Onkọ̀wé

A LITERARY MAGAZINE

ihụnaịya



MAIDEN ISSUE

stories of love, in all its shapes

Onkọ̀wé

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ISSUE 01

ịhụnanya

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ON THE WORD

ịhụnanya

ih-hoo-nah-nyah · Igbo · love

In Igbo, ịhụnanya means love. It is often explained as ịhụ n'anya, to see in the eye: to love someone is to see them, eye to eye. We began here because love is where every human story begins.

00 · FROM THE EDITOR

Do it with what you have

Dear reader,

This magazine began at a graveside.

Earlier this year my father died. He had been ill for a long time under the wrong diagnosis, and the right one came only twelve days before he was gone. He was one of the strongest men I have known, in spirit, mind and heart, and one day I will write about him properly. But I know where he is. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, and where he has gone is far more beautiful than where we are. That hope gave my grief a different shape. It did not make this life small enough to ignore. It made it a gift to steward, one we will give account for to God. So why wait? We should live it now, the way He wants it lived, with what He has already put in our hands. Onkọ̀wé is what that grief walked into.

I will be honest with you: I hate death, and I hate sickness. They are thieves. But the question is not whether we have time. The question is what we will do with the time we have.

My answer was this: do it with what you have. Not with what you wish you had, or what you will have someday. One step at a time, with the hands and

the words in front of you.

So we opened the doors and asked for stories. Writers sent us their work, and we read every piece with care. We did not polish them into perfection. We wanted them true. What you will find in these pages is love in its many shapes: love that waits, love that fights, love that frightens, love that outlives the people who held it.

Onkọ̀wé is Yoruba for the writer. We believe stories are the way we orient ourselves in reality. Onkọ̀wé is here to remind you that you are still alive in this world, and to show you how others have lived and loved, so that you can find your own bearings.

So live now. Love now. Read slowly.

Welcome to ịhụnanya, our first issue, and the beginning of many beautiful things.

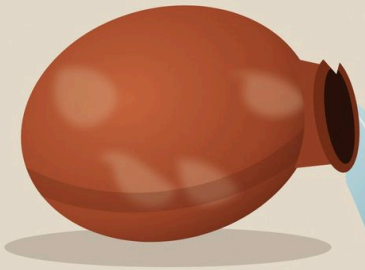
Immanuel Dámilárẹ̀ Olúwànífísẹ́

MANAGING WRITER & EDITOR

fear

fear

She was not afraid of him or his skin.



A STORY

EMMANUELLA OMONIGHO

ONKÒWÉ · ISSUE 01

01 · FICTION

01 · FICTION

fear fear

Emmanuella Omonigho

> *'Turn the other cheek,' he chanted internally until he calmed down.*

M was nineteen when he stopped being the coward. He wasn't born as one, but years of moulding made him one.

'The bible said turn the other cheek if your neighbour slap you for one,' his mother, a new convert into Christianity after the death of his abamen, would sing. 'If only my husband listened, he would not be underneath our feet.'

M had always been strange. He talked to himself because he had no friends, he looked to his feet when anyone spoke to him, and he had vitiligo. It was rumored that his mother slept with another man that was why he was born with a peeling skin. He was an abomination, a curse to members of his village. Elders had once come to his parents' house to put an end to him. The chief, his mother told as a lesson severally, accused M of drying up the stream into the patches of his skin and the gods demanded blood for them to be pacified. His father would have none of it, so he went to the shed located at the back of the house and brought out a cutlass to send them from his house. She pleaded with him to calm down. 'He didn't. He collapsed and

died, end of story.' After that, she turned to Christ and gave him a warning every time she could. In a way, M thought his father was like Jesus, dying for the sins of his child.

The first time M disobeyed his mother he had been sent to fetch water from the stream.

'Don't talk to anyone, carry the pot on your head and come straight home,' she said as she handed the faded clay pot with a chipped top. M collected the pot happily and skipped all the way to the stream, oblivious to the stares the people who saw him gave. He thought of the outside, and the grasses and seeing his only friends; the birds, and grass cutters. He was happy.

At the stream, M rolled up his shorts and squatted. He grinned when he caught a glimpse of a crayfish. He gently dipped the pot into the water before he brought it out, half filled. He was proud of his task even if it would take him several commutes to his house and back.

Then he heard voices, and turned around to see a group of children his age approach. It had been a long time since he talked with anyone who was not his mother. It was his opportunity to interact with other people. He waited for them to come closer, practicing the words he would say underneath his breath.

'That pawpaw ripe pass,' the tallest in the group spoke, they were four boys.

'Na lie, how much you go bet?' another answered as they got to the stream and took off their shirts. They wanted to take a swim in the stream. He took their closeness as a cue to approach.

‘H-how far?’ he gave his best smile as he walked to them, feigning inability to carry the pot by the side of the water.

For the first time they all looked at him. He assumed they had seen him and ignored, but he was wrong. They looked from one to another.

‘Wait o, is this not that boy papa talked about that day?’ again, the tallest spoke, averting his eyes from one of the boys to M.

