STAY IN BERLIN

By

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SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Remi looked at the clock on the wall for the umpteenth time that day. It was 4:41 p.m., and Kayode had still not arrived. She would have gone to a pay phone to call him for the tenth time, but there was a problem: she had no money. After arriving at Berlin-Tegel Airport two hours earlier, she had expected that Kayode would be waiting for her, but he was not there. The loneliness she felt all the way from Lagos to Berlin had now intensified, and she began to struggle with an amazing array of negative thoughts.

Berlin was exactly what Remi had feared: a city full of strangers, people who did not speak English; or if they did, it certainly did not sound like English to her ears. They all seemed to know where they were coming from and where they were going. As Remi stood close to the baggage claim area, she wondered if perhaps, she had made a mistake. Why did she feel like she was embarking on this journey alone?

"Kayode, where are you?" she whispered under her breath, as she looked at the picture of the man she had flown halfway across the world to meet. Even in his pictures, Kayode Coker looked like a man who could conquer any challenge.

That determined chin. Remi had seen it resolute whenever Kay made up his mind to do something. She would never forget the day he asked her to marry him. It was barely two months ago, while they were Skype-ing, having one of those odd chats. The conversation itself was not odd. It was just the fact that although the time difference was just one hour, they were in two different cities, each situated in different continents: Remi was in Lagos, Nigeria, and Kayode was in Berlin, Germany.

He was just telling her that he planned to get a dog soon, to keep him from feeling too lonely. All of a sudden, he got down on one knee and proposed. Remi had jumped up and down to convey a sense of excitement, because she felt like that was what she was supposed to do. When a man proposes, a woman is supposed to accept his proposal, no questions asked. But, even as she said "Yes," she had noticed that subconsciously, her emotions refused to participate in this act her body was performing. She felt no butterflies, no thrill of excitement, no desire to jump into Kayode's arms and have him smother her with kisses. Nothing. Just a nonchalant nothingness. So, why had she felt this compulsion to put up a show, to pretend to reciprocate whatever Kayode felt for her? That question kept popping up in her head and she aggressively suppressed the answer with all her mental strength. She did not feel like she loved this man, but yet, she had agreed to be his wife. Did he know this? That question was not as scary as this other one: Was Kayode himself, also putting up a front? Was he playing along too?

"Well, it's too late now," she said bitterly, as she stroked the diamond engagement ring on her finger. And she was right. They were already married. Technically. The technicality arose from the fact that only the traditional marriage had been conducted. The groom himself was absent at the ceremony. His absence was expected, announced in advance, anticipated, but on the day of the ceremony, it was still strange to conduct a wedding without a groom.

The whole thing started the day after he proposed. They were supposed to pick a date that would be convenient for both of them for the wedding. From the very beginning, Kayode had made it clear that he was not a 'traditional wedding kinda guy.' He said that such things were old-fashioned and belonged in the past. For him, it was important to get married in Germany,
because that was where his friends and those he wanted to attend the wedding were based. His family was still in Nigeria, but it made no difference to him whether or not they attended. His relationship with his family had seriously deteriorated ever since he put his feet down on sending money home for what he termed 'frivolities.'

Kayode Coker came from a family of social climbers, but he had never shared the same appetite for extravagance and display of non-existent wealth that every member of his family seemed to have in excess. He was a very modest person and as soon as he started working as a mechanical engineer in Berlin, the requests started pouring in. Ridiculous requests. His younger sister, Elizabeth, for example, once asked him for money to throw a surprise party for her boyfriend who had just completed his youth service. Kayode had screamed at her in anger when he heard the nonsense that she had just vomited.

"Are you supposed to be spending money on a man who has not paid your bride price? Shouldn't he be the one spending money on you? If you want to degrade yourself like that, you can't use my money to do it!"

And with that, Elizabeth's request was unceremoniously denied. Later that month, his father had called him with another monetary request and Kayode's response was:

"Daddy, let me get this straight: you want me to send money so you can buy a diamond necklace worth over 10,000 euros for Abike Abegunde?"

"Yes, of course," his father had replied with the same casualness displayed by a man asking his child for a glass of water.

"Are we talking about the same Abike here? Isn't she the daughter of Chief Abegunde, the man who refused to borrow you 30,000 naira to pay the house rent just before the landlord threw us out? He told you he was broke, and yet later that day, he was at a party spraying 100 dollar notes from a beer carton. Isn't that the same man or am I mistaken?" Kayode had asked angrily.

"Yes, he is, Kayode, but that was many years ago, and --"

"And what? People don't change, Daddy. You should know that even better than me. If a man who calls himself your friend, wants to help you, he will do so effortlessly. That man is heartless and I have no clue why you still want to force yourself into his inner circle. In any case, I don't want any part in this. If you want to buy his undeserving, spoilt brat of a child a wedding gift, it's your choice, but I won't fund it." And with that, Kayode denied his father's ridiculous request too.

But then, his mother came with her own. After singing Kayode's special oriki in a shrill voice for a full ten minutes, with all the inflections and necessary pauses in that way that mothers do, interspersed with calculated prayers, she cunningly made her own request too.

