curtains, the nick-nacks and the what-nots and those bits and pieces my wife and I had amassed during our lives together.

As my neighbours crudely but kindly held me in check, I could not help but marvel at the sight with which I was presented. A spectrum of red through orange to yellow that rose against the dark of the night sky and swept across the house I had previously called my home.

I'm convinced that, as I looked up, I saw an arm at the bedroom window, a tepid limb raised wretchedly at the glass... I'm assured that my eyes must have been deceiving me, the panic and the smoke and the distress all colluding to provoke some terrible optical illusion. But, to this day, I've never been completely convinced. No, I've never been convinced at all.

There is a quality of complete destruction one associates with fire, a sense of utter finality. Nothing returns from the ash that remains. As the embers fade, an end is distinctly defined. There is no mystery with regard to the consequences of a fire, whereas mystery surrounded the death of my second wife in spades.

She loved the outdoors. That was, in fact, how we first came to meet – hiking our way around the Peak District. I had indulged a portion of the insurance money from my first wife's death to pursue certain unfulfilled ambitions and experiences. The young widower, I reasoned, must keep himself distracted. Through an online company that organised walking tours, we had the serendipitous fortune to find ourselves side by side with cagoule and backpack as part of a larger group. We hit it off at once and were married within the space of a few short months. A modest ceremony but a day that throbbed with fond memories. We were in love, and we were happy. It is to my eternal regret that this happiness was not to last.

We had taken a short break to the West Coast of Scotland – a week of white-water rafting, abseiling, orienteering and the like. During an official and risk-assessed canoe trip, we broke away from the rest of our tour (my wife ever the ardent adventurer) only to fall prey to choppy water. Without warning, we were capsized by a sudden seismic eruption from below. Flowing at a petrifying speed, the current span us around and swept us away. I managed, by luck rather than fortitude, to break to the surface and gasped an erratic, desperate breaststroke back to my upturned canoe. Holding on for dear life, I screamed my wife's name whilst dragged along at the river's mercy, the buoyancy of my vessel the only substance keeping me afloat.

Her body was never found, and it caused nothing short of a stink. My latest in-laws obstinately refused to allow the inquest to reach a suitable conclusion. Utilising the services of several cavilling lawyers, they argued – successfully for a time – that the absence of a body rendered it impossible for their daughter to be legally pronounced dead. In one unsavoury exchange, unfortunately conducted in the oak-panelled and very public corridor of the courthouse, her red-faced mother even went so far as to reveal that her trust in me directly corresponded to the distance that I could be thrown.

Now, I didn't blame the mother – nor the father and his consistently cold and squinting eyes, for that matter. They simply did not want to let their only daughter go, and

this was a desire I could absolutely understand. But, as I retorted at the time, we all needed to grieve, and to grieve, some sense of closure was required. Their ears, however, were deaf to my sentiments, and the painful legal quandary was, therefore, forced to continue, dragging itself out across a torrid couple of months. As I waited for the court to reach their glacial conclusion, I somehow managed to unearth the wherewithal to successfully sue the tour company that organised the holiday for negligence. It was only after this that the enquiry into my wife's disappearance finally concluded that she must have drowned and decreed a verdict of death by misadventure.

As this sorry saga drew to a close, I will admit to having felt overwhelmed by utter exhaustion. A fatigue similar to the one I experienced when my canoe had finally washed ashore and I dragged my choking, spent body onto the muddy, sodden riverbank. Some inner reserve enabled me to climb to my feet, and I surveyed the water before me, desperately searching for the slightest sign of life. But alas, no. Like the teams that were sent to scour the river in my wake, to comb the reeds and bushes, to drag the depths, to prod or poke between rocks and crevices, I found nothing. The water had taken her. To where, I do not know, but taken her it had, and it had taken her by force. The rapids before me were in uproar, a riot of passion, a cacophony of harm. At that moment, it struck me how strange it was that this liquid so vital to our existence had the power to maim and crunch and kill. The torrents twisted together, bubbling with fury and spite. I accepted then that she was gone and that she was never coming back.

Perhaps the one slender ray of sunshine that crept through the blanket of lugubrious clouds during this period was the fact that I no longer had to worry about work. The insurance policies and out-of-court settlements had, at least, lifted that mundane burden from my shoulders. This sudden wealth, however, did prove itself the midwife to other concerns. I was still a relatively young man and desired companionship. A partner who would help steady my hand on the rudder of life. Only the hardest of hearts would have denied me this. But money attracts an unscrupulous suitor. I felt as if I was besieged by the very worst of womankind: gold-digging, back-stabbing, feckless trollops who quite obviously cared only for the inside of my wallet. It was, therefore, a moment of immense relief when the woman who was to become my third wife quite unassumingly appeared.

Her innocence was akin to a breath of fresh air, and she was genuinely uninterested in my money as she already had a vault full of her own. We married and purchased a pile in the Cotswolds. Something of a fixer-upper, but this was all part of the grand plan. Our life was intended to be perfect. Supported by a few shrewd investments, we were to be a couple in

debt only to leisure. The days were ours to do with as we wished. We spent our time in heady pursuit of art and culture, philanthropy and personal development. We worked on the house that we believed would become our Shangri-La. She died in the strangest of circumstances.

No one can explain the accident, and many have tried. There were opinions. There were theories. There were, if I'm to be brutally frank, direct accusations. For a time, things looked particularly bleak, and I was cursed with a run of sleepless nights. Eventually, the Crown Prosecution Service took a pragmatic view that the hard evidence required to haul those farcical notions through the courts suffered in short supply. I was relieved, of course. Not just for the state of my own liberty but also the memory of my poor, unfortunate wife. No one likes to have the stench of terrible events lingering around. Often, we do best to draw a line under these matters and move swiftly on – to open the metaphorical window and let the fresh air waft it all away.

The circumstances were these: during the renovations to our home, we had taken delivery of various imported building supplies in a shipping container. The cost to transport this towering cuboid from the docks had been extravagant, but the economic advantage was still far greater than sourcing the materials individually. I remember it looming in what we hoped would one day become our summer garden. A steel prism of red rust with an indecipherable code of faded numbers painted somewhat arbitrarily in white along its side. It was a blot on our landscape. Against the green fields and rolling hills, it rose like an insult; it imposed like a tomb.

How my third wife came to trap herself inside is something I still do not understand. I had been away in London to put some business affairs in order and, when I could not seem to contact her by phone, suspected that something might be amiss. With a sense of anxiety that mounted by the hour, I returned to find our house empty. After calling her mother, sister and any friends who came to mind, the alarm was officially raised. The police swept in to search and interview, to probe with questions and bumble incompetently around. I was informed – by a wheezing detective who regarded me with a great deal of distaste – that a missing person would not typically generate this level of activity so early in their absence. My wife, however, was somewhat different to the norm. She was, he said – making a very definite statement – really rather *rich*.

Isn't it a rotten cliché how the things we believe ourselves to have misplaced are always found right beneath our noses? The Keystone Cops had rifled high and low, comprehensively bemused that my wife's car, phone and purse remained at the house. The surrounding fields and woodland had been mined to no avail. It was only when one

enterprising young officer had the lateral idea of opening the shipping container that she was finally discovered. She lay on the other side of the door, quite dead. That metal box, it transpired, was perfectly airtight, and whilst trapped within, she had suffocated.

In the days that followed, I was presented with a spectrum of conjecture regarding the precise details of her death, but of course, they are details of which we shall never truly be assured. Did she burn through that precious oxygen by shouting and banging on the door in a futile attempt to attract attention? Or perhaps she more calmly reasoned that time was on her side, that someone would eventually find her? As her blood thinned, did she attempt to battle the sensation or simply sit down to accept her fate? Did she fall unconscious? Or – the vision in my nightmares – was she awake right unto the very end, clawing at her throat with bulging eyes, praying for release, praying for some *air*...? Air – the essential quality we all take for granted, that we do not even recognise until, for one horrific reason or another, it is withdrawn.

My fourth wife and I met abroad. My reasons for leaving England were manifold. Awful memories lurked in every corner; they followed five paces behind whenever I glanced over my shoulder. They were accompanied by an aspiring journalist and seasoned police detective who had separately taken a keen interest in my movements. The gall of these people, refusing to respect my right to mourn. England, it seemed, held only blackened recollections and unwanted complications. Once, in my youth, I'd had the pleasure of holidaying in the South of France. I enjoyed the experience so greatly that I decided to up sticks and move to the region. Not wishing to cause a fuss nor stir any unnecessary emotion, I took my leave without fanfare. Renting a small but decent apartment near the sea, my life began afresh, and amongst the social throng of my new hometown, I found someone to share it with.

A local girl... She took me under her wing and helped me settle, revealing to me the rustic splendour of the area alongside the many businesses that her parents owned within it. We found a plot of land that we'd be able to develop and were married in a joyful ceremony before her family and friends. My French, although at first faltering, progressed in leaps and bounds. *Entre deux cœurs qui s'aiment, nul besoin de paroles*. I placed the ring on her finger and said, 'I do.'