M fidgeted, but he wore his curious eyes with pride. ‘You know me?’ Although his mother never went to the University, she was able to tutor him on a combination of things, English language included.

‘Ehn, you think he is that boy with peeling body?’ another answered.

‘Yes, yes. Na him o,’ a third person said, his eyes opened wide with fear drawn over his face like a ghost touched the nape of his neck. Then he looked to the stream, ‘This water go don be cursed.’

They looked to the water then back at him. M felt his chest tighten, worse than when he heard his mother’s cry in the darkest of night.

‘Make we go,’ the last of them said and went to pick up their shirts. The rest were ready to flee, however the tallest stepped towards M.

‘Is it not enough that you have finished cursing our village?’ He asked with hatred.

‘I-I came to carry water. And I need help, I cannot put it back on my head.’ M still offered his best smile as he pointed to the clay pot.

‘Oh,’ Tallest said. He turned to the three others, who already gave distance, and said, ‘Let us help’ They frowned at him but hesitantly followed. M believed he got through to them, he would have friends for the first time. ‘Obuluo,’ he said in their native language.

The four lifted the pot off the ground with a bit of struggle, and then the tallest said, 'Come closer let us put it on your head.'

'Alright,' M rushed forward, stretched his hand to offer assistance. He smiled shyly. He had expected to feel the sandy bottom of the pot. Instead, he was soaked, drenched from the contents in the pot. He gasped, shivering from both cold and surprise.

The group laughed satisfyingly, 'Next time, don't come near my stream,' Tallest said, then he flung the pot far away from M.

They started to walk away when he called to them, 'You will pay for this,' he growled, then felt the sharp tongue of his mother's warning along with a surge of anger.

Tallest frowned, then crossed the distance to kick his legs. M fell to the floor in pain. 'Wetin you wan do me? Fight me?' Tallest questioned, then kicked him again, and again as the others laughed.

'Turn the other cheek, turn the other cheek,' he chanted internally until he calmed down.

'Fear fear,' the tallest spat before they finally made their way away from the stream with their belongings.

M managed to steer clear of people all his life after. The second time M disobeyed his mother, it was because of a girl. One night, when he was eighteen, he bumped into a stranger he had never seen on his trip back from the farm. The bowl of corn spilled to the floor, and he muttered profanities under his breath but never out as he picked them up when a hand reached for the corn too. M looked up to see a girl, with skin that glistened under the moon.

'N,' she introduced herself as she apologized. It was her first time in the village and she had been so engrossed at the fireflies that she did not look at the road.

'I never get to see this in the city.'

M had never seen anyone as beautiful, he could not see himself away from her. 'I have been here all my life, I can take you around,' he blurted in one single breath. At first, he thought she would shrink away in disgust, just like people always did but N wore a smile, big and bright.

'I would like that.'

M and N grew close throughout her time in the village. It was for a month, but it felt like both years and a day. M showed her all his favourite spots, while N told him about her experiences in the city. M had never wanted to go to the place where money grew like grass, and there were more cars than his hands could count. She also shared music with him. Her MP3 player hung on her waist like an imported belt, while they both shared her earpiece, listening to the bass and blues of the songs folded in the mobile device.

They would go to the market square together on some days. At first, M was worried about the reactions of people to their physical closeness. He would give them space by walking behind her, that way the members of the village would mistake their interaction for an impossibility. N, however, got fed up with that.

'Why do you shame me by walking behind me when we are supposed to be next to each other?' She questioned angrily, stopping right in the middle of the market, awaiting his response. He tried to gesture to the people without looking at them, for fear of their wrath at his audacity.

‘Are you ashamed of being seen in public with me?’ The question almost made M laugh because he was far from ashamed, he was afraid. She was royalty, daughter of a wealthy headmaster in the city and he was the harbinger of curses.

‘I will bring you bad luck if I am seen with you. Can you not see how I look?’ He watched his feet on the red soil of the earth, unable to see the realisation in the eyes of N, or what he thought would be realisation. Instead, N engulfed him in a hug, the first he had ever had in his life. She was not afraid of him or his skin, and she was not afraid of the reputation that was sure to follow her from the murmurings of the people present. M, at that moment, knew he would never love anyone as much as he loved N. She was his person.

From months to a year, M and N grew even more inseparable, even his mother noticed. She would sing around the house about ‘he finding a wife, finding a good thing’. M, however, always pretended to not listen, careful not to make his heart be overcome by false excitement. He needed to confirm, to be sure that his love was not one sided, just as his desire for the world had been.

M took her to the stream, and they sat, watching the birds play in the silence that the view offered. N laid her head on his shoulder, and that sent a tingle through his arteries to his heart. He felt every pump of his ventricles, every movement of blood from his heart to his tissues. Quietly, M spoke.

‘N, I love you.’

The girl raised her head to look at him, and he feared her response because her face coined into a billboard of confusion. ‘What did you say?’, N questioned in response.

‘Nothing,’ M shook his head, afraid of repeating the words, of hearing things he knew would be the truth.