"Kayode, oko mi," she began, and even before she landed, he knew she was going to ask for money. He had watched her perform this trick on his father several times with positive results: his father usually parted with money ear-marked for some other project. So, Kayode stilled himself and waited.

"Oko mi," she continued, "do you remember that my friend, Mama Sade?"

"The one who sells lace at Balogun market?" Kayode asked.

"Yes, that one! My very, very good friend. You know she used to baby sit you when you were a child? Ehen! She is celebrating her 50th birthday, and we, her closest friends, have picked one fine lace fabric for the aso-ebi. Ah, Kayode if you see the lace ehn, you will--"

"Mummy, how much will it cost?"

"Ah, it's not very expensive. I know you people in Germany are doing better than us here in Nigeria. All I have to pay is 100,000 naira for the lace and gele."
"100, 000 what?! Is the lace made of gold threads? Will it jump up and dance bata at the circus? I am sure 100, 000 naira will feed an army of children. There's no way, Mummy. I can't send that kind of money."

"Ahn, ahn, so 100, 000 naira is too much for you, abi? But, you've been sending us pictures now, and you look like you're doing well. Remember that picture you sent of you in front of one hotel like that. It looked expensive now."

"Yes, it was, and my employer paid for my stay at that hotel. It doesn't mean that I own the hotel. Mummy, I am doing fine, but if I send you this type of money, I'll be bankrupt in no time at all. Abi do you want me to go and beg for akara under the bridge?"

Kayode did not need to describe the particular bridge he had in mind to his mother. The image he had painted had done the trick, and she immediately shouted:

"Ah, bankrupt ke? Olorun maje! God forbid! It is not your portion. So can you send the money in installments instead?" she had persisted.

By the time Kayode dropped the phone, he had made it clear to his mother that the lace she was dreaming of would not be funded with money from his pocket. That apparently did not go down well with Mrs. Coker. She significantly reduced the number of phone calls she made to him and in her characteristic manner, successfully convinced the rest of the family to do the same. Whether this cold treatment was calculated to make him comply with their original requests, no one knows. Kayode saw it as good riddance and kept his distance. This was the stalemate, when he started courting Remi Bajulaiye, an old family friend.

Both Remi and Kayode had been in the same circles since they were children. Both of their fathers were contractors and they were family friends. But, Remi had been in several relationships, which turned out to be unsuccessful, before 2007. 2007 was the year she ended her last relationship, and decided to take a break from dating. In the spirit of embracing platonic relationships with men, she had logged into Facebook one day, to find a pending friend request. It was Kayode. He was working in Berlin and had joined Facebook the year before.

From chatting on Facebook, they eventually graduated to chatting on Yahoo Messenger and also on Skype. The weird part though was that Kayode was very time-conscious and would only chat for 30 minutes at a stretch. They had never had a conversation lasting longer than 30 minutes.

The day after Kayode proposed to Remi, he had made it clear to her that he did not plan on getting married in Nigeria. He wanted them to get married within three months of their engagement, which meant that Remi would have to travel to Berlin for the wedding. She was worried about involving her family in the wedding preparations all the way in Berlin, until she came up with the idea of a compromise: have the traditional wedding in Nigeria, and then the court and/or white wedding in Berlin. It seemed plausible enough, until she presented the idea to Kayode. He had seemed uneasy about coming to Nigeria for "just" the traditional marriage ceremony, as he put it. Remi had ignored his protests and insisted on this arrangement. So, Kayode agreed.

A few days later, they picked a date for the traditional marriage: April 26, 2008. The following week, Kayode had called Remi to drop the news: he would not be able to come for the traditional wedding ceremony. The weekend in question was a very important one for his career. He was up for promotion, and the series of evaluations and interviews that would decide if he got promoted, were scheduled for that weekend. Coming to Nigeria for the wedding was out of the question. At this point, Remi got very angry with him, and refused to speak to him for days. She
felt like he was choosing his career over formalizing his commitment to her, and wondered if this was not a foretaste of the life they would share together.

It was during this period when Remi was giving Kayode a much-deserved silent treatment that her parents intervened. Remi refused to change the date of the wedding, asserting that she had no assurance that Kayode would turn up for an alternative wedding date. Kayode, on the other hand, did not see the need for a traditional wedding, and said Remi could come to Berlin for the white wedding.

Mr. and Mrs. Bajulaiye, Remi's parents decided to step in. In their opinion, it was unwise for their daughter to go all the way to another country to live with a man she was not married to. Her reputation would be forever tarnished, and her younger sisters would have to live with that blemish on their family name. Her father said it had never been done in his family, and his daughter would not be the one to start such a disgraceful trend. Her mother, of course, agreed. So, what was the way forward? What was to be done? A wedding in absentia.

At first, when her parents had suggested the idea to her, she had vehemently opposed it and dismissed it as ridiculous. But, you should never underestimate the power of persuasion especially when the elements of one's argument seem to be so logical. And in the mouth of a smooth-tongued character who holds the cherished and beloved position of "mother," persuasion is easy. That was the case with Remi.

Her mother, Mrs. Bajulaiye had pretended to agree with Remi when the latter initially kicked against the idea of a wedding in absentia. But temporary abandonment was just part of the plan. In retrospect, she mused at how her father had completely stayed out of the scheme. But knowing them, her mother was acting with his full knowledge, approval and support.