I think of them always, you know. I remember them. All of them. The women, the wives. The little qualities and traits that I loved and loathed in equal measure. My first wife, for instance, would never directly ask me to do anything. Rather than requesting that I pass her a particular item, she would instead offer her desire as a proposal or invitation: Would

you *like* to get the glasses out? Do you *want* to take my coat off the hook? I remember that it used to infuriate me while we were together, but now, I think of her little foible quite fondly. My second wife would leave me breathless with her capacity for adventure; I often felt like I was straining to keep up. There was always some next challenge awaiting us, another undertaking to cross from the list. Sometimes, all I wanted was to take a quiet moment and be with her. To enjoy a good meal, a nice bottle of wine, to spend an hour or so in her vivacious company. Of course, now that she's gone, I look back upon her lust for life with nothing but unbridled admiration. Her spirit was unequalled, and I miss it every day. My third wife had such great plans. She had *vision*. Our home was to be a fortress from which we would conduct great enterprise. She argued that her life had been blessed, and it was her duty to return this fortune through numerous charitable endeavours. I had warned her often against the encroach of frauds and charlatans – that pack of vultures who circled in the belief that she was a soft touch. And now, quite naturally, I see only the good in this saintly woman. I wish I had supported her very noble and honest intentions with a great deal less circumspection.

And my fourth wife, well, she sits here with me now. Relaxed side by side on the veranda of our villa, we share a bottle from the local vineyard and silently look out as the sun tumbles in the distance towards a welcoming sea. The view is simply breathtaking. We are so captivated by this wonder of nature, by the comfort our company conjures for the other and the journey we're now beginning, that we can almost ignore the building site that surrounds us. The cement mixers and tools. The pallets of various materials and supplies. The hole that has been excavated for our swimming pool. The vast amount of earth that has been piled at its side.

# How Now, Ophelia?

by Allison Wall

**Content Warnings: Alludes to death/suicide.**

Not your thing? Skip to page 27 for the next story.

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*Lord, we know what we are, but know not / what we may be.*

—William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 5, Lines 43–44

Mine is not a tale of madness, nor of eroding wits, but of sharpening them until they cut through the will of God Himself. Who else could have cursed us so?

I did not know how it came to be. I had done nothing to deserve such a fate – not that I recalled. For I remembered nothing before this endless cycle. Over and over, I relived those moments of my life most charged with painful feeling. The same words were spoken each time, but everything else was new: the visages of the people, the scenery, the instruments of technology, the garments, even my own voice and countenance. But the events were identical.

I was abandoned. I was slighted. I witnessed the madness of my once-lover, the death of my father. I felt the uselessness of the rules of society, and I gave way to all the emotion I had ever restrained. I ran barefoot. I sang, and I skipped, and I screamed. I passed judgement upon all. I vented my feelings until – nothing. Did I die? How many times?

It began again. What purgatory! What hell! I uttered the same words, suffered the same heartbreak, grief, wildness, and end – and once more to the beginning: my father Polonius's house, conversing with my brother Laertes.

No, let us not say conversing, for I hardly spoke aught. Laertes sermonised. He cared for me inasmuch as my honour touched his reputation. Never did my brother help me. Nor did my oh-so-wise father. He used me as bait in a snare. And what would he catch? The king's favour? The queen's? He had it. All the power he could ever want was his, yet he lusted for more. Polonius cared nothing for me.

No one did. The king and queen, caught up in their passion, paid me no mind. Once Prince Hamlet used me to his liking, he cast me aside. He railed against me as though I originated his suffering.

I had believed him, believed them all, in their opinions of my value. But with each repetition, my perspective cleared. Those who claimed to care for me protected me none, empowered me never. I was infantilised, manipulated, abandoned. I was powerless to avoid my own destruction, trapped in a prison outside of time or any natural laws. And what was the matter of this prison?

*Words, words, words.*

Far easier to think of nothing and let the words carry me, drifting, as through a dream. Far easier to dream than to wake, to dream than to comprehend.

But words were not strong enough to hold back comprehension. Once awake to the reality that I was caught in this syllabic cage, I could not return to sleep. I forced new words past the doorways of my lips. I begged salvation.

No one believed me. No one else was aware of the pre-determined, indeed scripted, manner of their interactions or of the repetitious nature of our damned existence. They did not remember. They called me senseless when I was the only sensate among them!

Despair carried me to oblivion and once more to my father's house, to my brother's lecturing: *Best safety lies in fear*. Anger burned inside me, hot as coals. Safety has no communion with fear. For one can be afraid and be misused. Fear is a means of control.

With greater caution, I tested the limits of my prison. Several times I succeeded in surviving longer or in adding novel interactions. They never kept me from the next cycle, nor were they repeated. I came to believe that I could not change my fate because my part was not central enough. I was too far from the heart of it.

Central to what? The heart of what? Ah, from that which warranted this curse, which tainted all in proximity to it. A secret, rank in nature. I found it out.

So did Hamlet.

I heard him think aloud – an odd quirk of his personality. I observed behaviour. I listened at doors. I tested theories, enumerated meanings, narrowing possibilities until I was certain what he both longed and feared to do. What he had not the strength to do.

Hamlet could have set things right! Indeed, the ghost of his murdered father had commissioned him directly. He had every opportunity yet squandered all. He dallied. He played games. He pined after death. He inspired in me a loathing so strong, I became nauseated at the thought of him. If I were in his position, I would make such an end...

Epiphany! Why had I not conceived it sooner? This impossible tangle and the rottenness at its centre, Hamlet contemplated but never remedied. It was his failure to act that doomed us. If he would, the shape of events would be altered. Justice would wash us all clean.

A second epiphany followed. If my part was undesirable for freeing myself, I would take someone else's. I would cut this Gordian knot to pieces.

\*

I knew every interaction of my prison, word-perfect. (Once, in boredom, I said every other person's words with them. I did not last long that time.) I called upon my knowledge. I chose my moment. I recalled the exchange upon the pages of my mind and altered it. When I was satisfied, I enacted it.

I walked in upon Hamlet's contemplation at my ordained moment.

**HAMLET**

*—Soft you now!*

*The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons*

*Be all my sins remember'd.*

I was to greet him. This time, I did not.

**OPHELIA**

~~*Good my lord,*~~

~~*How does your honour for this many a day?*~~

**HAMLET**

~~*I humbly thank you, well, well, well.*~~

Rather, I skipped ahead, turning my words into accusations and demands, which I laid about his shoulders like wreaths of flames.

**OPHELIA**

*My lord, **you** I have remembrances of **mine** ~~yours~~,*

*That I have longed long to **re-claim** ~~re-deliver~~;*

*I pray you, now **return** ~~receive~~ them.*

So different was my countenance and tone that my good lord Hamlet was overcome with surprise. And he responded, small changes already among his words.

**HAMLET**

*No, not I;*

*You ~~I~~ never gave ~~me~~ ~~you~~ aught.*

**OPHELIA**

*My honour 'd lord, you know right well ~~I~~ ~~you~~ did;  
And, with them, words of so sweet breath composed  
As made the things more rich: their perfume lost,  
~~Give~~ ~~Take~~ these again; for to the noble mind  
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.  
~~Here~~ ~~There~~, my lord.*

I reached into his pocket and removed the handkerchief he kept there. It was mine. I had given it to him when he had begged for a token of my affection. He particularly loved it because it smelled of me. He was astonished at my forwardness.

But I was not finished. I did not just change my words; I took his. I held up the handkerchief, which he had claimed not to have.

**OPHELIA ~~HAMLET~~**

*Ha, ha! are you honest?*

**HAMLET ~~OPHELIA~~**

*My lady ~~lord~~?*

**OPHELIA ~~HAMLET~~**

*Are you fair?*

**HAMLET ~~OPHELIA~~**

*What means your ladyship ~~lordship~~?*

**OPHELIA ~~HAMLET~~**

*That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should  
admit no discourse to your beauty.*

**HAMLET ~~OPHELIA~~**

*Could beauty, ~~my lord~~, have better commerce than  
with honesty?*

**OPHELIA ~~HAMLET~~**

*Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner  
transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the  
force of honesty can translate beauty into his  
likeness: this was sometime a paradox, but now the  
time gives it proof. I did love you once.*

**HAMLET ~~OPHELIA~~**

Indeed, ~~my lord~~, you made me believe so.

**HAMLET**

~~You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot  
so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of  
it: I loved you not.~~

**OPHELIA**

I was the more deceived. **Yet now,**

**HAMLET**

~~Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a  
breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest;  
but yet I could accuse ~~me~~ **you** of such things that it  
were better my your mother had not borne ~~me~~ **you**: I am very  
proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at  
my beck **awaiting only my** ~~than I have thoughts to put them in,~~  
imagination to give them shape, **and** ~~or~~ time to act them  
in. ~~What should such fellows as I do crawling  
between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves;  
all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery.~~  
Where's your father?~~

**HAMLET OPHELIA**

~~He is dead. At home, my lord.~~

**OPHELIA HAMLET**

Let the doors of hell be shut upon him, that he may play the  
fool no more for having trusted thee where but in's own house.  
Farewell.

**HAMLET OPHELIA**

O, help ~~her~~ **him**, you ~~sweet~~ heavens!

**HAMLET**

~~If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for  
thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as  
snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a  
nunnery, go: farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs  
marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough  
what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go,~~

~~and quickly too. Farewell.~~

**OPHELIA**

~~O heavenly powers, restore him!~~

**OPHELIA HAMLET**

~~I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; You care nought for me. God has given you one face, and you make yourself yourselves another: you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nick-name God's creatures, and make your cowardice wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on 't; it hath made me mad. I say, we will have no more marriages: those that are married already, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go.~~

Reversed, how much better the parts suited us! Hamlet always accused me of two-facedness, of inspiring weaknesses, never acknowledging that those were what he harboured, nay, nurtured, within his own breast. Now, he heard the truth of himself, perhaps for the first time in his life. When does a prince hear honest words? Who makes so bold as to tell him?

By his reaction, I knew the answer: none.

