

Until It Doesn't

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It's 1972, AND THEY are fifteen. Here is where we meet them: K is across the street, plucking at a dried-up tree. J is at the entrance to the library, stuffing a book into his backpack. K turns and sees him, waves him over, calling his name. J notices his stained blue trousers and unkempt hair, arches a brow. He crosses the street and reaches for K, runs a hand through the stubble on his cheek and moves it up to his head. K doesn't smile at first, merely stares at him. Then he does, the same smile from his eyes. A cold harmattan day, the empty street lined with shriveled trees and dust-patched houses, and we know where we are. This is the beginning of a love story.

There is a tale long told, about a boy and a girl, and a love so desperate it snuffs the life out of them. This may not be the version of the tale you are familiar with, but this is the version we are telling.

Time has flickered by. A year, then two. He's beside K as they walk into the church. This is the first time they've been to a church in years.

K's grandmother is dead, and everyone is present. They find a spot on the second pew. K sits beside his mother and sister, and J curls up beside him. He has brought a book, a light one, in case he gets bored. Something to fan himself with, he tells K. They do not say anything for a while, just listen to the Reverend talk, about how beautiful a life the woman lived, how treasured she was. An aunt at the other end of the church bursts into tears, and J is immediately amused by it. He is sure that K is, too, but isn't showing it. We have no memory of the first time they met – we weren't there – but it was in the school canteen, they've said, two boys, out of place in a crowded school. It was a year before we met them, maybe two, we don't know – we weren't there. But something about being in this church conjures the image of it. He wants to tell K now that he is ready to use the L-word. K had used it the day his grandmother died, and in the months leading to the funeral, J has become sure he's ready. The church is dense, and there are muffled baby cries somewhere. On the bench, he runs his fingers into K's, and they remain this way, their bodies rising and kneeling in supplication, fingers locked. Outside, the weather is clear and bright, and we know he won't say the words.

Rain splatters on the windows of K's father's station wagon, and the heat from their bodies rises and fogs up the glass. They are parked a few blocks from J's house, headlights dimmed. Fela's 'Gentleman' comes on the radio, and they sing along to it. Several times, they have done this. Several times, we have watched them sit in the dark of K's father's car, singing along to songs on radio and sipping beer from paper cups. But today, something is different: J wants him, we know this. It's in his eyes, the way they linger on K's body, the slant of his shoulders, the small of his neck. K is so beautiful he has to remind himself to breathe. Bare feet against the dashboard, J exposes the smooth thinness of his legs. K runs a finger across his thigh in the shape of a heart, and J repeats the pattern on the foggy window. They don't say anything for a while, and we are not sure what J will do until he does it. He reclines the passenger seat and pulls his shorts down to

his knees. He says, I want you, and brings K's hand between his legs. He is aroused by K's nervousness, and he smiles and assures him that it's alright. He unbuttons K's shirt and runs his hand across his skin, twirling his fingers atop his nipples. The dark hair on K's chest is more than he has imagined, and he's surprised by how little he knows of his body. K is hard and hot and smells like mint, and when J takes him in his mouth, K grips his head and thrusts deeper. We look away. Later, his skin smells of K, and he inhales it again and again until it doesn't.

No one ever comes here; no one reads the sun-bleached posters on the walls and electric poles that line the narrow entrance. We can tell because there are no littered beer bottles and cigarette butts lying around. Here: a makeshift beach on the outskirts of town overlooking the stream. It looks like you would expect – desolate. Abandoned to its devices. The water is barely knee-deep and does not quite flow like an ocean. But if we listen carefully, we can hear the waves roaring. J has the entire afternoon planned out. He arranges a mat by the sandy shore and unpacks a basket of sliced apples and drinks and toasts. K watches as he smears jam on the bread, sipping from a bottle of beer. When they are done, J runs off, nimbly stepping on the hot earth. K is slower, behind him, less sure-footed, bending to pick up a rock. When he looks up, J's far at the other end across the water. They run and play and get sand in their hair. The week before, K turned eighteen, and there was a party at his house. J recalls it now, K in a green suit and a red brooch, all man and set for the world. There is a posed photo of them. No one sees this, but, in it, their hands are touching; however lightly, they are touching. He wonders, now, if K remembers it, their hands touching. He wants to ask but doesn't. They watch the big orange sun on the move; quietly, as though savoring the moment, they watch it get closer and closer to the dark side. Their eyes are full of laughter, their smiles wide. From a distance, we, too, watch and smile and cry a little, and we wish we can stay with them in this moment forever.