N laughed though, and M began to feel embarrassed until she said, ‘This is the thing with you M. You never find the courage to do things, to say the things you really want to say out loud.’ Then N lifted M’s face to look at her. ‘I want you to look me in the eye and say what you said once more’.

In the year they had been together, M had seen N’s eyes plenty of times, but the view at the moment was bedazzling. He found himself getting sucked into the brown iris, into the world of visions only she had experienced. Then he said the words, louder, and clearer. ‘I love you N, from the moment I saw you I knew I did, and I always will.’

A sheepish smile climbed up N’s face as she repeated the same words to him. ‘I love you too M. I knew from the moment I saw you.’

The world stood still for M on that day. It was his heaven. He would cherish that minute for the rest of his life, that was before a fit of laughter rang from near them. M and N turned simultaneously to the group, and fear seized M’s veins. Tallest and the three. However, Tallest was the shortest now as the other three towered above him. Still, he wore the face of nightmare that haunted M many years ago. M had heard Tallest went to the city, and was mixed with a group of delinquents that landed him in kirkiri, so seeing him in person was shocking.

‘Well, well. Na you be this?’ Tallest approached the couple, and M clenched his jaw, using a hand to wrap N into his protection. ‘My very good friend M. You don turn oyinbo finish.’

‘Hello, Tallest.’ M said curtly, hoping the interaction would end with his politeness, instead Tallest carried on.

'My name now is Lil T. No dey call me Tallest.' Fitting name for a fitting height, M thought but kept his mouth shut and eyes to the ground. 'Who do we have here?'

'Na Headmaster pikin,' one of the three said proudly.

'Ah, I see.' M raised his head to look at Tallest briefly but put his head down again. 'I have heard of how beautiful you are, but not this beautiful.'

'T-thank you,' N was never nervous, M thought, but everyone had heard about all that Tallest did before leaving the village. How he burned down the houses of his parents, and drowned someone in a neighbouring river. It was only right to be afraid of him.

'What is a fine girl like you doing with a cursed boy? Come, be with me.' He reached to grab N's hand but she swatted it away.

'No,' she said even as her voice broke.

Tallest laughed, a sinister laughter that spread around the quiet stream. 'I said come to me,' he demanded again, and this time grabbed her wrist, pulling her despite her screams that chased the resting birds out of their nest. M felt his heart beat increase. Turn the other cheek. He chanted his mother's words over and over, but N's screams pierced his brain.

'Why do you want to stay with fear fear?' Tallest taunted N, 'He is a good for nothing coward that cannot fight or protect you.'

Turn the other cheek.

N screamed even further as Tallest dragged her in the sand. 'If you do not behave, I will press you inside the water.'

Turn the other cheek.

'Stay,' Tallest screamed at N, then hit her across the face. M looked in her direction as she lay on the ground, her screams shifted from loud to quiet, as

her eyes stared at him in a growing disbelief. ‘M…’ N whispered but the wind carried it to M’s ears. He breathed out, pain etched on his chest and anger inside of it. ‘I’m sorry mama, but I could not turn the other cheek.’ Not this time.

M stood up in an instant, and ran straight for Tallest. He pulled him into a tussle as all his muscles flexed in rage. Rage over years of anger. Over the taunts of the village for his skin condition, and for hurting the only person, outside of his mother, who loved him back as a person. Their fight pushed them into the stream, and even as the current pulled at M, he never let go of Tallest, baptizing him in the water of his pain.

✦



ABOUT THE WRITER

Emmanuella Omonigho

Emmanuella Omonigho considers herself to be a versatile creature. She writes stories, which, considering you’re reading this, makes total sense. She enjoys experimenting with ideas on Edo culture, girlhood, mental health and identity. She takes photographs and makes videos when a story is not forcing its way out of her head. Or she sits and obsesses over anime and book characters.

Both Love *and* Death

And when love finds me, I pray it takes me forever.



A POEM

INKOMARUME

ONKÓWÉ · ISSUE 01

Both Love and Death

Inkomarume

> *And when love finds me, I pray it takes me forever.*

Both love and death
Come to you when their time comes.
And when they come, they do not care whether you're ready or not.

They simply take you away.

Both love and death,
kills you when they have found you.
And to force love is the same thing as committing suicide in a romantic way.

And when love finds me,
I pray it takes me forever.
For I once had a taste of it through free trials,
and I found myself clapping for what was happening to me,
Until it left me in the middle of a journey it had taken me on without ever telling me where it was leading.

And when death finds me,
I hope it lays me down gently.
For I have always remembered it and lived each moment of my life as fully as I could.
I have tried to do everything I could.
I have tried to be anything I could.
And I am still doing everything I can.
And I am still becoming anything I can—not to win the world,
but simply to experience life in all its possible forms.

Finally, when I get back home,
I will share the story of life on this tiny blue and green rock in only two divine languages:
Love and death

✦



ABOUT THE WRITER

Inkomarume

I am a poet and writer from Kigali, Rwanda, who explores the inner world of human beings: their wounds, desires, contradictions, memories and dreams. I write to give language to feelings that are often difficult to speak, and to turn personal experience into something others can recognise themselves in. My writing moves between intimacy, spirituality, love, identity and the mysteries of being human. I believe literature can be more than expression; it can be a way of healing, remembering and awakening. I write because there are things within us that need to be spoken, and sometimes poetry is the language they choose.