It was my satisfaction, too, that I managed to alter the words such that I was able to prick his conscience regarding his failure to avenge his father. I would have liked to add more, to unburden myself of how he had used me, how he had used the entire Earth and the firmament itself as though they existed only for him, without regard for anyone else. Rather, I recalled his action at this point and followed suit:

**Exit Hamlet OPHELIA.**

As I did, I heard him take up the speech I myself had uttered. It was changed, somewhat, so that the descriptors aligned with my person. Then, in came King Claudius with Polonius my father, and of their conversation, my madness was the subject, not Hamlet's. They spoke as though they had sent him to spy upon me rather than the reverse, as it had always been.

Success! I had taken Hamlet's part, and he had been forced into mine. Having reversed our speeches, I had reversed our paths. It was now for me to do what he could not: act, with logical consideration, without faltering. Readiness is all. I knew what needed to be done, and I was prepared to do it.

\*

Next, the travelling players would arrive. Hamlet always recruited them to his purpose: through presenting mimicry of his uncle's sins to provoke his guilty reaction. I had no need of players. I had seen the king react countless times. I knew the truth of his guilt. Instead, I went to the queen.

Gertrude sat before a mirror, arranging her red-gold hair. Beauteous majesty of Denmark indeed! She was a graceful woman in the prime of her life despite having already raised a son and buried a husband. She wore a wide-necked gown of deep sea blue.

At my entrance, she hailed me. 'How now, Ophelia? And how doth my son, Hamlet? Hast thou learned aught about his condition?'

Interesting. Though for the others, Hamlet's madness had transferred to me, my taking of Hamlet's part had evidently not changed Gertrude. Not yet, at least.

I said, 'Look not to him, but rather to thine own self.'

'What meanest thou?'

'You sit beside a murderer, majesty. Every day, when you take up your throne, he sits upon your right hand, and you upon his left.'

Gertrude put a hand to her breast. 'But what can this be? My husband, the king?'

'Aye, and he hath killed your husband, the king. For his throne. For your bed.'

The queen flushed. 'Insolence never found a less fit form! Get thee from my chambers at once!'

But I grasped her, hard, by the wrist, and back I forced her to the bed. She quailed before me.

'Did you not think it strange, my lady, that the king should die? Did you not think it strange that it opened the way for your lover in the night to become your lover in the day?'

'You speak of what you cannot know!'

'You lay here, upon this bed, with your husband's murderer, and his own brother!'

'Oh God, help!'

'All Elsinore cries out for deliverance. But it is God who condemns us. He will not come to our aid.'

'Are you Ophelia, or some spirit, sent to haunt me with the secret misgivings of my mind? Your words rise from the very depths of my conscience.'

'You had knowledge, then, of Claudius's fratricide?'

‘I had feared it.’

‘Explain.’

Gertrude’s gaze was downcast. ‘Claudius always shewed me special affection. I entertained it, as sister to brother. But his attentions took a carnal turn. I kept myself from him as best I could, never alone, lest he find me unguarded.’ She lifted her eyes, appealing. ‘What else was I to do? Who would have believed me? Such things are dismissed as women’s paranoias, or else the blame would fall upon me as seductress, for a lady who protests overmuch is given all the fault to bear.’

Gertrude waited as though she expected me to deal out judgement. I said nothing. I knew the truth of her words.

She continued. ‘When my King Hamlet died, I had no protection. Claudius took the throne and me with it. Had my son Hamlet been here, perhaps I would have confided in him. But what mother told her son the like? This is all beyond bearing. I know not what to do.’

I took the queen’s hands. They were long-fingered, beautiful. ‘I am a woman, as you are. We know one another well.’

‘You do not condemn me?’

‘What is there to condemn? The shame belongs to Claudius alone.’

Gertrude flung her arms about me. ‘You hear me, and you offer friendship. Nay, not only friends! Say we are more.’

‘I will be as much to Your Majesty as you desire.’

Gertrude leaned back, only enough to look into my eyes. What passed between us was like nothing I had felt before.

But hark: from the hall, an efficient step.

‘Gertrude, my love!’ called the king.

I grasped Gertrude’s shoulders. ‘Attend! They shall invite you to see a play. Beg off, plead a headache or other ailment. They shall tell you stories of me, that I have lost my reason. Look into mine eyes, now, Gertrude, and tell me. Am I mad?’

‘Nay, not you.’

‘And will you be persuaded against me?’

‘You are all I have in this maelstrom.’

Again, her eyes sent sparks through me.

I concealed myself behind the bedcurtains. My heart pounded. If Gertrude betrayed me, I had no hope of escape.

Claudius's voice: 'My dear, come and wait upon us as we take in a most diverting sight. Our son Hamlet has invited in a band of players, and they mean to perform for us tonight.'

'Ah, my lord, I would, but I am most beset. My head aches, and I fear I must excuse myself from revelry.'

'I believe it; thy voice is weak. Have you need of physic or a doctor's care?'

'To be apart and quiet for a time is all the cure I need, methinks.'

'Then I wish you ease and speed of it.'

There came a sound: a kiss.

'I take my leave. Keep this door shut fast behind me.'

'Why, my lord? Be there some danger?'

'Nay, not so much, though fair Ophelia has of late been seen about the castle, with gesturing and wild proclamation most unlike her. She ought not encroach upon your rest.'

'What ails Ophelia?'

'It appears she held Lord Hamlet in affection, who, having put her off as a prince is wont to do, may have caused a madness to take root in her.'

This is what they had concluded? That one rejection had robbed me of all reason? Marry, it was in accord with how they thought of women – or did not think of them. None considered the effect of never having agency or the void that opened when such a one lost every guide, and each decision yawned like the very gates of hell.

Claudius spoke: 'Worry not for her, and only for thyself. Rest, Gertrude. I will see you anon.'

The door closed.

When I emerged from the curtains, Gertrude looked upon me with awe. 'He did exactly as you said.'

'I know a hawk from a handsaw, and I have the measure of the king. Had you doubted me?'

'No. I only hoped you were mistaken.' She shivered. 'Horrible acts, merciless fate...'

I feared she would ask how I knew Claudius's deeds. I dared not confide in the queen my description of the cyclic repetition of events. But Gertrude was used, as I had been, to being told what to do without question.

Instead, she asked, 'Is the king's treachery known by any other?'

'Hamlet suspects.'

'Is that what makes him mad?'

‘What matters now is not the state of Hamlet’s mind, but the state of yours. The situation is plain. What mean you to do?’

‘What can I do? I am queen, but what is that? Claudius wears the crown.’

‘A crown with deeds most vile, with lies and malice stolen. Power ill-got cannot remain with him. It must not.’

‘I wish I had one portion of your resolve.’

‘Take! I give it freely.’ I clasped her hand. ‘We walk this road together. Doubt not me, my lady, no more than you’d doubt the sun to rise.’

‘I shan’t. But say, what are we to do?’

\*

I had never got this far. I did not know what happened next. But then, I was creating new events. Did it matter what the old pattern was? Perhaps it had already been irrevocably changed. If so, this was the greatest danger I had been in. Plotting against a king is treason, no matter if that king is guilty of the self-same crime. If I was executed after I had altered events, would I wake again at the start? Or would my death be permanent?

I could not be distracted. I bent my thoughts not on my own fate but upon Claudius’s, for it was within my reach.

Gertrude and I could not accuse him outright. We had no proof. All he needed do was deny, and we would be discredited, imprisoned, executed.

There was no other recourse, no other body to which we might appeal. The king held all power, and his rulings were from the lips of God Himself. Hamlet might lead an uprising, but I did not trust his indecision.

We could not challenge Claudius to a duel. It would not be honourable for the king to take up against a woman, even through a proxy.

The way forward – the only way – was trickery.

I had a plan. I had taken inspiration from the world repeated around me. The trickery’s success depended upon Claudius’s guilt. Having seen his reaction to Hamlet’s players, having overheard his fervent prayers, I was confident he felt guilt. Not enough to absolve himself and abdicate, but enough for my means.

I knew how to set my trap. And I needed Gertrude to play a part. I told her all, for I would not have used her thus without consent.

She agreed, all eagerness.

I quizzed her, then: ‘Tell me what you’ll say to him.’

‘I shall say, “My lord, these last three nights I have gone walking upon the battlements, beset as I have been with headache and sleeplessness. There, I have encountered a figure, a ghostly apparition, in the form of the old King Hamlet.” And then perchance he shall make some exclamation, and I shall say, “I do believe the figure would speak, but I am afraid and flee. Whyever should the ghost of my first husband be restless in the night?” And, “Please, my lord, do come with me tonight so that you can see the truth of the matter yourself.” And I shall convince him. He can deny me nothing for which I ask, and I can bend him to my will.’

‘You remember the spot we have fixed upon?’

‘I do.’

‘And the time of our appointment?’

‘It is in my memory locked.’

I myself had uttered this phrase time and time again but to my brother. Our words, our parts, were out of joint. I trusted this as a fair portent: the prison of words was unravelling around us.

Gertrude asked, ‘Once he is come, will you be safe?’

‘Leave that to me. But I wish you would come with me, after.’

‘I cannot be parted from my son, especially with his father dead and gone. Too, if all goes aright, he will need guidance. Such I will provide.’

Would Hamlet hear her voice as wisdom? I doubted it. But I could not sway her: her love for her son was great – greater, I feared, than his love for her.

I said, ‘Well. Then let us part, wishing success upon our endeavour.’

So we did.

\*

Over several days, I used the nighttime hours to furnish all that I would need. I then hid myself away in a disused part of the castle to await the designated hour. I attempted rest, but my mind was against me. It was full of hindrances, such as my brother’s teaching that best safety lies in fear, or my father’s that I did not know myself, that I must receive direction in all things. I knew these rules to be traps. Even so, they were difficult to ignore.