He leaves tomorrow. He wants a fresh start, a new beginning of his

own. We understand this desire. We, too, want to be free, yet we wish this wouldn't happen. A scholarship in Bristol, he tells K. K, on the other hand, will be studying engineering in Nsukka. They are at K's house, and nothing else seems to matter right now, not the distance, not what this distance could mean for them, and certainly not our continued existence. K brings him to his tidy bedroom in the old creaky house. His parents are out for the afternoon, taking a trip into the city. He wraps his legs around K's waist and his arms around his neck. K is so familiar to him now. The birthmark above his eyebrow. The thin lines of his lips. The hairs on his chest and calves. And then into his ear, he tells him. His tongue glazing it gently, he tells him. The words sink between them, and K glides into him slowly, then quickly, then slowly, until he begins to scream the words more frequently. He knows that K has waited so long to hear them, and for a while, their desires match, and everything seems like the beginning of a new phase. But he leaves tomorrow. He wants a fresh start, a new beginning of his own. He wants to tell K this but he doesn't. The distance will handle it.

There is a story they tell about leaving... No, let's not tell it here. What you must know is that they left, so we left, but they are here and so are we.

When we see J, he is in his apartment looking out the window at the sea. Lagos is most beautiful in July. He leaves his windows open, even in the rain; he is inhaling the morning breeze, enjoying the sound of the sea as it returns to itself. He is staring out at the far end where the sun and the sea collide. The evening before, someone told him that K is here, in Lagos, doing some business at the Atlantic. How long has it been? Eight years? No, ten. What has he been up to? He has heard many stories; some he believes, most he doesn't. His boyfriend stretches on the bed and he is snatched back from his thoughts. The boyfriend is awake now and is staring at him, willing him back to bed. He moves to the bed, presses his lips against the boy's, and leaves to start the morning smoothie. He blends the fruits slowly, hoping the sound will cloud his

thoughts. It's unlikely they would run into each other; somewhere within him, he hopes they do. We had followed the letters that slowly stopped coming, trailed the telephone calls that soon went cold, the emails left unreplied. K is probably with someone else now, he tells himself. Ten years is a long time to stay stuck on one person.

When we see K, the television is muted in his room. The reflection from it helps him focus. He's staring, but isn't watching. His thoughts are scrambled. He's heard J moved to Lagos after university. He doesn't want to run into him. He is glad to have moved on. He has a girlfriend, a stable life, a dog; things have been pretty fair with him. He falls asleep on the sofa, thinking and not thinking about him. He's still asleep when his girlfriend calls from a landline. Her voice is tender. She wants to know how he's doing, if he has eaten. Pressing the phone to his ear, he tells her that everything is fine; he's doing some research for his project. He reassures her of his love for her, and the line goes dead. He heats his dinner in the microwave and turns up the volume on the television set. A vibrant population, they say, and he knows J is one of them – somewhere – habiting, reassuring someone else of his love.

J is taking his usual evening stroll along the beach; the wind is tender on his skin. He has on a straw hat and a loose-fitted shirt over a pair of orange shorts. His sandals dangle from his left hand. He likes the feel of sand between his toes. A memory of their visit to the makeshift beach back in Enugu returns to him, K sweeping a finger through his arm, J's skin breaking into goosebumps, the sun setting at a distance. Under a tall coconut tree, J sees him, in a white shirt and grey shorts. In what feels like a minute but could actually be a few seconds, their eyes meet, and J puts up his hand to wave. In the distance, the sun is setting, and the figure under the coconut tree looks away. The smile on his face thins out and is replaced with shame. Grateful for his hat, he turns and traces his steps back, trapping sand between his toes, digging his feet into the warm earth. Later, he wonders if he imagined him there because he was thinking of him, and he's not sure if it was K after all.