Before the Sunrise

the pain churned, but his love outweighed



A STORY

ELLA FEARLESS

ONKÒWÉ · ISSUE 01

Before the Sunrise

Ella Fearless

> *It was the very words she wanted to hear on the second night after her marriage.*

Kari traced the loose ends of the mat as she stared out of the open window. The night breeze taunted the candle light, the flame swayed.

'If he finishes early enough, he will come today', Yingi had told her the day before.

Now as she let her fingers play with the loose ends of the mat, she heard manly voices enter into the sitting room. A brief conversation and the others were gone. His voice remained, calling out to Yingi. His second sentence asked of her. Warmth filled her belly in response. Her lower abdomen ached, the blood flow increased. She stood, adjusted the cloth in between her legs and sat again. Yingi's voice emerged from the kitchen and carried on to the sitting room. They spoke and laughed. Their voices were loud enough to hear the full conversation. He was too tired. He would not eat. Where was his wife? And how was she doing?

Yingi replied, "She must be on her mat already".

He was rather resigned, "I'll just rest then".

Kari stood, but when his footsteps approached, she remained hidden, by the side of the door. He passed by to his room, next to hers. As Yingi moved through the corridors to her own room, Kari emerged from behind the door. They stood staring. The dim glow of the lantern in Yingi's hand revealed Yingi's face; old, weary and knowing.

Splashing sounds of water were heard outside; Ebikefe was having a quick bath. Kari lingered at her room door, facing Yingi.

"You want something?" Yingi asked.

"I wanted to greet him, make sure he is well..."

Yingi spared a brief smile. "Are you not on your period?"

Silence.

"I would have... just greet him and left"

Silence lingered. Kari gripped her wrapper firmly, gently removed her stare and returned to her mat. She extended her big toe to quench the candle at the center of the room. Staring into the darkness, she gently loosed the thread she had weaved at the corners of the mat. If he had come earlier, they would have at least spoken. How did his day go? Did he think of her too? Now it was night already, Yingi said so.

Ebikefe whistled as he entered into his room.

"You want to call the spirits here?" Yingi called out from the corridors.

Ebikefe whistled on.

"You will not have a meal this night?" Yingi's voice had softened into a plea.

"I am full my mother. And you need to go and rest too" He patted her shoulders, gently nudging her to her room.

"And where is my wife?"

Kari's eyes flickered open.

"The young lady is trying to have some rest Ebikefe."

"Sleep well" Ebikefe said as Yingi entered into her room, and closed the door.

Kari's eyes shut tightly as he came in and gently lay next to her.

"Are you sure you're asleep? I saw the candle light go off not too long ago" He whispered very softly, the sound traveled through her ears, her abdomen vibrated in response, the blood flow increased. She let out a soft chuckle.

"I thought as much" His breath on her neck intercepted and prevented the cool night breeze. She nestled closer. He covered them both with a cover cloth.

"How are you?" He breathed out.

He was not speaking but breathing. The words came in, not to her ears but to her head, neck and shoulders. He spoke and her whole body responded, but only her lips parted to say, "fine".

"Fine?"

"Cramps"

"Sorry" His arms won through her shallow resistance and rested on her stomach.

"Not there" and she found herself lowering his fingers till they rested on her lower abdomen. He rubbed for a while and retrieved his hands to wrap around her.

"How was your day?" He breathed out again, and lay on his back. She grieved the absence of the warmth from his chest.

"I'm so tired. We were preparing the house"

"Oh.." she said.

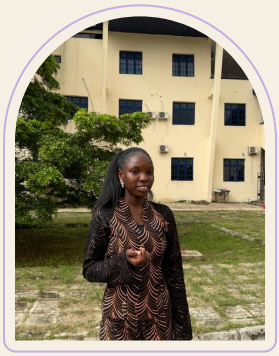
"You thought we would be staying here? With Mama all over our necks"

Kari offered a short chuckle. "I think....Mama might say that maybe it's too soon"

"Yes. But we need to start our family. We'll leave first thing in the morning".

It was the very words she wanted to hear on the second night after her marriage. Now she loved him more than anything else. He pulled up the cover cloth to her chin and she nestled into him. Her abdomen vibrated from the rush of blood, the pain churned, but his love outweighed.

✦



ABOUT THE WRITER

Ella Fearless

Obi Emmanuella Oyindeinyefa, alias Ella Fearless, is a creative writer and an avid fan of African literature. She writes on her blog, where she shares her views in short stories, articles and poems. She authored My Father's Temper and Other Stories in 2025, her first published book of short stories.

Billie work

Take a rose. Drop it into the river. Did it sink?



A POEM

BILKISU MACHU

ONKỌWÉ · ISSUE 01

Billie work

Bilkisu Machu

> *Not knowing whether you were chosen by fate… or merely abandoned by it.*

Take a rose.

Drop it into the river. Did it sink? No? How unexpected.