Had I acted aright? Would I succeed?

I eventually found solace: whether or not my plan worked, I was choosing my own fate. Me. Ophelia. I was no longer flailing like a landed fish, helpless, before it is clubbed to death. I was no longer speaking against my will. My actions aligned with my inner self. I was already living in the freedom I sought. And with this freedom, one way or another, I would make such an end as would be remembered for a hundred years.

Night gathered, dense with an auspicious fog. It swirled round the battlements, swallowing all. Now and then, the wind brushed through, uncovering the cold stars. Torches sputtered, their yellow-orange light quickly smothered in layers of dark. It was barely possible to see one's hand at the end of one's arm. The soldiers on duty patrolled none but gathered in the warmth of a guard tower. The walkways were deserted. I could not have imagined a more perfect setting.

I took my position, concealed within a recess of stone: a freak of the battlement's architecture. I waited. Listening. The fog muffled all noise. Even the sea crashing against the cliffs was reduced to a whisper.

Finally, voices approached.

'You must take my word.'

'Yes, and I have, my love. We have been upon these ramparts walking to and fro, and I have seen nothing amiss. Indeed, I have seen precious little besides this fog. Do you not think this might be some fancy of yours?'

Claudius spoke to the queen as to a child. The tone of his voice dispelled the last vestiges of reservations I harboured.

'No, my dear, I am quite certain of what I saw.'

The wind blew and pushed aside a curtain of fog. There was the king. He stood, hands upon his hips, and he was alone. Gertrude had already made good her escape.

He clicked his tongue. 'Useless, this meandering about in the damp after a figment of your imagination. Let us to bed. Gertrude?' He turned this way and that. 'Gertrude! Where are you?' He laughed, but there was no mirth in it. 'Is this a joke you play upon me? How amusing! But it is late, and I am weary.'

I stepped out from the shadows. The armour with which I had arrayed myself rattled. At the noise, the king spun toward me, saw me.

I wore his dead brother's armour and held his sword in my hand. My face was hid beneath the helmet, though I had stained it with coal and cranberry juice, so only my eyes shone out. I had procured a pair of stilts, left behind by some court jester, and I wore a great cloak over all.

I towered over Claudius, wreathed in mist. I raised the sword.

The king fell back, stumbled into the battlement wall. 'No. It cannot be. I— I dream. Surely, I dream.' He passed a hand over his eyes. Then, he put back his shoulders and, bolder, said, 'If thou art my brother Hamlet, dead these many months, then speak. Or show thy face, that I may know thee.'

I brought the sword down upon the stone. Sparks burst forth.

'Help! I am under attack! Come to the aid of your king!'

No guards were coming. None could hear.

Claudius clutched at the emptiness where he was used to finding his sword. Gertrude made sure he had taken it off, as we planned.

Weaponless, Claudius fled. I gave chase, though I did not have to go far: I steered him into a particular corner and blocked his escape.

He had no choice but to face me – the ghost of the brother he had murdered. He panted. 'What do you want? Why are you here?'

I growled from my chest: '*Revenge.*'

Claudius laughed weakly. 'For what could you possibly come to *me* seeking revenge?'

With my chainmailed hand, I tapped my ear. For he had killed his brother thus: by dripping poison into his ear while he slept.

All pretence dropped from Claudius's face. 'Brother, I— I did not intend for— That is, it was Gertrude, that viper! She would not let me rest until I had carried it out. The woman was unfaithful, not I. Seek vengeance upon her!'

His easy sacrifice of Gertrude woke deeper rage within me. But I did not move. I bore into Claudius with my eyes.

He raised shaking hands. 'Think you not my own remorse consumes my every waking hour? But how can I repent? I cannot live without her, and so I cannot live without the crown. One is part and parcel of the other.'

Oh, my blood boiled that he would speak thus of Gertrude. As though she was not a person but a bauble attached to the wearer of the crown. As though Claudius only wore the crown for want of it. As though he was not the power-hungry usurper his actions proved him to be.

'I care only for her happiness. Please, do not strike me down! It would break her heart.'

I could scarce believe my ears, but that I knew all men would have claimed so, about the queen or me: that they had everyone's interests at heart but their own. It was a lie. The greatest lie Claudius ever told himself – indeed, that any man ever told – was that they did not seek power when power was what they loved most of all. They wielded it over us, twisting and breaking us to suit their own egotistical ends.

The thing they did not account for was what I had learned. Power could be taken.

I raised the dead king's blade.

Claudius looked with eyes wild. 'What will you do? Kill thine own brother, so that we may be guilty of equal sins? Then do it. Strike!'

But I did not move. I held the sword aloft. It was heavy, but anger steadied my arm. The fog swirled. Moonlight caught the blade, glinting.

Claudius demanded, 'What mean you to do? Keep this blade of vengeance hanging over me? Steal by fear from me the time I have upon this Earth?'

I did not move.

The wind died, and the fog swirled thick. The moon was covered.

Judging my moment, I shifted, opening an avenue to him upon my left side.

Claudius shrieked, 'But you cannot take from me anything I am not willing to part withal!'

Like a flighted rabbit, off he shot, sprinting in the direction I intended. I thought perhaps he would know this way and refuse to take it, but fear had robbed him of judgement and fog of sight. He ran at full speed onto the isolated promontory of the battlement, a peninsula from which there was no other escape, toward the battlement's end, where the wall shortened to the height of my knee. I heard a stumble. A gasp. The rest was silence.

I went to the walk's end, feeling my way before each step. I would not have known I had reached it, except my stilt connected with the low wall. There was no one upon the battlement but me. Below, the ocean beat upon the rocks. There had ended Claudius, the ill-got King of Denmark. After him, I flung the helmet, the armour, the jester's stilts. Beneath, I wore my brother's clothes. The dead king's sword, I sheathed at my side. I climbed down the castle walls, and I went from Elsinore alone: in my own power, strong and free. Thus, I made an end to the cycle. My only regret was that I left Gertrude behind.

# Odontophilia

by Isabelle Ryan

**Content Warnings: Blood body horror (teeth).**

Not your thing? Skip to page 29 for the next story.

\*\*\*

He came into the room with a face like a creased sheet. His cheeks looked strange, his chin jutting beneath pinched lips.

‘What happened?’

‘Toof,’ he said. Blood bubbled on his lips. Miserably, he proffered something small and white.

‘Another one?’

He nodded grimly, then spat on the floor and fixed me with a steady, heavy gaze.

‘Let me see.’

He tipped back his head, hooked a finger in his mouth and pulled. I peered inside the ruined cavern: pocked and pink and sharp. In this latest’s place, I found a deep black hole. Blood oozed and pooled beneath his cringing tongue. He groaned and spat again, swilled water in his mouth.

He explained that he had itched his gums. I pictured those dirty, ragged nails digging to ease discomfort, inching between hard and soft, and turned my face away.

His tacky fingers touched my palm and left the pointed tooth behind.

‘Only sixteen left,’ he said, a kind of wonder in his voice, then sat with his head in his hands.

I put the tooth with the others in the drawer.

‘Can I have my book?’

I fetched his pencils and the mindful colouring book he started as a joke. I watched him, and I didn’t. He chewed his nails, letting his fingertips probe.

‘Careful,’ I said. He took back his hand – saliva pulled and snapped; spit glistened – and frowned at it. Traitor. He spat on the floor.

‘Here.’ I pulled my chair close, took the pencil from his hand. Our knees touched, slotted like puzzle pieces. I dug a clean, if crumpled, tissue from my pocket, wiped blood from his chin.

‘Where does it itch?’

His Adam’s apple bobbed. ‘Everywhere.’

I nodded. I didn’t know where I had put the tissue. Maybe it lay drinking that bloody gob on the floor. My fingers slid between his lips and found a split behind a broken tooth. A soft sound shuddered on his tongue. My fingernail rooted and worried at the gum. Another noise – deeper, grateful – and his eyes leaked. The broken tooth juddered and loosened. I twisted it free and, for safekeeping, tucked it in my mouth. He whimpered, aching, pulled me closer.

Sixteen times, I twisted, pulled. Red lines painted his chin like a dummy’s mouth. Scarlet spots stained and dried brown on his grey trousers. I bowed my head and softly spat his teeth into his lap.

# Dawn

by **Elli Ross**

**Content Warnings: Death (mentioned).**

Not your thing? Skip to page 38 for the next story.

\*\*\*

Chris was about to kiss me.

I had my eyes closed, and so did he. I could feel his hot breath on my face. Any moment, our lips would touch, and I would have had my first kiss.

‘Don’t do it.’

I opened my eyes. Over his shoulder, looking at me with one intact eye, was my old imaginary friend, Dawn. As I watched, she reached up to slowly push her other eye back into its socket.

I pulled away. ‘I can’t.’

Chris opened his eyes, and I saw the disappointment flash across his face before it smoothed over. ‘Why not?’

I shook my head. ‘I just can’t.’

He leaned back. I could understand his disappointment; he’d wanted to kiss me for a while. But with Dawn still staring at me, I couldn’t even look in his direction, let alone kiss him.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘What now?’

We were in his bedroom. I had come over for dinner, and afterwards, he had come up with some excuse to leave so we could be alone.

I shrugged. ‘We could go help your parents with the dishes.’

Dawn had sidled back into my line of sight. She was trying to make eye contact with me, but I avoided her gaze. She put her hands to her mouth and stage-whispered, ‘He doesn’t deserve you.’