Her father had acted like he wanted Remi to make her choice independently by using phrases like "It's your decision," and "The choice is yours" in conversations with her. So while her father had played the role of the objective encourager and supportive pillar, her mother had done the dirty work of actively convincing her. All this time, Kayode had been conveniently left out of the picture.

Eventually, after weeks of persistent conviction, Remi finally gave in. When the day finally came, the ceremony was conducted with Remi and a large, wood-framed picture of Kayode. Under customary law, she was now Mrs. Remi Coker. But not in Germany. Her visa and green passport still read: Remilekun Sophie Bajulaiye. Now, she was at the international airport in Berlin, and had been waiting for Kayode for more than two hours. Was this a mistake?

"You're taller than me," a man's voice spoke, startling Remi out of her mental walk down memory lane.

Remi turned around to come face-to-face with a black man. She was taller than him, and it had nothing to do with the four-inch beige wedges she was wearing at that moment. Even without her shoes, she was still a few inches taller than this man. The curiously thin straps of her sandals wrapped themselves around her ankles and then disappeared under the hem of the long ankara-print dress she wore. She wore absolutely no jewelry, save for two gold hoop ear-rings. Remi was what Nigerians would call a "yellow paw-paw," even though her skin was the color of freshly-roasted yellow corn. Without the burnt bits. She had an oval face, which was considered attractive, with deep-set wandering eyes. And when this man found her, those eyes were wandering all over the airport lobby. Remi was 29.

The man on the other hand had a very forgettable face. Armed with a calm demeanor, which typically betrayed no emotion, he was often thought to be cold-hearted and detached. Quite far from the truth. He was physically fit, not unlike most men his age - he was 31 - but he had
chubby cheeks, which reminded one of a child who had not shed his baby fat. He had always had those cheeks. He wore a black and white check long-sleeved shirt, with a red and blue striped tie. Black pants and black leather shoes completed the look. That this man was black was a fact that could not be missed. They were both standing in a space predominated by white men. And in a sea of white, black stands out. But this man's blackness was not the same shade as charcoal. No, it was the color of cocoa beans, the hue more accurately described as "dark brown." However, since black is a more convenient term, this man was black. His name, as you might have guessed by now, was Kayode Coker.

In all their conversations, it had not occurred to Remi to find out how tall he was. She had a natural aversion to short men, but Kayode did not look short in his pictures or on her computer screen. Plus, the last time she saw him in person was when she was 13. Had he been wearing heels too? The thought was laughable.

As soon as Remi recognized Kayode, she ran and hugged him. She hugged him, wrapping both arms around him, resting her head on his right shoulder. He just stood there with one arm draped across her back, the other hand still in his pocket. When she finally pulled away from him overcome with so much emotion, all she managed to say was, "We're wearing the same colors!" as she wiped a few tears from her eyes.

Kayode confirmed the truth of her statement by looking again at the red and blue pattern of her dress, which matched the red and blue of his tie.

"You're right. How was your flight?" was his reply, as he offered her his handkerchief.

"Oh, fine. Thank God."

Within a few minutes they were on their way to Kayode's parked car. Remi's mind was full of questions. Her initial meeting with Kayode did not go as she had imagined. She had hoped there would be more hugging, some caressing, a good deal of tender words and some kissing for goodness sakes. He had never tried to be romantic over the phone or during their chats, but yet she expected that he would know that was the right thing to do at this first meeting. He was her husband, wasn't he? But Kayode had offered her none of these things, and she still did not know why he had been so late in coming to pick her up. Since he did not volunteer an answer, she took it upon herself to find out.

"Kay, I don't want to sound ungrateful, but why are you just coming? I've been here for 2 hours. I tried calling your phone lines, but--"

"I got held up at work and I couldn't leave early," was his gruff answer, as he hauled Remi's 7-piece luggage set into the back of his car. "And what did you pack in here? The whole of your father's house? You're going to have to get new stuff."

"No, it was not only my father's house I packed in there. I also packed a few danfo buses, an okada and the whole of Balogun market too! At least three of those bags contain gifts for us. Wedding gifts from relatives, friends, you know … people who came for the wedding. Our wedding!" Remi retorted angrily.

"You might have to get rid of some items. My place isn't very spacious and--" Kayode continued, as if he did not hear her protests.

"No way! I am not getting rid of anything. For the love of God, I just travelled all the way from Nigeria to come here. We haven't even left the airport and you're already bossing me around. Do you know how difficult it was for me to reduce everything I own to just a few bags? You have no idea how much stuff I had to give away, and even throw away. Things I have acquired over the last 20-something years, just because I got married. And you're here giving me
a stupid excuse about the space in your apartment. Why didn't you tell me that before I came, eh? All my things are going into that house. Every last one! Nonsense!"

Remi got into the front passenger seat of the car, fuming. Kayode finished putting away the luggage in the trunk and sat in the driver's seat. His face betrayed no emotion. No anger. No pity. Nothing. With his eyes glued to the steering wheel, and without turning to Remi, he said: "For the record, I am not your husband because we are not married. That ceremony you people had in Nigeria is of no consequence to me, whatsoever. You are still Remi Bajulaiye and I am Kayode Coker. Until we are married here in Germany, please do not refer to me as your husband. Got it?"