At the entrance to a movie theatre, he sees J, standing with a man in a well-tailored suit. J's laughing, hard, his head thrown back, his palm slapping against his thigh, just as he remembers. It is the laugh – the wave of it – that makes him look. J is, now, just as he was then. K doesn't pay any attention to the man in the suit; his eyes are fixed on J. He hides under the shade of a tree and stays there, watching. J is still the most pleasant-looking man he has ever seen, and twenty-nine seems to agree with him. His legs are still slim, his hair combed up in a medium afro. He can't help staring, and we wish J will turn and see him, too. J looks at the watch on his wrist, and they walk into the cinema. He stares till he can't see him anymore, glad that he never saw them touch, even shake hands. Maybe he's relieved things happened this way. Maybe watching as he leaves again is the closure he needs.

K's wedding invitation is in J's mail, and it has lain unopened for days. J battles about its possible content and what it means for *him* – for them. In-between clients, he rips through the brown paper and finds the card inside. His sister had called and said that she and K ran into each other. He's so grown now, she said. He will call his sister and ask about the girl. In his mind, he conjures an image: thin, skin as dark as coal, spineless. We like this image in his mind. He looks at the card again and runs his hand across his name. There is a note: *Please, come*. He signs it off with his name. The wedding will be held in Enugu, at the same church where his grandmother's service was held. He wonders if K has been back there since the service, if he has found his faith, found God; if he remembers their fingers interlocked. He hasn't been to Enugu since he left ten years ago. His parents had died in a car accident while he was abroad, and home isn't what it used to be anymore. Before he refolds the envelope and tucks it in a side drawer, he reads the note again, imagines the preciseness of his plea. He promises to make an attempt to attend. We hope he would.

He's not really awake. His consciousness is buffering at best. The child is crying from the next room, and he can sense his wife shuffle out of

the bed. He checks the clock by the nightstand; it's past 4 a.m. Sleep has been a luxury since she was born. He walks into his study, switches on his computer and tries to get some work done, but can't. He decides to go for a run, something he hasn't done in a while. Enugu is lifeless at this time. The weather is cold at first, then tepid, then lukewarm, and he pulls off his sweatshirt and wraps it around his waist. He passes J's parent's house on the way, now vacant. He hasn't thought of him in a while. He had hoped to see him at the wedding. He looks up, instinctively, at J's bedroom window above the driveway. He jogs on, promises to forget him. He's getting good at it. We hate that this is happening, but we can't help it.

It's been three years since he received the invitation to K's wedding, and he is honeymooning on a resort island in the Maldives. He is happy – at least we think he is. His wife is pregnant, and everything seems to have worked out after all. The palm trees are twirling. The island is littered with coconuts. The ocean is as blue as the sky. It's so beautiful, and yet his eyes carry a tinge of sadness. We wonder if he misses K, if he is wondering what it would be like to be here with him. His wife sneaks up behind him and wraps her arms around his waist. He shuts his eyes for a second, wraps a palm around her neck. She is pretty when you squint, and we are not sure how we feel about her just yet. Their marriage is accidental. No, the pregnancy was accidental, the marriage, customary – a product of a drunken one-night stand. But he's happy; at least we think he is.

The wind is dull, the air carries a sense of mourning, and it's the day of K's father's wake. The house is filled with strangers muttering the same platitude. He isn't prepared for the gathering of well-wishers and strangers telling him that he will be alright. His wife takes the girls – five and two now – back to the house; they aren't used to seeing him so disoriented. He's hugging someone and he looks to the next person and there he is. He cries then, with his arms wrapped around J, his head against his shoulder. He cries like this until everyone has left. They

spend the night in J's hotel room, cuddled up under the sheets, saying nothing, just holding each other. We are alive again in this moment, our tongues thirst for what this could mean. Hunger for more. Reach, with every touch, for a little more, just a little more. He is gone before J wakes, and he wishes he had left a note.