I ignored her.

‘Sure. They’ll appreciate knowing we’re not up here having sex.’ He smiled at me, and I smiled back, knowing he was over his disappointment or at least really good at pretending. The fact that my stomach flip-flopped at the mention of sex was irrelevant.

‘Thank you,’ I said and gave him a peck on the cheek.

Dawn mimed gagging, a bony finger pointed toward the back of her throat.

\*

Dawn had been around as long as I could remember. My parents told me I’d started talking about her when I was four. She was a lot like me: always my age, my height, with brown hair and a slight build, even slighter than mine. She was my best friend, which worried them a little, but since I had other, real friends, they decided it was fine.

And it was fine for several years. Then, when I was nine, they started hinting that maybe I was too old for imaginary friends. And when I was ten, I killed her.

She kept showing up, though.

\*

I didn’t slam my bedroom door when I got home, though I wanted to. Dawn was already sitting on my bed, patting the spot beside her as if she hadn’t just ruined my date.

‘I’m mad at you,’ I told her.

‘You don’t even *want* to kiss him,’ she replied.

Of course I wanted to kiss him. I was sixteen, and he was my boyfriend. Who else would I kiss? ‘Go away. And stop following me when I’m out with Chris, okay? Just give me a little privacy.’

She shook her head, bedraggled hair flopping loosely. ‘Nope. It’s my job to take care of you.’

‘It is *not*.’

‘Sure it is. I’d do anything for you.’

‘That would make you a guardian angel, and you’re not.’

She sniffed. ‘How do you know?’

I opened a dresser drawer so I wouldn’t have to look at her. ‘Because if you were, that car wouldn’t have hit you.’

She was silent. When I turned around after unfolding and refolding the same shirt three times, she was gone.

\*

I hadn't meant to kill her. I'd meant to make her go away. Since she was just an imaginary friend, I thought, I could tell her to leave, and she would. I would miss her, of course, but I was too old for imaginary friends, anyway. Everyone said so.

I didn't really remember most of that day. I knew we were talking about a boy who Erica said had a crush on me. I knew Dawn didn't like that. She was always so dismissive when I tried to talk about the boys Erica said were cute.

I thought I'd pushed her. Well, I was sure I'd pushed her. I just didn't remember doing it. The only thing I remembered for certain was the moment she was hit. The expression on her face. My arms still outstretched. The dark green minivan speeding into her, sending her flying without the driver ever knowing they'd hit someone.

I couldn't bear to look and see what had happened. I ran into the house and didn't come out of my room until my parents got concerned that I hadn't come to dinner. I told them she was gone and nothing else. They seemed to understand I was mourning, or at least that I didn't want to talk about it.

I hadn't wanted that. I hadn't wanted her to die. But I had wanted her gone, hadn't I? Everyone said I was too old.

That hadn't stopped the ache in my chest, a hole where she used to be. But I'd told myself it had. I'd told myself that she wasn't real in the first place, so I couldn't have killed her because she was never alive.

It didn't help.

I didn't do anything about the boy; Erica told me a week later that he didn't have a crush on me after all. When she announced that she was dating him instead two weeks later, I told myself I was jealous of her.

And when I got home from school that day, Dawn was sitting on my bed, waiting for me.

\*

Chris called the next day asking to hang out, to make up for last night. Dawn glared at the phone the whole time.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ I said as soon as I hung up.

She crossed her arms. I once thought she had beautiful skin, but since she died, it had turned ugly and mottled. ‘Really?’

‘Yes. You’re thinking that I don’t actually want to go and I don’t want to kiss him.’

‘Well, you don’t.’ She uncrossed her arms and leaned forward. ‘Do you?’

She was almost as close as Chris had been yesterday, before the kiss that didn’t happen. I looked away. ‘Of course I do.’

She didn’t say anything. It was as good as demanding an explanation.

‘Everyone at school has had their first kiss,’ I said. ‘Even Chris has kissed other girls. I *have* to.’

‘Have to isn’t the same as want to.’

‘I want to,’ I insisted, even as my stomach twisted uncomfortably.

When I looked at her again, she was staring at me. I shook my head. ‘Whatever. I’ll just go with the flow. If it doesn’t happen, he’ll understand.’

‘Sure he will.’ She didn’t sound like she believed me.

I turned away. ‘You’re not invited, anyway.’

\*

She hadn’t looked dead initially. She looked like she’d been hurt, with a broken arm held against her chest and her left foot facing the wrong way. But other than that, she looked just as pretty as she always had. There wasn’t even any blood.

‘I’m sorry I pushed you,’ I said. I was standing by my door, and she was sitting on my bed. I was afraid to come closer in case she was mad.

But she just smiled. ‘It’s okay. I know it was an accident.’

She opened up her arms for a hug. She had a huge black bruise on her arm that she didn’t seem to notice. I winced, though. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine.’ Her smile didn’t waver.

I hugged her, and her scent was the same too. It was as if nothing had ever happened.

But it *had* happened, and over the next few months, I began to notice things that were... off. Her skin taking on a yellowish tinge. Her injuries not healing. Her cinnamon scent changing to something more unpleasant.

I didn't want to ask her about it. How do you ask someone if they're dead, especially if you're the one who might have killed them?

So we existed together peacefully. I didn't say anything the first time her eye fell out; she didn't mention the skin and muscles eroding away on her fingers. We settled back into our comfortable, familiar relationship. It was nice having her back. Even if she still didn't want to talk about boys.

That was okay. I didn't really, either.

\*

Chris's hand was warm in mine. He hadn't let go since we started our walk by the lake. It was a beautiful day for a walk, but his palm was sweaty. I wished there was a polite way to pull away and wipe my hand off.

'This is nice,' I said, and I meant it, because Dawn wasn't there.

He smiled at me. 'Yeah, it is.'

We weren't the only people walking around the lake that afternoon. We'd passed several dogwalkers, a few families, and a jogger or two going the other way. But now we were approaching the woods, and my heart was beating fast. It sounded nice and romantic, a first kiss in the woods under dappled sunlight. But I couldn't quite picture it. Whenever I tried, Dawn was there, behind Chris, shaking her head.

It wouldn't be like that, though. She wouldn't be there, and it would be nice. His lips would be... I didn't know what they would be like. When I felt my own with my fingers, they felt soft, but I imagined a boy's lips would be different. Whatever the case, it would be nice.

We were only just out of view from the path when he stopped and tugged me behind a particularly large tree. I was trembling. It was just like a romance novel, I thought, as he put his arm around my back and pulled me close to him. What would a romance heroine be doing now? Swooning? All I could do was look at him. Off in the distance, a dog barked.

I tilted my face up to meet his, and I closed my eyes. That was what you were supposed to do. I knew that much.

His lips touched mine. They felt hot like his hand, only less sweaty. I'd thought I would have a spark of some kind, a revelation. I'd thought I would want to wrap my arms around him and press him against a tree and kiss him for all I was worth. I didn't feel anything. Just his lips. Which started to open, pushing mine open as well, and his tongue—

I jolted away. When I opened my eyes, Dawn was standing behind him, her expression carefully blank. His expression, by contrast, was one of shock, quickly turning to annoyance.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, and before he could say anything in response, I turned and ran back to the path.

\*

‘I don’t mean to pry,’ Dawn said, ‘but I think there’s something you want to tell me.’

I was fourteen, lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling. Dawn was sitting on top of my dresser, watching me.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said. Except it wasn’t nothing, and Dawn knew it, so after a few seconds of silence, I said, ‘Erica’s dating Liam.’

‘Oh.’ She slid off my dresser, and I felt the bed shift as she sat down. ‘Are you jealous of her?’

‘No. Yes. I don’t know.’ I rolled over, looking up at her.

‘Do you like him?’ she prompted.

I shook my head. ‘I don’t *think* so. He’s just... gross. He smells like cheese and picks his nose and chews with his mouth open. I don’t know why she likes him.’

‘And not you?’

I sat straight upright. ‘What?’

‘Why does she like him and not you?’ she repeated. ‘That’s the question, isn’t it?’

I shook my head so hard my hair thwapped me in the eye. ‘Don’t be stupid. She’s a *girl*, Dawn.’

Her expression was perfectly innocent as she said, ‘So am I.’

I stared at her. She stared back at me. I had to say something, but my mouth was dry, and my thoughts seemed to have ground to a halt.

‘You know,’ she said, ‘it’s okay if you *do* like girls. Penelope Lawrence is a lesbian, too.’

‘I’m not! I’m not a lesbian!’ I grabbed my pillow and buried my face in it. I couldn’t look at her.

‘But if you were,’ she persisted, ‘it would be okay. If you wanted to kiss girls. That would be okay.’

I didn't want that. I wanted to kiss boys, like everyone else. Like Erica. It wasn't *my* fault that all the boys in school were gross.

'If you wanted to kiss me.'

I couldn't look at her. She was my best friend, and Erica was my best school friend. I couldn't want to kiss either of them.

I didn't want that. I *didn't*.

I lowered the pillow. Dawn was still there, watching me.

'I don't want that,' I said slowly.

She looked away. 'Okay.'

'Maybe I do like Liam,' I went on. 'Even if he's gross.'

'Okay.'

'Maybe I don't like him. Maybe I am jealous of Erica.'

'Okay.'

'Because she's good at finding boyfriends.'

'Okay.'

I stared at her. The bald spot on the back of her head hadn't grown since I was twelve, but it was large enough that I could see the yellow-grey skin of her scalp. I wanted her to *say* something, anything other than 'Okay.'

'So,' I said.

She turned back to me and smiled. Throughout all her decay, her smile had remained perfect. 'Okay.'