Remi did not answer. Her heart was full but her mouth refused to cooperate. She just turned away from him, her body trembling with sobs. She was convinced that she had married a monster.

They drove home in silence for about twenty minutes, and when they finally reached Kayode's apartment, he opened the front door for her and let her in. He lived on the second floor of an apartment very close to the eastern part of Berlin's center. The apartment itself was furnished like a typical bachelor's pad, and Remi could tell with just one glance at the kitchen, that Kayode hardly ever cooked. She was not surprised. She helped him with some of the lighter bags, and after showing her the room that would become her bedroom, he retired to his room for the night. By now, it was almost 8:00 pm.

Remi was both hungry and exhausted from her long trip. She decided to just lie down on her bed for a few minutes. By the time she opened her eyes again, it was 2:00 am! And the hunger pangs had more than doubled in intensity. Kayode had not shown her around the kitchen, so she had to get acquainted with the kitchen supplies and food stuff on her own. With all the stumbling around and crashing into objects she did before finding the light switch, she was surprised the neighbors were not beating down the door. The electric stove was quite easy to use and Remi was cooking her first meal in Berlin, in no time at all.

She made herself some pancakes and scrambled eggs within a few minutes, and sat down at the breakfast table to enjoy her meal. That was when she saw it: a desktop computer sitting in a corner of the sitting room. She had expected to see a laptop, but certainly not a desktop computer. As she ate her meal, a thought occurred to her.

"I hope he hasn't locked the computer with a password," she thought, as she washed up the dishes and went off to use the computer. Unfortunately, it was coded with a password. However, as Remi tried to unlock the computer, the password hint that kept re-appearing was the phrase "What is my love in Yoruba?"

"That's easy. Ìfè Mi."

She was right. That was the password and she logged into the computer. She went straight to look in the "My Pictures" folder, but was sorely disappointed to find just the generic wallpapers that came with the computer. She kept searching different folders, but came up empty each time. You see, Remi was convinced that there could be only one reason why the Kayode she thought she knew in Nigeria was so different from the man she met in Berlin: another woman. She was hoping to find proof of this other relationship on his computer. No such luck!

After seeing the same Koala bear hanging from a tree for the 15th time, that morning, Remi decided that it was time to temporarily abandon her mission and switch to more fun activities. She opened a browser window and went to Bella Naija's website. Something about visiting a website that connected her back to Nigeria was so endearing that for those 35 minutes, she almost forgot that she was on another continent. She saw pictures of events she had attended in
person just weeks before. And then something strange happened: she started nodding off to sleep! So, Remi went back to bed, after shutting down the computer.

A few hours later, Kayode tapped her gently and woke her up. It was around 6:30 a.m. and he was leaving for work. He left her some money, a spare key for the front door, a phone card, and a cell phone for her use. The phone card, of course, was to make international calls, because, as he said, he knew she would want to call back home to let them know she had arrived safely.

Just before he left her room, he turned around and said:

"I'm sorry about yesterday. Let's just learn to live together in peace, okay?" And without waiting for a reaction from her, he was gone.

Whether Kayode's apology was sincere or not, Remi could not tell. At least, not from the look on his face. Since her eyelids were still heavy with sleep, she succumbed to the pressure and went back to sleep. She did not wake up again until 11:00 a.m.

Remi was naturally adventurous, but something about being in another country where English was not the official language scared her. She had read somewhere that some Germans spoke English, but she knew that it was only a matter of time before she would be forced to learn the language. So, she made plans to broach the topic with Kayode when he got back from work. Meanwhile, she called her family back in Nigeria to tell them she had arrived safely in Berlin. However, she carefully left out, especially from her mother, the details about how Kayode had discredited the traditional wedding, and the argument the day before. Here's why.

The day before the traditional wedding ceremony, Mrs. Bajulaiye, Remi's mother, had called her aside and issued a serious warning: no matter what happened in Berlin, Remi had to work out any disagreement or unforeseen circumstances with Kayode.

"Ile oko n'ile e o, Remi," her mother kept repeating to the point of irritation. At the time, it had made no sense to Remi, why her mother would keep telling her that her husband's home was her home. Of course she knew that. Why was it being drummed into her head as if she was a two-year old?

It took her coming to Berlin to realize the gravity of her mother's warning. She had to make this marriage to Kayode work. She was no longer welcome in her parents' home for anything other than a short visit. As far as they were concerned, Kayode's home in Berlin was now their daughter's home too.

But with Kayode being so cold and unhelpful, she was at a loss for what to do.

"The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, right? Today, we shall see." And she tried it that very day. Instead of going out to explore her new neighborhood, she stayed and cooked. Kayode just happened to have the basic ingredients lying around in his freezer, and with some of the spices she had brought from Nigeria, a simple meal of fried rice and fried chicken was ready in no time. Unfortunately, there was no plantain lying around, so there was no dodo.

By the time Kayode came back from work, there was a piping hot meal waiting for him, and Remi was ready to serve him. But she was shocked at his reaction.

"What's that smell? Have you been frying something?"

"Yes, I have. I made a special meal for my darling."