Now take another and feed it to the flames. Watch what happens. The petals curl, blacken, and fall away one by one. Did you hear that? That little sound she made?

You thought it was the fire, didn't you?

Perhaps it was. Or perhaps it was her.

Two roses. Two sisters. One carried away by the current, the other swallowed by the flames. Both beautiful. Both doomed. Yet somehow, only one was given the chance to drift a little longer.

But how long can a rose float before the water finally claims it? How long can something so delicate survive when the current has already decided where it belongs?

And the one burning? Did she deserve the fire, or was she simply the one you chose to sacrifice?

Funny thing about fate. It rarely tells us why it chooses. It simply points, and we obey.

So tell me, why her?

You don't know, do you?

Neither does she.

Perhaps that's the cruelest part of it all. Not knowing whether you were chosen by fate… or merely abandoned by it.

✦



ABOUT THE WRITER

Bilkisu Machu

Rigzjhi Bilkisu Machu, but Billie online. Graduate and writer. Been writing since eleven, and basically never stopped. Romance lover, horror book addict and poetry enthusiast. Currently romanticising words and slightly traumatising her readers.

THREE POEMS

Symptoms *of* Romance

Can we skip to the part where you're in love with me already



NADIA SHAKA

ONKÒWÉ · ISSUE 01

Symptoms of Romance

Nadia Shaka

> *Can we skip to the part where you're in love with me already*

I

I like what your soul is made of
A different substance from mine
Your quirks are not a foreign entity, you settle into yourself
Like you've always been this weird, this free, this beautiful

I envy your strides
A head taller than most
But you jump, dance, run like you've never been contained.
Like you wouldn't ever want to be.

You sing when you talk
You attempt things you're not good at
And you don't stop to look at anybody
You don't wonder who's watching

Well I'm always watching
You make me interrogate my own self
You make me want to chase this kind of innocence
This kind of brightness
You make me want to be free

II

I love you
But what do I know
I don't always know how to say what I mean
Sometimes I should speak but I don't make a sound
I say sorry more times than I need to
I'm not friendly but I try
I don't know exactly what to do with my life I only have a tiny clue

Some days I still want to be a poet, a DJ, a singer, a photographer, a presenter, an actor
Other days I'll be okay just being someone you love
For so long I've said that I'm not ready
Those three words were always much too heavy to utter
Too heavy to keep in one man's hand
Too heavy to trust he could hold it
I know now that you could be that man
The one that can bear it

Still I do not know many things
But I love you
This much I know

III

Can we skip this
The stuttering
The self consciousness
The feeling like I have two left feet
And there just has to be something on my face or in my teeth

Can we skip to the part we laugh
The part where we have rhythm
The part where we dance
Right now we're stumbling
Falling over each other with every word

Have I forgotten how to talk?
It feels like everything I say is wrong
I worry too much about what you think and how you see me
Can we skip to the part where you're in love with me already

✦



ABOUT THE WRITER

Nadia Shaka

Nadia Shaka is a writer who is interested in bearing witness to the human experience, with stories that are genuinely curious and heartfelt.

A STORY

Washing the Signboard



The souvenirs had lied. The love had not.

IMMANUEL OLUWANIFISE

ONKÒWÉ · ISSUE 01

Washing the Signboard

Immanuel Oluwanifise

> *The souvenirs had lied. The love had not.*

When she saw him, the memories came before the questions. Among the first was the sex. The rapid spasms, the sparking of nerves that had never been this titillated before then, all caused by one pound of flesh. His pound of flesh.

Then the midnight talks, the wide stretch of land he called a farm and she called a forest, crowded with tall trees. She had loved the way the branches reached in every direction, each one lined like the regression and correlation graphs she had drawn as a statistics student, before fashion took her. Some nights they lit a bonfire for two and drank coconut water, staring at each other. There were other nights too. On those nights anger took him, and his baritone, the voice she had once thought romantic, shook the house. The banged doors shook it again. He wasn't the talkative type, but his anger made up for it.

The memories always cut back to the sex. To their first time. To the one before their second child. To the one that gave them their third, and the family planning. To the way he knew her, beyond any boy she had dated in

secondary school. He knew her. They had touched every part of each other. His body was hers. Wasn't that what they had agreed?

But now, as she looked at him, he wasn't in a body. He seemed to be floating. And she stood on the ground, still not understanding.

She had found him in a club, or so she first thought, because somewhere far off there was music. Whatever this place was, it was huge. She couldn't calculate its breadth.

"Temilade!" she screamed. She couldn't hear herself, but she knew what she was saying. "Why are you floating? And what are you doing… here?" She looked around, but couldn't register much, or anything at all.

He could hear her. She could tell, because he smiled at her.

"You sure know how to make an entrance."

"If I didn't, how would you have met me?"

He smiled, in the proud way he knew how to when he was around her.

"Come down nau!" she said, as though it was the obvious thing to do.

"All right, Madam. I'll come down." He had always called her Madam when she gave orders, and he said it the way other men said darling. It was not the baritone that had once shaken the house. It was low and unhurried, as though nothing was left in him to be angry about.