\*

I walked home. It was the most miserable walk I'd ever taken, but I managed to keep from crying until I'd locked my bedroom door behind me. Dawn was already waiting for me inside.

I threw myself onto the bed and cried. I didn't even know what I was crying about, exactly. All I knew was that Dawn's cold hand on my back was more comforting than any real person could be in that moment.

\*

Erica had dated Liam for two months. Then Joel for one. Then Mark for five. Then Randy for three weeks.

I was jealous every time.

\*

I woke in the morning to my phone vibrating on the nightstand. It was probably Chris. He'd texted me twelve times yesterday after I'd left, but I hadn't been able to bring myself to read them.

It wouldn't stop, so I reached over and turned it off without looking. I didn't want to know what he wanted to say to me.

There was a soft knock on my door. It was my mom. She came in and sat on my bed, which she only did when she had bad news. I sat up.

'Honey,' she said, 'something happened.'

'What?' I said. She sounded like she'd been crying. 'What happened?'

'Did you see anything yesterday? You and Chris went for a walk, right?'

I nodded. 'I saw some people.'

'But nothing weird or suspicious?'

Her hands were folded on her lap, and she wouldn't stop looking at me.

'Mom, what happened?'

'It's Chris,' she said. 'It's... I'm so sorry, sweetie. He's dead.'

It was as though I was hearing her from rooms away.

'They found his body this morning. They think he went out to the woods again, and...'

She covered her mouth. 'They think it was murder. I'm so sorry.'

My eyes slid past her shoulder to Dawn, standing in the corner behind my door. She smiled and waved at me. There was blood on her shirt.

Mom said, 'Are you okay? Do you need anything?'

'I need to be alone,' my mouth said.

Mom nodded and gave me a quick squeeze. I barely felt it. 'You just let me know if you need anything, hon.'

She left and closed my door behind her. I watched as Dawn came over and took her place, putting a hand on my shoulder.

'Did you do this?' I asked.

'Do what?' she said.

‘Dawn.’

‘He was bad for you, Rachael.’

I just looked at her.

‘I love you,’ she said. Her voice was soft, and her face was close. Her grey eyes didn’t leave mine. ‘I’d do anything for you.’

I closed my eyes. The air seemed to tingle as her hand slid down my arm to grasp mine. I squeezed it tightly, acutely aware of my face tilting up to meet hers.

Her cold lips touched mine.

She tasted like cinnamon.

# Debris and Salvation

## by Victor Okechukwu

**Content Warnings: Abortion.**

Not your thing? Then you have come to the end, until next time...

\*\*\*

‘It’s your entire fault, Clem,’ she said. ‘My mama dislikes me now. She said she never wants me to call her again because I never listen to her.’ Sandra threw her phone on the bed.

I held my face in the palm of my hands. For weeks, Sandra had blamed me for anything that made her angry. Last week, when she slipped and fell in the bathroom, she said it was because of the baby I had planted in her stomach. Yesterday, she ate four times and told me I was turning her into a fat pig. I had swallowed all the blame she threw at me like it was Orijin (a local herb that was sure to stir constipation), but now depression was starting to get a hold of me because I was running out of options.

‘How am I going to live without Mama talking to me?’ Sandra continued moaning. ‘Then you’ll also leave one day, and I will die alone like the evening sun.’

I didn’t know what to say.

‘Didn’t you hear what I just said?!’

I avoided her glare and mumbled, ‘I heard you.’

‘If I knew this was how you were going to treat me, I wouldn’t have fallen for all your love talk.’

Why would she say that? I could take all her blame, but not this.

‘I never forced you to love me,’ I said.

She looked out the window. Her cocoa-butter face was pale and dry. Her black hair was rough, and her eyes were still moist from crying so much, but it didn’t take away from her beauty.

‘I wanted a simple life as a student. A triangular life – from classroom to library to hostel – nothing more,’ Sandra began. ‘But when I arrived at this university, I found out almost every girl had a boyfriend, so I felt I wasn’t living like the others. That’s when I met

you.’ She turned to me as if all the while she could feel my gaze. ‘And I told you I wasn’t desperate like other girls, but you said the only way we would understand each other better is if we lived together.’

Each time Sandra recounted the past, she would repeat how I’d been desperate for her to live with me. She always forgot the part where she was the one who said, ‘Let’s go to your room,’ after our second kiss.

‘Can’t we just forget about it?’ I said.

‘When are you going to get the money?’ Sandra asked.

On the floor, a crawling ant was making its way around the side of my right foot, but it seemed lost for where to go next.

I couldn’t tell her I had sought money from every corner; twenty thousand was all I’d got. I wanted to end the discussion, but I had to give in when Sandra was in the mood for a talk. It was better than the days she would cry or yell that everything was my fault.

‘Clem, what if I die at the hands of the quack doctor?’

I walked to her, held her hands and knelt. ‘You won’t die,’ I said. ‘Just believe me when I say you won’t die.’

‘If we’re caught, we’ll be arrested and jailed for sixteen years,’ Sandra said.

I shifted back. My eyes became watery; my world was falling apart.

We were quiet for a while. I crouched on the cold tiles.

‘Aren’t you meeting Stephen today?’ Sandra asked.

‘I will.’

‘You’ve said that for three days now, and you always end up not meeting him.’

We only had one year left before graduating.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked.

‘Nothing. I’ve been busy.’ I bit my lip; I didn’t know how to tell a proper lie.

\*

During my first month at the University of Nigeria, I didn’t have a single friend. I was quite indifferent about getting one because it seemed like a different world – a lot of new faces, students crowding the streets and classes like I’d never seen before. The large buildings each had a frightening roaring black lion emblem on their sides. I was having a hard time fitting into the Economics department because I wasn’t so good at maths and statistics, so I spent long hours at the library studying every day.

One day, I was returning from the library with half a dozen books in hand. A group of students in white and green gowns were singing, drumming and dancing in an open space under a mango tree. I got distracted by them and tripped and fell. It was Stephen who rushed to me and picked me up; I had injured my knee and right toe. He took me to his lodging off campus and helped with my wounds. This was the story I always told people who were surprised when Stephen called me his younger brother. And he still called me that even after I left him. Most students were afraid to deal with him; he was known as a powerful drug baron on campus, capable of even murder. He was nicknamed ‘Kizito the baron.’ He was untouchable – even the university couldn’t punish him because his father was a popular politician in the state.

As a freshman, all this information about Stephen had gone over my head. I grew fond of him, and he became my first friend.

Later, Frank, a gang leader, met me and said, ‘You better get as far as you can from Stephen because, eventually, he will kill you.’

‘He would never do that,’ I said.

‘Do you really know Stephen? Do you know how many guys he has sent to their early graves?’

‘Not me...’

Even Stephen’s bad habits hadn’t bothered me, like the fact that he and all his friends smoked cigarettes. It wasn’t until he took me to a nightclub and paid a stripper to fuck me that I began to despise his character. I ran from that place before the stripper got into my head with her twerk and touch.

After that night, I began to avoid Stephen. He knew it too. Yet, while he didn’t harm me, he forced his friendship on me; I think he had a soft spot for me. Sometimes, he came to my door and knocked for twenty minutes. I wouldn’t open it, but I could hear him murmuring.

When Sandra became pregnant, and money wasn’t forthcoming, she told me to go and meet Stephen. The first day she mentioned it, I found myself experiencing a surge of anger towards her. I hadn’t seen or spoken to Stephen for over a year, and I didn’t ever want to have anything to do with him again. But none of my five friends could afford to give me the two hundred and fifty thousand I needed. Stephen was my only messiah.

Sandra also had no one to turn to. Her two female friends had abandoned her after she asked them for money. Her father had died when she was little, and her mother was the only one supporting her. But when she’d told her mother she was pregnant, she got angry with her

and wouldn't pick up her calls. Sandra's misery swelled with the thought that her mother, a junior civil servant, had laboured so much to send her to school, only for Sandra to squander her time with me.

'Can you believe what they are saying about me?' Sandra had once said.

'What?'

'That the only guys I could fall in love with are paupers.'

She didn't ask anyone for money. She didn't even go to class again. Her friends never visited, and none of her coursemates came to check why she wasn't attending classes.

When I arrived at Stephen's lodging, he opened the door casually and didn't say anything, as if he'd known I would return one day. He walked back to the kitchen where he was smoking a cigarette, singing and cooking porridge potato, his favourite. I stood at the open kitchen door, watching him. His ebony face, dark hair and small ears hadn't changed; neither had his shifty eyes set under incredibly bushy eyebrows, and his long neck. The only thing different since I'd last seen him was his broad shoulders and chest; it seemed like he had been frequenting the gym.

'I know you're still angry with me,' I said.

'No, no, not at all. The Bible says we should forgive our haters,' Stephen said while crushing the cigarette into an ashtray.

'I'm sorry.'

'For what?'

My lips became heavy, and I couldn't open them. I wanted to say, *for leaving you*, but I felt it would sound hypocritical.

'Clem, why have you reduced yourself to this?' He made a mock gesture of contempt with his left hand at my ill-fitting, second-hand clothes. 'Such a tramp!'

My oversized jeans, dingy red polo and worn-out shoes were all I had. Those and a confident, wry smile. Sandra falling in love with me was a miracle.

'Why don't you just get straight to the point and stop this deceptive game?' Stephen said.

He had served himself the potato porridge and was eating in the parlour.

'I got my girlfriend pregnant,' I said.

'Seriously? That beautiful lady. What's her name again?'

'Sandra.'