Let's tell that story of the lying boy. Here is how we think the story goes: Whenever his mother sends him on an errand, he spends several hours playing with friends and comes home with stories of different creatures he had to battle on his way home. One day, he goes off into the forest to fetch some firewood for his mother. There, he meets an old woman who asks him to help her lift her bundle of firewood onto her head. I am sorry, old woman, he says, last night, I slept on my palm and twisted it terribly, I can barely move a muscle. She looks at his hand, with which he holds an axe, but doesn't see where he claims he is hurt. If that is what you wish for yourself, the old woman says, I wish you the same. He walks away whistling and sets off to fetch his firewood. Wielding the axe, he dislocates his arm and lays there in the forest screaming and squealing with pain, but nobody hears him. When his mother comes in search of him later in the night, she finds his body, stretched out on the dry weeds, his right arm impossibly twisted.

The moral of this story, perhaps, is that lying can kill you, slowly but surely. Or perhaps the moral is that old women can curse you, or that lying to old women can get you killed. Or perhaps it is that lying is just another way of guarding the truth. The truth will set you free, they say. We know a handful that have died from following this.

In his sitting room back in Lagos, J is seated across from his wife as she plays with the twins. His mind is a maze and he tries to focus on the things before him. He picks the babies up one after the other – boy, then girl—and twirls them in the air. They squeal and make babbling sounds, laughing. He is trying not to think about that night in Enugu, how much he had wanted to do, to say. How much of their

lives were shed on the floor as they climbed into bed. He thinks about the morning after, waking up to an empty room that still smelled of K. He remembers the anger he felt, yet he's glad it happened the way it did. He cautions himself to spend more time with his family. The next weekend he takes them to the zoo. The twins are too young to make out the animals, but they babble along with them, hopping around in his arms.

Since his father's funeral, two years ago, he has expected a call from J. He has started and stopped himself from sending an email, written letters he tore into tiny pieces and flushed down the toilet. They are in bed now, he and his wife. Her head is pressed against his right arm, and he strokes her hair lightly. She's still as beautiful as the first day he saw her. He still reassures her of his love each day. It's in the little things: the flowers he buys, the birthdays he never forgets, the anniversaries he shows up for, the kisses on the lips before he leaves for work. There are three kids now, and she's pregnant with the fourth. He didn't want this child, but he smiled when she told him. Another baby, he said, I'm sure we can handle it. The next morning, he takes his family to the amusement park. They sit in the Ferris wheel, and the kids scream at the top of their lungs when it gets to the top. They eat ice cream from a cone and it drips all over their hands and shoes.

It is important to this story to know that J never has any more children. The twins are five, and they argue so much now. His wife wants more children; he is sated with just the two. Here is the thing about their marriage: she pushes, and he pulls back. It's the morning after their sixth anniversary and he is up early, getting ready for the day. The night before, he had walked into their bedroom, where she was lying on the bed, her red thong blooming. Slats of light curved over her body from the bedside lamp. She wore pale pink eye shadow; her hair resting against the pillow; her eyes closed, lids fluttering. He had stared at the scene for a few seconds and pulled the blanket up to cover her nakedness before walking into the bathroom. In there, he took

the pills, one, two, and hoped they would work this time. He craved alcohol, but he knew she would smell it on his breath. He popped a third pill, reading the prescription in his mind: *two tablets per dose*. He waited thirty minutes, brushing his teeth and running warm water in the tub. There is a boy though, young, dark and faintly broad. In the right shade of light, his eyes are K's. He has a tender smile, and we like that this makes J smile too. With him, J never has to take the pills. Their arrangement is physical: they have sex, and J pays him. The third pill kicked in. Drowsy, he splashed running water on his face and walked back into the bedroom, her eyelids still fluttering. He pulled down the blanket and ran his hand across her bare butt. There was a smell of something sweet as she pulled him close to her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he slid, now erect, into her. He touched her face and said, You're so beautiful, and she gripped his back firmly, jerking her waist forward and back. Afterwards, he spent an hour in the shower scrubbing his skin. She had fallen asleep when he was done in the shower, and she is asleep now as he leaves for work with a kiss on her forehead.