Only then did she really look at him. She had always known he was a fine man. She had married him partly for it. But he had never been this fine. The hospital had gone out of his face. The grey had gone from his temples, and yet he did not look young; he looked finished, the way a garment looks when the last thread is cut. His skin was the same deep brown, but lit from somewhere underneath. His shoulders had squared. His jaw, which had softened in the last years, was a clean line again. If she had passed him on the

street as a stranger, she would not have waited at any ATM for him to come babbling. She would have walked up to him herself.

And the gown. It was not a jalabiya, nor an agbada, nor any gown she knew. It was white, but not one white. It held the ivory of new cotton at the collar and cooled to the white of a shell at the hem. There was no fastening anywhere. The neckline sat on his collarbones as though it had been cut on his body, and the cloth fell from his shoulders in long, unbroken lines that moved half a second after he did, like water catching up. Along every edge ran an embroidery so fine she had to squint: gold thread in a pattern that looked like vines until it moved, and then looked like writing. The whole thing seemed to have a life of its own. When he came down and stood on the ground like her, then ran toward her, it rolled back its own sleeves.

Something lurched from the pit of her belly to her throat as she ran into his arms. He held her tightly. Very tightly. A tear fell. The last time she had held anyone this tightly, it was her brother, the night before he stopped coming home.

"Don't cry. Don't cry," he said, patting her back. Once, his hands would have moved from her shoulders to her waist, and more often than not to her backside. This time, his hands left her body at the shoulders. She reached for his waist, the way she always had. He caught her hand, gently, and held it between them.

She had his sleeve between her fingers before she could stop herself, turning the hem over, hunting for the seam.

"All this," he said, "and the first thing you check is my stitching."

"There's no seam, Temi!"

"Hello to you too."

"Who made this? Don't lie to me. Somebody made this."

He was laughing, loud. She could hear its reverberation inside her body.

"You'll find out." He took his sleeve back, gently. "See. Isn't it beautiful?" he said, teasing.

She, beneath his chin, looked up at his eyes. He held her gaze. She was surprised. "You win." She gave up. "You never used to win when you were not looking this good."

"One of the perks of beauty," he said. She smiled. That private smile she enjoyed when he made his self-confident remarks.

"What do you think?" His hand traced the sky, and her eyes followed his fingertips to the aurora. Pink, blue and purple. The colours poured down the sky like water and never landed. "It is..." He trailed off.

"It is." She had agreed before she could argue, and she always argued first. It was as if her mouth had grown a mind of its own and both minds were struck by the same beauty. "Where is this place?"

"You don't know?"

"If I knew, would I be asking you, Temilade? Don't start."

"Ah. Right." He scratched his jaw. "You're not dead."

"What?"

"I said you're not dead."

"Obviously I'm not. Do I look dead to you? Come, what's wrong with you gan?"

He studied her the way he used to study her new collections, head to one side, taking his time. "You look like a woman who has been sleeping in a hospital chair."

"Six weeks. Because somebody would not take his medicine." But he had not been conscious for weeks. How could he have taken it?

He looked at her as if she were hiding a secret. His head tilted. His lids lifted. His eyes narrowed in realization. For the first time, he seemed afraid. But she would not call it fear. It wasn't the hysteria of their wedding night, when he paced the room in his suit and shoes and she had been the one who undressed him. It wasn't the panic of the day her water broke in his office and darkened the red rug, and he thought it was blood. His hysteria was what had made her like him in the first place. He had met her at an ATM, babbling and rambling as his boyish eyes darted around her face. She had giggled and known she would give him her number.

This was different. He wasn't rambling. His mouth had simply stopped. Every time she expected words, his eyes darted away. He was tapping his foot, and only then did she look down. The ground was clear, as clear as the quartz pendant he had bought her for their twenty-eighth anniversary. There was no shadow at his feet. There was none at hers. She looked up for the sun and could not find where the light was coming from.

"Temi. What is this place? You haven't told me yet."

"You really don't know."

"You go talk abi you no go talk." Her pidgin sounded ajebutter-y, like one of those rich kids who had learned it on purpose, to prove they could be street-smart.

He took a breath, the same breath he used to take before telling her he had bought another plot of land. "Tara. You're out of your body."

"I'm what?"

It was as though his words switched on every one of her senses. The music she had half heard came clearer. It was a sweet sound, very far away, like singing heard across a wide river. It rose, and went quiet, and rose again. It was not performing for anyone. It was just there.

Now she could see the crowd teeming ahead and the people walking past them. She tried to count them the way she would count any sample, and the number kept slipping away from her. On her left were trees bearing the same fruit in different colours. Beside them stood a creature she was sure she had never seen in her life. She could find no eyes on it, and yet she knew it was looking at her, the way you know someone in a crowd has said your name. The air smelled of rain on hot ground, and of something she could not name, and it made her homesick, for a place she had never been.

"What is this place?" Her voice held horror and excitement at once.

Temilade beamed. "I know, right? Wait until you taste the fruit."