"What did you make?"

"Fried rice and chicken."

"Fried this, and fried that. Oh, so you want to kill me, abi?"

"Kill you ke? What do you mean? I --"

"So you don't know that fried foods are unhealthy. You want me to die of a heart attack before I turn 40, abi?"
"You must be an ungrateful ass! I spent the last few hours, slaving away in this kitchen just to feed your sorry ass--"

"Where is all this bad language coming from? I have never heard you use such foul words. So you've been pretending abi? You clearly lack home training and your parents--"

"Leave my parents out of this! I'm not the only one who is full of surprises. What is wrong with you? I have no idea who you are anymore. You're definitely not the person I was expecting to meet here, so tell me, between the two of us, who is the pretender?"

"You better stop shouting at me. Nobody yells at me in my own house!"

"House? House? Don't make me laugh. You call this small carton a house? Have you seen the big mansions your mates are building at Lekki?"

"Why didn't you marry one of them, ehn? Gold-digger!"

"Which gold do you have, Mr. Berlin? Oya, show me the gold. And you dare to open your mouth and call me a gold-digger. In your life, never you ever--"

Remi made as if to slap Kayode but he stopped her. It was at that moment, when she came face-to-face with him, that she realized for the first time that his eyes spoke volumes. Even though his face was generally expressionless, she could read his emotions by looking into his eyes. The heart searches for words to convey its anguish, its struggles, hoping to give these words to the mouth to deliver. But sometimes, the words pass from the heart to the eyes, leaving the mouth hungry and deeply dissatisfied. In these moments, the eyes do the talking. Kayode's eyes spoke of a deep and serious internal struggle, which threw her off guard. It was clear that he was waging a battle against himself.

After threatening to call the police if she tried anything else, he retreated to his room. Remi was left alone, once again, with her thoughts. This pattern continued for two weeks, with Kayode mostly blaming Remi for something. If it wasn’t the food, it was the laundry. And if it wasn’t the laundry, it was the way Remi chose to clean the bathroom, throwing lots of water on the floor, and mopping it afterwards, the way she was accustomed to doing it in Nigeria.

Eventually, Remi called Kayode aside one weekend and told him in no uncertain terms, that she was tired of him finding fault with every little thing she did. They both finally agreed on a compromise: if Remi needed to do something and she was not sure how to do it, she would ask Kayode first. Kayode said he would be more patient with her seeing that she was trying to adjust to a new culture, and a new country. Such was the agreement this couple came to. One would have thought that two adults would have made this arrangement from Day One, but not Remi and Kayode. No. They worked backwards.

Later, that same day, Remi approached Kayode with another proposition. Although she had barely gone out of their apartment since her arrival, save for short walks around the neighborhood, and a few trips to the grocery store, she had not really met anyone or been anywhere in particular, that was of interest.

She informed Kayode that she would like to learn German. There was no point in postponing the inevitable, for if she was going to live in Germany, she might as well learn the language. So, she asked him to enroll her in a language class to while away her time. Remi was not surprised to hear Kayode voice his agreement with her new proposition. In fact, she expected it. He had felt guilty that Remi was left alone at home by herself all day, and they barely did anything together when he returned because he was usually exhausted after work. This would give her a chance to meet other people and keep her busy.
Within 24 hours of her request, Kayode had enrolled Remi at one of the numerous beginners' classes for people looking to learn German. This particular class was held at a local art institute close to Central Berlin.

On her first day, Remi was surprised to meet several African immigrants taking the same class. But, the most surprising part was that there was a good number of Germans taking the same class. Apparently, they had grown up and lived in other mostly European countries, and spoke every other language except German. Remi considered this absurd, how a person with a German name, with roots closely-tied to Germany, could not speak the language. But then, one of her classmates, a Sierra-Leonean man, pointed out that this was not very different from a familiar trend: Africans living in Africa and all over the world, who were fluent in every other language except their native languages. After making this observation, Remi was a lot more understanding.

Apart from this discovery, Remi made another startling discovery: of the 80 students in her class, roughly 47 of them were Turkish. In fact, the elderly gentleman who taught the class was a Turkish man who was born and raised in Bonn. He used to own a bookstore, but had since retired and handed over the reins to one of his children to manage. Remi usually stayed behind after class to ask him questions, which this patient man answered.

It was her teacher, who first suggested that Remi should change her transportation arrangements. She was always more than an hour early for class, since Kayode dropped her off around 7:30 am, as he had to be at work for 8. Class, however, did not start until 9am, and they ran every week day for three hours. Kayode initially took Remi to the venue for the first couple of days, on his way to work. But, after her teacher suggested an alternative transportation arrangement, Remi, who saw this as an opportunity to regain her independence, insisted on Kayode showing her how to use public transportation. That very weekend, Operation 'Gain-My-Independence' was launched.

On Saturday, Kayode took Remi on several test runs from the art institute to the train station nearest to their home, using the underground train, which the locals called the U-Bahn. The point, of course, was for Remi to master the route so that she could eventually ride the train on her own. After he had satisfied himself that she knew how to get from one point to the other, they went home. The following week would be time to see how much Remi had learned.