K follows the news every day, watches on his television as gunshots are dispersed into the air; rings of black smoke rising to the clouds from burning houses and car tyres, people running from one street to another. There is no news of who the country is at the mercy of, and everyone is law. His wife's cousins visit from Lagos and they share the guest room downstairs. In the sitting room, they talk about Lagos, how the media only covers a third of what actually happens there. They talk about the families burnt alive along major roads, and the houses set on fire with their occupants still in them, the ruthlessness of the military government. From the directory in his office, he dials J's office number and his secretary answers. He doesn't leave a message or a name. He promises to call back. He gnaws at his cuticles till they turn into little globes of blood. He is not sure what he is waiting for, but he waits. By the phone, he waits.

A misplaced bullet cracks through J's bedroom window in Lagos, and he is back in his father's house in Enugu. His sister gives him the keys, and the house smells of insecticide and moth balls. He plays 'Zombie' on his father's old record player, and he finds that he still remembers the words. That night, his son has an asthma attack, and they spend their first two nights at the hospital where his parents died. Daddy, where is mummy? his son asks when he wakes up. He holds him close to his chest and assures him that his mother will be back. Silently, he, too, hopes she will. They'd had a big fight about moving to Enugu. She wanted to stay. He needed to leave. There is no one there, she said. It's what's best for everyone, he said. I will go to my parent's place for a few days, she said, I will meet you in Enugu. He looked at the face of his wife, the beginning and end of her resolve all etched there. They slept on opposite sides of the bed, and in the morning, she packed two bags and set off with their daughter; he shut his eyes, unable to move, and assured himself that she would come back. She doesn't say it now when he calls her about their son, but we know she blames him for the asthma, for everything.

His daughters are grown and do not smell like babies anymore—milky sweetness replaced with something harsh and delicate, like roses, lilies. The boys are in senior secondary. And their mother is ill. Cancer has lain siege to her lungs and threatens to drain the life out of her. They spend most of their days in the hospital with her. She is strapped to an IV, and her face is sunken. The veins on her arms and feet pop out in varying lines. He is holding her hand when the first call comes. It rings twice again before he steps out to take the call. Hello, the caller says. J's voice is still as calm as he remembers. He leans against the wall and shuts his eyes, inhales with a sigh of relief. The conversation is awkward at first, until J mentions that he is in Enugu. Neither attempts to divulge more information, and the call ends on a formal tone, with a willingness to get together sometime for a drink. The millennium comes, and sometime never does. They run into each other at First Bank, a week before J is to move back to Lagos, and they shake hands

and hug, sad about the unbridged distance. J asks about his wife, and he frowns and shakes his head. They plan to get drinks later that night, shake hands and hug again. K spends the night at home with his wife, and by morning, we are miles apart again.

His daughter visits before she goes off to the university. She lives with her mother in Lekki, who he heard has remarried. There was no invitation, and they rarely talk about her new marriage. They endure conversations about the twins: their schooling, scheduled vacations with each parent, his disapproval with her decision to change their daughter's last name. His daughter sits across the room from him. She's much grown now and her face is her mother's. She wears a wig and has kohl under her eyes. She doesn't say much; she responds in monosyllables. The year before, his son began to court a girl in his school who has a warm smile and a bright presence. They are off to the same university in Ibadan, the three of them, and we are sure things will work out fine. The twins have a relationship that excludes him and his ex-wife, and for this, he is grateful. He wants to ask if she is seeing anyone, if her mother lets her experience things in her own way. I'm so proud of you, he says to her, and she looks up at him and smiles. It is not a lot, but he will take it. When she leaves, he reaches for his mobile phone, scrolls down to where K's number is saved. He stares at the device for a while, and we are tempted to push the dial button.