She looked around. Some people floated. Some stood grounded like them. Some simply appeared. And they were beautiful, all of them. Not beautiful the way the models she hired were beautiful, lit and powdered and tired underneath. Beautiful the way a morning is. A man walked past with a face so kind she wanted to curtsy. A girl who could not have been more than twenty laughed at something, and Tara felt the laugh in her own chest.

And the clothes. Her fashion label, Enikoe, was already exporting to Canada, and she was a nightly face on the fashion talk shows, yet she could not stop staring. A tall woman passed in a wrapper and blouse that could have been aso-oke, except that the weave changed as she walked, indigo stripes at one step and gold at the next, as if the cloth were remembering different colours. A man wore an agbada whose sleeves were so wide and so

light they lifted behind him like wings, and the embroidery on its chest was not stitched on but grown into the cloth, the way veins grow in a leaf. Two girls walked arm in arm in pleated silk, hundreds of knife pleats so sharp and even that Tara's eyes ached, and as they moved the pleats opened to show a second colour inside, coral within cream. An older woman wore a gele tied higher and more intricately than anything Tara had seen at the grandest Lagos wedding, folded into fans and petals, and it did not look heavy. It looked as though it was holding her up.

She looked for a seam on any of them and could not find one. Her eyes, she noticed, were sharper here than they had been in years.

Then the hair. A lady ran past with cornrows that curved around her head like the rings of a tree, a bead at every end, and the beads chimed softly in time with the far-off music. A young man wore his locks long and loose, each one wrapped at intervals in thin gold wire that caught the light that had no source.

"Oh my God, that braid." She caught his arm. "Temi, who is her hairdresser? I need that woman in Ijebu-Ode by Monday!" The woman's braids zigzagged from her hairline, crossing and recrossing in a lattice so exact it looked woven on a loom. At the crown they gathered into one thick plait that ran down her back to her waist, with threads of something like pearl worked into it, so that it shimmered whenever she moved her head. She turned to Tara with a gentle, amused face.

"She heard me?"

"Yes. Here, everybody is a bit like Superman." He leaned closer. "So no more gossip. Your voice notes would not survive this place."

"My voice notes were informative."

"Fifteen minutes on the Doha trip, Tara."

"The Doha trip was a disaster. Somebody had to document it."

He laughed, and then the laugh went quiet in his face. "Tara, I wish I could take you around. Keep you longer. But you have to start going."

"Why are you chasing me away?" She narrowed her eyes toward the braided woman. "Is it her?"

"I'm not chasing you, Tara. You're not dead yet."

"Are you dead?" she blurted.

"I'm alive, as you can see. Even more alive than you."

"Am I dead?"

"No. You're only less alive."

She made the face from the memes he used to send in reply to her fifteen-minute voice notes. In them she complained about interviewers who made her promote her collection on the spot, and about her staff, the fake fabrics and the poor quality of everything these days. The memes showed a confused man with equations floating in front of his face. He laughed now the way he had laughed then.

"Twenty-eight years of marriage," she said, "and you finally win an argument by dying first."

"No, no, no," he said between laughs, and touched her hand. A shared memory flashed through them both.

It was their wedding night. He was pacing in his suit and shoes, and she caught his hand as he passed. "Temilade, sit down. Imagine it like us dancing."

He let out a nervous laugh. "I don't even know how to dance."

"Some songs can make you a dancer," she said.

"It was beautiful," he said now. "Life is beautiful. Love is beautiful."

"Since when do you make speeches?"

"Since here." He shrugged. "They give you time to think."

She was quiet. She didn't know what he meant by that, and whatever it meant she knew she wouldn't like it. So, he was still annoying here, too. She stared at his gentle face, and his mouth with which he had professed the sweetest and the harshest things, and sometimes nothing at all. And then she was back at their first date, days after the babbling at the bank. He had bought her a Sprite at Mr Biggs and nothing for himself.

"You won't drink?" she'd asked.

"Oh, sorry. I'll drink. I was watching you drink. Not in a strange way. In a normal way. I'll drink." He ordered. He drank. He choked. The next moment his head was in her lap and attendants were crowding around, one holding a cup of water, one holding a phone. They spent the rest of that evening in his family's clinic, and there she had told him, "I love you." He had smiled, shy. He hadn't said it back.

"I love you," she said now. He smiled, shy? She wasn't sure. He didn't say it back.

"You still won't say it."

"You know me."

"Come with me. Let us go back. Let's leave this hospital and go home." The words came out of her the way they had come out every night for weeks beside his bed. "Just take the medicine, Temi. Take it so you'll be well. Take it so we can go home, take it and let us go home! I cooked the moi-moi."

"Tara."

"Don't Tara me."

He smiled sadly and looked around.

And she was a girl again, begging her brother to come home. Mummy had been clutching her gold chain, shouting his name in the compound. Daddy was calling the driver and the police. The smoke swirled into her nose, and the smell of weed clung to her clothes long after. Her brother did not come home.

But this was not her brother's boyfriend's room, and this was not smoke. She looked where he was looking. The aurora. The music, rising again from far away. The trees with their many-coloured fruit. The braided woman, still smiling at her from across the clear ground. And something in her stopped pulling at him.