As it turned out, she had learned enough. Although she was very nervous, she was able to navigate her way seamlessly from home to her class, and back. With each passing day, her confidence grew, and she began to enjoy her independence little by little. She was enjoying her language class, meeting new people, and certainly not as bored as she had been just a few weeks back. Everything was going well for Remi. Until that day.

That day was a Wednesday. Class finished earlier than usual, as the teacher had to travel out of town that afternoon. So, at 11:15 a.m., the class was dismissed. Minutes later, Remi walked to the station to catch the next train. The train she usually took, which was a later train usually took about fifteen minutes to arrive at her regular stop. This time around, due to some construction work, the train she boarded would take an extra ten minutes to arrive at the destination. This was what she heard some of the fellow passengers say in English, after the announcement was made in German over the public speakers on the train.

"Great! I'll just use that time to catch up on sleep, then," Remi thought to herself as she found a seat. Kayode, who had caught a cold, had kept her up for most of the night, with his intermittent nose-blowing and trips to the restroom. To top it off, when he actually fell asleep, his heavy breathing progressively evolved into a very noisy snore. Remi who slept in the room
next to Kayode, and who was generally, a light sleeper, had found herself staring at the clock, counting the hours until daybreak. So, by the time her class ended, she was seriously sleep-deprived.

After setting an alarm on her phone to wake her up in exactly twenty minutes, Remi promptly nodded off to sleep. And she had a dream, right there on the train. In her dream, she saw herself wandering down a familiar street. It looked just like the street on which she grew up as a child, the one in Ikeja, except that the houses were all the same. She was looking for something and seemed to know intuitively exactly where to find it. So, she kept walking, until she got to a side street on her right. The minute she turned into that street, she saw a man walking towards her, holding something in his hand. It looked like a brown parcel that was neatly wrapped. Just before he handed it over to her, he opened his mouth and said something to her. The language was not familiar and she said so in English. As soon as the man heard her speak, and realized that she did not speak the same language with him, he retracted the hand bearing the gift and began to walk away from her. She kept running after him, but even though he was walking, she could not catch up with her. Suddenly, she tripped on a stone, and fell. That was when she woke up. The train had come to an abrupt stop and it was the jolt that woke her up. As she stared wildly about her, it took her a few minutes to remember where she was. The first thing she noticed was that the faces of the passengers around her were different. These were not the same people who had boarded the train with her.

She grabbed her phone. One look at the screen and she realized that she had been sleeping for almost an hour! The alarm had gone off at the time she set it for, but she had forgotten to add a tone to the alarm. It had gone off silently, as the phone was set to silent when she left her class that day. Just then, a voice announced over the public speakers that the train was now departing for another stop. That name was not familiar to her. Confused and dazed, she quickly got off the train. Once she got on the platform, her suspicions were confirmed. While she knew the name of the station where she stood, she had no idea how to get back home. Remi was lost in Berlin.

The first thing she did was to try calling Kayode for help. Unfortunately, his phone was turned off. She had not saved his office phone number, so that was out of the question. She began to panic. She tried to ask a few people she saw for directions to her apartment complex, using a combination of the little German she had learnt and English. It did not work, either because she was mispronouncing the words or the people she asked really didn’t understand her questions.

Remi resolved to keep calm, but she felt herself veering closer and closer to the edge of absolute panic and fear. So, she made her way upstairs from the subway to the ground level. She found herself on a street lined with cafes, restaurants and bars. Not exactly knowing what she would do, she darted nervously into the nearest one. It was a small café called Café Isabella.

As soon as she entered the café, she noticed that there was only one customer sitting down at a table, deeply engrossed in a newspaper. She could not see the man's face, but she definitely saw the top of his head. He was quite bald. There was soft jazz music playing in the background, which ordinarily made the atmosphere calm and relaxing. But all that music was wasted on Remi, as it did nothing to ease her nervousness.

She half-ran, half-floated to the man behind the counter. The man behind the counter was really a young boy with red pimples decorating his milk-colored face, who looked like he would much rather be anywhere else than working at a café. He looked to be about 19, though without the pimples, and possibly with a beard or moustache, he could easily have passed for a 24 year old. Remi repeated the series of questions and wild arm movements she had already performed
at the train station just minutes before. They had the same effect on this boy, as they had on the people she had met earlier: absolute confusion. In fact, the boy thought she was trying to get a special brew, and so the poor boy kept telling her in German to "look there" while pointing to a blackboard with the café's menu chalked in white and blue letters.

"Oh God! Ki ni n ma se?" a frustrated Remi cried out, further scaring the already frightened sales clerk.

"Ki lo de? What's the matter?" a man's voice asked, out of the blues.

Remi turned around so quickly that the rubber band which had held her braided hair in a loose pony tail, simply broke off, and went flying into an obscure corner of the café. Her hair, thus liberated, fell in cascades over her shoulders and in front of her face, temporarily blocking her vision. Had she imagined it or did she just hear someone speak Yoruba and then English? In this café?