Death is waters K has learned to wade in. On a cold harmattan morning, the cancer takes the last chunk from her lungs, and his wife dies. The bed in the old creaky house squeaks beneath her weight, and he knows she's dead before he feels her pulse. He does not cry. He does not let go. He holds her palm, rubbing and rubbing it between his, determined to keep a part of her warm. They stay this way till late in the evening when the ambulance comes. He does not let go. He continues to rub her palm until she is pried from him. Only then does he cry, leaning against the entrance to the mortuary, his face in his hands.

There is a story to tell here, but we do not remember it. What we know is that it is a story about loss, about a boy who swims through seven rivers and climbs seven mountains, only to get to the end of his journey and die from a scorpion's sting.

J doesn't attend the funeral service. The old creaky house has been repainted. He doesn't remember what colour it was, but he is sure it was not the shade of white it is now. A banner with a photo of K's wife stretches from the top left of the house to the ground. They have chosen a good photo. She is just as he'd imagined her: thin, skin as dark as coal, spineless. What he hadn't imagined was how beautiful she was, the gentle calmness of her eyes, lips that seemed to quiver however lightly – how much their first daughter replicates her. At the entrance to the house, she stands by her father, welcoming guests. K smiles and shakes hands with the guests. Clearly, she is beside him for support. He's somewhat slanted, like an invisible part of him rests on her shoulder. For a while, J watches them from one of the canopies in the compound before approaching to shake hands. He wonders what the introduction will sound like: meet my childhood friend, Mr So and So, or something in that light. He wonders if K has told them about him, or if, like him, the life they shared remained between them, tucked somewhere deep and unsullied. There is no introduction. K hugs him, pats him on the back twice and thanks him for coming. He leaves, thinking and not thinking about a proper introduction. It irks him that there was none, but he doesn't admit it to himself.

It is 2017, and they are 60. Nearly five years have passed since the funeral, and neither seems to recall the awkwardness of it. They exchange emails about their children and the influence of social media on the new generation. Together, they catch up on abbreviations. What is LMFAO? J asks him. Do you understand this meme? K asks. Their children are working and have followed paths of their own. K's boys are in grad school abroad and rarely visit Nigeria. They sign each email with tender words: *Love, Dearest, Yours*. K doesn't understand emojis

just yet and reads in them the funniest meanings. We like this. We are alive again. The year before, J retired from his practice and moved back to Enugu. He lives in his father's house with his sister whose husband has died. We should get that drink, J says in his last email, and they agree to meet at a bar in New Haven. J is early. He sits at the far end of the bar and gulps down a glass of Heineken to calm his nerves. He wants to look busy when K shows up, so he opens Jeffrey Archer's *Kane and Abel* and pretends he is reading it. He feels like 'smart' is his most attractive look. They hug an awkward hug, a few pats on the back, and we wonder if by the end of the date, the hug will be tighter. K orders a bottle of Guinness and sits beside him. They are self-conscious and they interrupt each other. Yet, they laugh and we are calm. There is something appealing and beckoning outside, something that reminds us of new beginnings. We look away, for a second, at the couple across the street from the bar, and the air is different when we return. J argues that K's views are conservative. K says that schooling abroad has made J forget the cultures of our country. There is a cold silence between the two, and we are not sure exactly what it is we missed. They sip their drinks quietly. J checks his wrist watch. K taps at the keypad of his phone. We chide ourselves for looking away. We should have been here, watching closely. We should have seen it happen. There is hurt somewhere in us but we do not allow it linger. Suddenly, we feel like trespassers, like we have, for decades, occupied a space we did not own. The door closes behind us, and we are beside the couple across the street as they lock hands. The boy (we should call him F) holds the girl (well, D) to his chest, and he inhales the smell of pineapple in her hair. The weather is damp, and there is a feel of rain ahead. We take a final look back inside the bar, and neither of them even realises that we are gone.