"Stay," she heard herself say.

He turned to her. "Madam?"

"Stay. Don't come back." She meant it, and she had not known she could.

It frightened her how easily it came. For weeks she had pulled him toward her, toward the chair, the medicine, the house. Now she looked at his face, the way it had settled here, finished, and she found that what she wanted was whatever made it look like that. His joy had become hers. She had not stopped wanting him. She had only begun to want for him.

And she loved him. She knew it the way she had known it at Mr Biggs, with his head in her lap, except it was larger now, and quieter, and it needed nothing back. She remembered his hands leaving her body at the shoulders, and she understood that nothing had been taken from her. Almost thirty years of learning each other had been small. Not less. Small, the way a door is small beside the house it opens into. What waited for them would not be his hand on the small of her back, or anywhere lower. It would be something she

had no word for yet, and every part of her that had ever trembled for him trembled now, toward it.

If her body had not been waiting for her in that chair, she would have stayed, for him, for this, for everything.

Together is not forever. The wedding souvenirs had lied. Tara woke up.

The machine was beeping. Her head had fallen onto his arm as she slept in the chair beside his hospital bed. She did not scream Doctor! Doctor! Doctor! the way she would have, the way she had thought she would. The doctors came and swarmed him. She stepped back into a blurred cocoon of silence, wide-eyed, as though she had never slept.

She watched the doctors leave. She signed documents. She watched his body zipped into a bag. Months later, at his burial, she threw sand three times and said amens beyond counting.

Some nights she was sure of it. If she had begged harder, if she had held the medicine to his lips one more time, he would have followed her home. Then she would remember the aurora, the music that came and went, the braid, and the clear ground under her feet, and she would know she had not wanted him to.

She cried one night, staring blankly at the television, when Christiane Amanpour signed off from London the way she always did, the way he had always said goodnight back to the screen. She wept until her chest ached, the way only the living can.

The next morning she went down to the workshop before her staff arrived. She had not cut fabric with her own hands in years. She kept that for the pieces that mattered most: a first lady's gown, a wedding she had

been paid too much to refuse. Her staff found her there at eight, and at eight the next day, and the day after.

She was not copying. She could not have copied it if she tried. There was nothing to copy from, only the memory of a gown that rolled back its own sleeves, a braid that ran into another braid, and colours that fell and never landed. She draped silk and tore it off. She pleated chiffon until her fingertips were raw. She drew curves the way she had once drawn regression lines, searching for the one line that would pass through every point. Every morning, the line missed. For weeks, the bin filled.

Then one evening she held up a gown and could not find the seam. She knew where it was. She had sewn it herself. But she looked for it the way she had looked for his shadow on the clear ground, and it was not there.

She sat down on the workshop floor and laughed.

The collection showed in Lagos in March, and then in Toronto in May. The fashion pages said Enikoe had never done anything like it, that no one had. On the nightly shows they asked her where it came from. She smiled and said it came from grief, which was true, and let them think she meant only him.

It was him. It was the place. It was everything there. She sewed toward it the way you lean toward music you can barely hear. She seemed to dance a little awkwardly but oddly satisfied in this new life, the way they had danced on that cold hotel bed. And she found, to her surprise, that the longing did not make her ungrateful for here. It made her more grateful. She thought of the green signboards on the Lagos–Ibadan expressway, faded and leaning, that she had passed a thousand times without a glance. If one of them had

ever led her somewhere like that place, she would have gone back to wash it. She would have painted it fresh and made it bigger.

That was what their love had been, and she meant to make the sign bigger. So she opened the land he called a farm. She cleared paths between the tall trees and built cabins under the branches, and couples came from Lagos and Ibadan and Abuja to walk where he had walked with her. On Friday nights there were bonfires, and she stood by the fire cracking coconuts open for strangers, and watched husbands and wives stare at each other's eyes across the flames. The Sprite at Mr Biggs she kept. Even when Mr Biggs closed down. Some things were only theirs.

And some things she remembered only when she was alone. His hand on the small of her back in crowds. The first night, and every night after, his body and hers learning each other for almost thirty years. She had thought it was the destination. It had been the sign. It had been a foretaste, handed to two people who did not know what they were tasting. It had pointed past itself, the way his fingers had pointed at the sky.

So she loved him more now, not less. She wore the perfume he liked on evenings when no one would smell it. She slept on his side of the bed. Some nights, after the guests had gone to their cabins, she lit a small fire of her own, poured two glasses of coconut water, and drank hers slowly, saying his name to the trees the way she used to say it into his neck. It was not madness, and it was not mourning. It was washing the signboard.

The souvenirs had lied. The love had not. They could not have together forever. But they could share forever, and that was enough.

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ABOUT THE WRITER

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Immanuel Dámilárè Olúwànífísẹ́ is a Nigerian writer and the founding editor of Onkọ̀wé. He writes literary fiction and theological essays, and works as a studio writer with Sterling & Stone's Story Incubator, developing thriller and science-fiction stories. He believes the more honest you are, the better your writing will be, and he writes in the griot tradition: stories that help people find their bearings in the world.

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