"Excuse me, could you repeat yourself?" She felt the words form in her head, but they never made it to her mouth. She just stood there, mouth ajar, gazing in wonder at this stranger. It suddenly occurred to her that her hair was blocking her view. Pulling her hair away from her face with her right hand, she let her left hand fall to her side, holding onto her large purse. With her hair out of the way, she got a good look at this stranger. She knew he was the same man who had been sitting at the table in the café, when she entered, just by looking at his bald head. From where she stood, she could see the newspaper he had been reading lying carelessly on the table like a pile of dirty laundry. The man must have been reading Remi's thoughts because he repeated his words, exactly as he had said them the first time.

This time, Remi heard him correctly and knew she was not mistaken. This man had to be a Nigerian. But how could that be? His face was …

"I said 'Ki lo de?" the stranger repeated. The man in front of her was slightly taller than her. He had a long torso, broad shoulders and big hands, the sort of hands that looked like they were built to lift heavy things. He was light-skinned, the kind of man Nigerians would refer to as a 'yellow paw-paw.' Thick black eyebrows framed deep-set eyes, which Remi knew she would never forget for one reason: they were green. And his lips? They used to be pink, but were now tainted black, a tell-tale sign of a man who has been smoking cigarettes for years.

He never lost his cool and seemed mildly fascinated by Remi's flustered appearance.

"Are you a Nigerian?" was all Remi managed to say, as if that was the solution to her problem.

"Of course. Or do I sound like a Ghanaian?" he said, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes as he switched to a perfect Ghanaian accent, and quickly added "Chale, long time!"

Remi laughed in spite of herself. This stranger was funny.

"Sorry, it's just that … I need to get back home … and well, I'm lost," was all she managed to say.

"But of course you are, and you’ve scared poor Rupert too. It's his first day on the job." He was right. Even though she had failed in her attempt to ask him for directions, she had certainly succeeded in transferring her anxiety and nervousness to him. The stranger apologized to him and the boy happily returned to his duties.

Taking Remi by the hand, he gently led her away to one of the five tables in the café, the one right beside the window overlooking the street, and offered to buy her a cup of coffee. Remi, who was only too glad to have met someone who understood her, eagerly accepted his offer. Ten minutes later, they were both sipping hot cups of coffee and talking.
The stranger introduced himself as Olisa Adigwe. His father was a Nigerian, an Igbo man, and his mother was a German. They had met when his father was in Germany for studies in the '70s. Olisa was the third of four children, and had lived in Germany until he was six years old. His family had relocated to Nigeria in the early '80s, but he had visited Germany almost every year since he was 13. He worked as an engineer for Mobil in Nigeria, and was on a month-long vacation. Remi, on her part, parted with only a very condensed version of her life's story, leaving out sensitive details, and being careful not to refer to Kayode as her husband, but rather as her fiancé.

"So, Olisa," Remi said, taking another sip of her warm beverage, "since your mother is German, do you have a German name?"

"Do birds fly?"

"An ostrich cannot fly so …"

"You know what I mean jo," he said laughing at her feeble attempt to make a joke. "My mother named me Klaus, after her father, my grandfather. So my full name is Olisa Klaus Adigwe. Some of my friends call me Olisa, some call me Klaus. For those who are prone to butchering both names, I tell them to call me "Kay." That way, everyone is happy, and my name is safe from unnecessary mishandling."

That first day, they talked for hours in the small café. Remi who had been worried about getting home late, completely forgot the time and the clock ticked away. But, at about 4:30 p.m., when a few people who had finished early from work began to stream into the café, they felt like they had lost some degree of privacy, and promptly left the café. With Olisa's help, Remi was able to get back on the right train and in no time at all, found herself back home in Kayode's apartment. Remi never mentioned her little adventure to Kayode, but rather, chose to keep these things to herself. In her mind, this newfound friend, was her little secret, and she had no intention of sharing it with anyone. Not even Kayode.

As is common in stories of this nature, little secrets never remain little for long. So it was with Remi and Olisa. From the very first day they met, each felt an indisputable and inexplicable attraction to the other, and neither fought off that attraction. Olisa told Remi on that first day at Café Isabella, that he had a girlfriend back home in Nigeria. So, for all intents and purposes, they knew each other's status relationship-wise. One was engaged to be married, and the other was in a long-term relationship headed for marriage. But neither of these factors deterred them from seeing each other.

Remi and Olisa saw each other almost every day for the rest of Olisa's one-month vacation in Berlin. His plan to visit friends and relatives in other European countries was put on hold, and he decided instead to spend his entire holiday in Germany. The reason for that was of course, obvious: so he could be close to Remi.

After class each day, Olisa would take Remi out to lunch at different restaurants. From French to Dutch to Thai cuisine, Remi got to sample Berlin's culinary delights at Olisa's expense. After lunch, he would take her to see the sights and sounds of Berlin. Since he knew the city like the back of his hand, he was the perfect tour guide. They visited art galleries, museums, historical buildings, parks, zoos and other attractions, including the Pergamon Museum, which Remi had begged Kayode to take her to see, and which he was always making excuses for not visiting. The excuses ranged from physical fatigue from working so hard at the office, to unfavorable weather since this was June, right in the middle of summer. Since Olisa was taking her out to all these places, Remi stopped asking Kayode. He just assumed that she had finally realized he was not an outdoors type of guy. He had no idea that Remi had long since concluded
that he was irredeemably anti-social and had given up any hopes of molding him into the man she wanted him to be. As far as Remi could see, that dream was dead, and she did not particularly care to revive it, since her own social life was in full bloom.