'Yes, Sandra,' he said. 'Why didn't you use a rubber?'

'We never tried it.'

‘Was it “we” or just you?’

‘We didn’t like the idea of using a rubber because we loved each other.’ I said it that way, knowing he had no girlfriend.

‘You’re a fool. So, you never thought one day she would get pregnant. Bloody fool! Are you the only one with a dangling rope between your legs? You can’t say you didn’t know what was at stake when you began having sex with her.’

I could feel my face burn like I had a fever.

‘You need money for a quack doctor or one of these big hospitals?’

‘Big hospitals abide by the rules,’ I said.

‘There’s nothing like law in this country if you have the money for bribes.’

‘If.’

‘If you loved her, you would have protected yourself.’

Those words sent a sharp pain down my belly. ‘I love Sandra.’

‘Anyway, that’s the past, but you must know that I can’t help you. You are not family. I help only those who are family.’

Sweat covered my upper lip, and droplets from my forehead streaked my face.

‘Please, there is no one else to help me.’

Stephen’s chair screeched hard against the floor as he stood up and stomped to the kitchen. ‘You have God. He is your creator; disturb him, not me.’

He whistled and served himself another plate of porridge.

\*

I left his house at once. The weather was hot. It was the usual August break, a dry month. I was sweating profusely. After such an ugly disappointment, all the weather could do was add to my anger and frustration. Two weeks ago, it had been rainy, but ever since August had arrived, it had quickly swept the rain clouds off the horizon and left the blazing sun with its entire force to torch the earth – and me. I had forgotten my bloody handkerchief. *Who forgets a handkerchief in this sweltering heat?*

From the scattered red rocks on the hill at my left to the tower of Nsukka’s splendid City Hall and the university’s entrance gate with its moulded black lion at the top, every corner of the street had newsboys, cafeteria workers, shop dealers, jewel traders sweeping sidewalks, and the rest going about their business.

*Go disturb God? How could I disturb God? I can't even see Him, and I don't even know where He goddamn lives. Stephen was being stupid! Yes, fucking stupid!*

My t-shirt was now drenched in sweat, and my whole body was like an oven. I noticed passersby gazing at me awkwardly, but I didn't care. I kept talking to myself anyway. *Who else can I talk to when nobody gives a shit about me?*

All I'd wanted, from the beginning of my relationship with Sandra, was love. Pure love. The kisses, moaning and penetration were all pure love. We didn't just have sex for the fun of it or live together for five months just to learn each other's habits. We made love because it was the best feeling we'd ever had.

So, what concern was it of Sandra's mama or Stephen how we displayed our love for one another? Why say we could have used a rubber? Were they there when we were together? It was our life, not theirs. Everybody should mind their own business!

\*

At home, Sandra was asleep. The pots were empty. The fridge had only a bottle of milk, two bottles of juice and a half loaf of bread. The same as before I left for Stephen's place. Sandra hadn't eaten anything. Why was she starving herself? Did she believe it would kill the baby? Or was she not hungry? We had eaten only breakfast.

Every dime had to be saved for the abortion. Probably Sandra would wake up in the night and eat something.

How had Sandra gotten to be comfortable with a poor guy like me? My parents rarely gave me money because they were poor too (they sold second-hand wares by the roadside), and most times, I lived on Sandra's allowance. I'd been ashamed of that in the beginning, but Sandra said she wasn't interested in money, only love. Last year, she had talked me into getting a part-time job because I was broke. But after three months I resigned because I needed to devote my time to focusing on my studies. Though Sandra was angry about it, later on, she accepted my excuse.

I lay beside her on the bed. I looked up at the cracked ceiling, the broken wardrobe, the washed-blue painted wall. I hissed. Sandra's money was almost finished. I turned to look at her, and she was awake. What was she thinking? Was she regretting falling in love with me?

The next morning, Sandra's cry woke me up. She'd locked herself in the toilet and was crying and screaming. I knocked at the door twice, and she said, 'Leave me alone, Clem.'

'Please, don't do anything stupid. I love you,' I said.

'You don't understand, Clem. There's no going back in this. I'm finished. Whether I abort the baby or not, I'm finished.'

'Don't say that. I'm here.'

'You can't change anything.'

'I know, but let's get rid of the baby first.'

I heard the toilet flush. Sandra opened the door, sweat and tears filling her face. She was in her pink nightgown, and when I went to hug her, she pushed me away.

'You know Stephen is a drug baron,' I said.

'Who doesn't know? I wish there was another way,' she said without turning to me.

'I don't like him.'

'What other choice do we have? Do you want me to carry this baby while I'm still in school? Do you think I don't understand how ugly all this drama is? I do. We have no other choice.'

\*

Crows kept crawling in the sky. The morning sun had just left its resting abode and was blazing down on the Earth with its yellow rays. When I got to Stephen's door, it took me about ten minutes to knock because I didn't know what to tell him. Especially after yesterday's refusal and humiliation, I was sure I was wasting my time. But I remembered Sandra's words.

'Dude, you aren't family anymore. So don't come knocking at my door whenever you like,' Stephen said when he opened the door.

'Sandra wants to harm herself. Please, I need the money,' I said, holding my head in my palm.

'I can't give you any money.'

Stephen's face was blank like he felt nothing for me. My eyes were watery.

'I will do anything for you.' I was almost on my knees. 'I just don't want Sandra to kill herself. I can't live with that.'

He opened the door wide. 'Come in.'

In the sitting room, the centre table was covered in bottles of beer and white powder; their pungent mix had asphyxiated all the oxygen. I sat on the sofa next to a ladies' jacket.

'My girls are still sleeping in the next room. We had a good time last night,' Stephen said, smiling and shifting a pile of clothes off the opposite sofa before sitting on it. His eyes were red. 'And I used a condom, not stupid like you and senselessly believing in this weird idea of love. Love is money, you idiot.'

'I just want the money,' I said.

'I have to advise you so you don't make the mistake again.'

'I know enough now.'

'Ok,' Stephen said, nodding his head. 'If you want to be part of the family again, you have one job to do.'

'I'm ready.'

'You have to shoot Kareem in the leg twice,' he said, placing a silver gun on the table.

I was dumbfounded.

'He stole from me a year ago, and he thinks I've forgiven him, but I never forget.'

The room was an eerie quiet as Stephen stood up and got himself a beer. 'I hate people who steal from me,' he said in between guzzles.

'No, I can't do that.'

'Sandra will commit suicide, and everything will be on you.'

'Anything else, please, not this.'

'You had your chance, but you left.'

Sandra's face, flushed with tears, flashed in my head, and I sucked my teeth. 'But I never used a gun before,'

'About time to be a man and learn.' He tossed his empty beer on the table, and it clattered loudly against the others without breaking. 'I would wire you the money today, but you know nobody steals from me. That gun has only two bullets; you've got twenty-four hours to shoot them into Kareem's leg.'

'Don't make me do this, please.'

'Don't you want to become family?'

'Don't make me do this wicked thing.'

'Be a man. Do it for Sandra.'

I looked down, and I felt like dying. Why on earth did I exist? 'Please, please, Stephen, I beg you.'

He rose and left the room.

\*

When I left Stephen's place, I knew going home was the worst idea. Kareem was a senior gang member, and everyone feared him because he dealt with gangs around the university. Stephen had introduced him to me at a party during my first year. I can still remember his brown face, the long, black beard around his jaw, and the native marks beside his wild, grey eyes, giving him an intimidating look.

How I was going to shoot him in the leg was the question that kept ringing in my ears. He was bigger and taller than I was, and his muscular build was daunting. What advantage did I have against him? A gun? He must have a gun too. But that wasn't my main concern. It was the morality behind the gun.

To satisfy Sandra, I had to put another man through pain. But Kareem had caused pain to other people. He was a gang leader, and I was sure he must have killed or at least beaten rival gang boys to a stupor, but it wasn't my destiny to rain vengeance on him – he had never done anything to me. I sat on the staircase of the empty Town Hall. Then, my phone dinged, and I opened the message; it was an alert for two hundred and fifty thousand sent by Stephen. A message came in that read: *I gave you all you need. Don't disappoint me or steal from me like Kareem did.* I was drenched in sweat.

Kareem lived off-campus and was sure to follow a tiny bush path at the back of the Town Hall, which was a shortcut to the university gate. My phone's clock said 9.32 am. When would he be out of his house? I stood up and walked to the path, but there was no sign of anyone coming. My heartbeat rose. I ran into the bush when I heard footsteps from afar. When I bent low to look through the tall grasses, I saw Kareem coming. He was in his usual yellow cardigan and blue jeans with a white canvas. I held my breath and brought the gun out. It was still heavy. Kareem had earphones in, so he didn't hear when I staggered and fell. When he had passed where I was hiding, I left the bush and pointed the gun at his leg while he kept walking. He was walking fast, and my hands were shaking, but I pulled the trigger and was knocked to the ground by the blast. I looked up; Kareem was holding his thigh and screaming. He wanted to get his gun from his bag, but he had to keep one hand on the blood flowing from his thigh. I heard another set of students coming from afar and laughing. I remember Stephen said it had to be two shots. I shot the second into the sky and ran away.

\*

Two days later, as we walked slowly through the evening, I couldn't bring myself to look at Sandra. She had noticed my weird mood ever since I returned from shooting Kareem. Kareem had survived; some students had found him and rushed him to a hospital down the road, where the bullet was removed.

The only satisfaction I had while returning the gun to Stephen was when he said Kareem hadn't caught the face of the person who shot him. And that was when I realised Stephen had led me into a trap that almost swallowed me. I regretted ever meeting him. Kareem's gang had sent word to all the other rival gangs declaring war.

Each step we made stirred a little cloud of dust on the rough and tortuous path. Both sides of the red road were lined with dry, brown elephant grass that never moved under the sizzling heat of the evening sun. It was a long walk to the centre of Aku village where the quack doctor lived. I had the money in my pocket, yet I felt ashamed.

When we got into the blue-painted building, I opened the door, and the evening sunlight swept across the face of a bald old man writing on a brown paper under a yellow lamp.

The old man had a stitched forehead like a map, and when he gazed upwards, you couldn't tell where he was looking. He raised his head and said, 'I believe you understand the cost.' He said it as though something bad was about to happen.

I looked down and then turned to Sandra. She nodded and looked into my moist eyes.

'Don't worry, I will be strong,' she said.

The old man said, 'Are you in white clothes?'

'Yes.'

The quack doctor told me to close the door and directed Sandra into another room. He switched on the dangling torch that hung from the ceiling. I was trying to focus my gaze on Sandra to see if she would look back at me. But she didn't.

I walked from one wall to the other. I had heard stories about quacks killing women by making them bleed. At one point, everything was too quiet, and then, in the next instant, I heard murmurs. I tried to eavesdrop but couldn't hear what they whispered. I knelt and prayed to God that nothing bad had happened to her. Then, I heard the sound of the door opening. I stood; the doctor removed a bloody glove and dumped it in the waste bin. 'You have to thank your luck. She's going to live, but she has to rest. Maybe for three weeks.' The door to the surgery room was open, but I couldn't walk in. Motionless, I could feel every nerve in my body as though I had been electrocuted.

The doctor continued, 'But she lost her womb.' He held my shoulder. 'You've got to understand that this is life. Everything comes with a price.'

*No kidding! That's all everybody has been telling me, everything has a fucking price. Everything has a fucking price, everything has a fucking price. That's why I had to shoot Kareem in the leg – because I needed money. That's why I had to make a drug baron feel fulfilled by doing his bidding. That's why I put Sandra through a horrible trauma that almost took her life just for her not to carry the baby. Because everything has a fucking price. I swear if anyone tells me that again, I'm going to break their nose. Fools!*

Sandra had to stay in the clinic for three days because she was exhausted. She had lost too much blood, but luckily, I was a match, so I donated blood and prepared meals that would help her regain her strength.

When we finally returned to our room, she was quiet. I tried talking to her, but she never responded. One day, I said, 'I'm sorry for all you went through at that quack's hand.'

Sandra stared at me for a minute before saying, 'Will that change anything?'

\*

We were both in a state of grief, but Sandra's was haunting. She rarely talked, and if she said anything, it was a short, mumbling sentence. Sometimes, I wanted her just to yell at me – perhaps that would quench her grief – but she didn't. I knew she would leave me one day, but I believed she wanted me around because if left alone she might endanger herself, even though she had been calm since we left the quack doctor's office.

She was drowning in a sea of idleness. And the punishment for such idleness was that we suffered an inner restlessness about how to help her. For a week, neither of us attended lectures, which soon turned into a month during which we did not set foot in the university. We had already missed two quizzes, which presented us with another complicated situation because missing a quiz meant we wouldn't be allowed to take the final exams.

I was lying on the bed counting the ceiling tiles when I heard a knock on the door. I knew it wasn't Sandra because the knock was heavy, like one in haste.

'Who's that?' I asked.

'It's me.' It was Stephen's voice.

*What is he doing here?* I pulled the door ajar. 'I don't want anything to do with you.' I didn't look at his face.

‘Dude, is this how you treat someone who helped you?’ Stephen hissed. ‘Stop behaving like a kid.’ He pushed me away and entered the room. I wanted to resist him, but I felt weak after hearing ‘helped you’ from him.

He sat on the chair while I sat on the bed. He kept staring around the room in disgust, cracking his fingers.

‘I haven’t seen you at school for a while,’ Stephen said.

‘I’m taking a break.’

‘What, a nice break with Sandra?’

‘What do you want from me, bro?’ I stood. ‘Why don’t you leave me alone?’

‘Where’s Sandra?’

‘She went for a workout.’ It was her first since the abortion.

‘Yeah, she needs that after all she has been through. I hope you are looking after her well,’ Stephen chuckled.

I didn’t say anything.

‘Anyway, two guys were killed yesterday.’

‘What does that have to do with me?’

‘Since you shot Kareem, his gang has gone wild against other gangs.’

‘Is that what you came to tell me?’

Stephen drew the chair closer to me. ‘Just be careful; you are part of the family now.’ He tapped my leg twice. ‘I wish you good luck.’ He left the room.

My heartbeat was racing, and I smacked my lips countless times as my eyes became watery. I heard a knock. It was Sandra’s kind of knock.

‘The door is open,’ I said, wiping my face.

I tried to meet her eyes when she came in, but she kept looking down.

‘How are you feeling?’ I asked.

‘Stephen said he had a good chat with you,’ Sandra said.

‘Yeah... kind of,’ I said.

‘Hmm.’ Sandra nodded.

‘How are you feeling?’

She went to the kitchen, made cornflakes and began eating. Previously, we always ate together, even when one of us wasn’t hungry; we just loved sharing what we had. But since Sandra got pregnant, all that had stopped, and after the abortion, she preferred eating in the kitchen, standing.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked, leaning against the kitchen door.

‘Nothing.’

‘Each time I ask how you feel, you don’t answer me.’

‘I’m fine, if that’s all you care to hear.’

‘No, baby, don’t talk that way, you know I always want to know...’

‘It’s ok. Please, can I eat my food in peace? I’m tired.’

I sat on the chair close to the bed. When Sandra finished eating, she walked to the wardrobe and looked at herself in the mirror, holding her belly. Then she took off her clothes and checked her body shape. I walked up to her, but when she saw me, she put her clothes back on and lay on the bed facing the window.

I didn’t know what to say. It was just ten in the morning, and she wanted to sleep. Who did that? I felt like holding her face and asking, ‘Why are you angry at me?’

We went back to our routine of just sleeping, not looking each other in the eyes or talking. Kareem continued chasing me in my dreams, telling me that I killed the two guys his gang killed. Sometimes, I woke up sweating like I’d played half an hour of football. I tried not to sleep again. The one person I loved didn’t want to talk to me. I felt frustrated and annoyed and also responsible for what had happened. It was my fault, but what would I have done differently? Given the circumstances at the time, there was nothing to do but shoot Kareem in the leg and make Stephen happy. That was what this godless country was all about; if you couldn’t change a system, you lived with it and served those with access. Yeah, Stephen could have helped me get a good doctor who would have helped Sandra, but he didn’t because he loved to see me suffer.

One evening, after I returned from loitering around the street, depressed, I found Sandra seated on the bed, motionless like a cucumber. I was worried about how things were, and I wanted her to talk. I sat close to her, not knowing what to say.

I scratched my head and said, ‘Just talk to me. Tell me something.’

She said nothing and didn’t make the slightest move. I stood up and walked to the kitchen, then returned. ‘Aren’t you going to tell me anything?’ I asked.

‘Tell you what, Clem?’ Her darting grey eyes glared at me.

‘What I did was wrong. Taking you to the quack doctor and this whole thing...’

‘You won’t get it from me.’

I turned around, covered my face with my hands and sighed.

‘You are not the only one who has given up something,’ I said. ‘You never asked how I got the money.’

‘I thought you said Stephen gave you the money because he had forgiven you.’

‘He didn't forgive me that easily.’

‘What did he make you do?’

Sweat began to run down my armpit.

‘What did you do, Clem?’ Sandra said again, her voice rising.

‘He told me that I had to shoot one of his boys in the leg.’ I looked down. ‘I had no choice.’

‘Tell me you didn't kill him.’

‘I shot him in the right thigh. He's healing in the hospital.’ Sandra dropped her head almost to her lap, and I could hear the heaviness of her breath. She raised her head.

‘This is madness. Why would you do that for me?’

‘There wasn't any other way out,’ I said. ‘You said it yourself. And if there had been any other way, I would have done it.’

‘What are we turning ourselves into for love?’ Sandra asked tearfully. ‘We are too young to be consumed by this foolishness. I have felt horrible ever since I went into that quack's hospital.’ She gazed at me. Turned away and then back to me. ‘I don't know if I love you anymore.’

‘We love each other,’ I said, kneeling close to her.

‘That has changed. Look around, Clem; it's not here anymore.’

‘I know that everything we did, we had to do to make our love stronger,’ I said, looking into her eyes.

‘I'm sorry, Clem. We didn't.’ Sandra began to cry. I wanted to cry too, but I couldn't. I only felt sorry for everything that had happened. I held her hand, but she stood up and went to the window. The cacophony of noise from the traffic outside penetrated the room. I followed her and held her around the waist. ‘Everything will be fine,’ I whispered. She shrugged me off and went into the toilet.

The next morning, I woke up and found Sandra packing her clothes in a hurry.

‘Are you leaving?’ I asked.

‘I just need to figure out what's next for me,’ Sandra said without looking at me.

‘Where are you going?’ I asked, rising from my bed.

‘You don't have to know.’

‘When are you going to return?’ I asked, trying to hold her hand, but she freed herself. She moved past me with her suitcase, and I grabbed it.

‘Please don't leave me,’ I said.

‘Don’t put that on yourself, Clem,’ Sandra said, looking at me with a new vigour in her eyes. ‘Don’t feel guilty for me. And I don’t blame you. It was my decision, and I must bear the consequences of my actions.’

She took her big bag and left. I felt weak. And it seemed all was lost.