But as we know, Fate is a master meddler, never leaving things alone as they are. Change is Fate's weapon, the uninvited guest that no man can keep away. If Remi had not been so wrapped up in this whirlwind romance with Olisa, she might have noticed that the man she was living with was changing. And nothing had spurred Kayode's change in behavior, other than Remi's aloofness. She no longer cared if there was any food waiting for him after work, did not show any particular interest in his work life or career, and did not bother him with her usual requests. Kayode assumed that this withdrawal of affection and interest, was a direct result of her newfound freedom, that is, her language class and everything that came with it. He had no idea how close he was to the truth, and yet how far off the mark he was. Remi's indifference caused a pronounced difference in Kayode.

Kayode began to open up his life to Remi, who he had kept at arm's length since her arrival. He began to introduce her to the people in his social and professional circle. First of all, he introduced her to his closest friends, who by themselves were a curious bunch, as they came from other parts of Europe, and some of their names were difficult to pronounce. She got around that challenge, by giving them her own nicknames, a trick she had learnt from Olisa. Kayode's friends did not seem to mind their new names, either, and often joked that they would have to officially adopt these names sooner or later. Later on, she met some of his colleagues at work, including his supervisor, Mr. Bergdorf. It was Mr. Bergdorf who first asked a very important question in a remarkable way: if they were engaged and they loved each other, when did they plan to get married? Their parents had asked this question, minus the "love factor," in varying degrees of persistence over the last few weeks, but they had conveniently brushed it aside. However, there was something commanding, and urgent in Mr. Bergdorf's voice that neither of them could ignore. Following his advice, they picked a date that was exactly two months from that day: August 16th. Now that they had a definite date, they began to plan their wedding in earnest.

The first person Remi told about the wedding date was Olisa. He knew from day one that she was engaged, but hearing the actual wedding date from her lips threw him into a state of frenzy. She broke the news to him while they were both relaxing at Freibad Plötzensee, one of Berlin's urban beaches. As soon as she made her announcement, he jumped off the blanket they were both lying on, stretched as it was on the sand. Then, he did something that puzzled Remi: he got down on both knees and begged her to cancel the wedding.

"Remi, please hear me out," he pleaded in response to her protests. Although she knew that whatever he was going to say would make her decision more difficult, she decided to And she granted him an audience.

"Happiness and duty are not the same thing. The luckiest people alive are the ones who find them both in a single person. A special person. Remi, if you'll be the honest person I know you to be, you'll admit that your happiness does not lie with Kayode. If you married him right now, it would only be out of a sense of duty because you came all the way to Berlin for his sake. You don't love him. Your heart belongs to someone else--"

"And another woman's heart belongs to you, Olisa!" Remi interrupted, eyes blazing. "Don't try to force my hand when your hands are not clean. Do I need to remind you of Amaka?"

"I'm just dating her. It's not like we're engaged or anything," Olisa said, sulking.
"I bet you that’s not what she's thinking. Besides, should it matter? Should the absence of an engagement ring on her finger, somehow lessen the depth of your commitment to her?"

"You don’t know Amaka. She's lazy and can't cook--" he started.

"But you knew all this before you started dating her. What changed?"

Olisa offered no response. Remi paused, took a deep breath and continued.

"See, this won't work with me. If you're already bad-mouthing a woman who has known you longer than I have, then what do I have to look forward to? It's only a matter of time before you start bad-mouthing me too. Besides …" Remi said, tearing her eyes away from Olisa's crestfallen face, "emotional decisions are the worst kind. I mean, look at us …"

"So, you think this was a mistake, don’t you? What we have means nothing to you," Olisa said bitterly.

"No, that's not what I … Well yes … You know what I mean--" Remi said.

"Do I?"

"Look, Olisa, I feel bad … For Amaka's sake. She doesn’t deserve what I … what we've done to her. Neither does Kayode," Remi said with a sigh.

"I honestly don’t care about Kayode," Olisa said, a cold look in his eyes.

"And you don’t care about Amaka too, from your account. So who do you care about, apart from yourself?" Remi replied angrily.

"I thought that the answer would be obvious to you by now," Olisa said quietly, looking at her intently. Remi felt like someone had poured ice cold water on her. Just a few weeks back, she had felt hurt by Kayode's lack of attention and general coldness to her. That hurtful feeling was still fresh in her heart, and she could never have dreamt that she would be the one hurting someone else. Or other people.

They left the beach soon afterwards. Olisa would be leaving for Nigeria within three days. Before they parted that afternoon, he reminded her that she had a decision to make: she had to choose between staying in Berlin to marry Kayode or eventually relocating back to Nigeria to pursue a relationship with Olisa. Olisa had made it clear that he would not be satisfied with a mere relationship with Remi. Marriage was his ultimate goal. And she had to let him know what her choice was before he left. She agreed.

With the weight of this decision on her shoulders, Remi returned to the apartment she shared with Kayode. That very evening she fell ill, and she knew that this illness could not be cured by any medicine. It was in vain that Kayode tried to convince her to go to the hospital to see a doctor. It was just a slight fever, which would soon pass, was her reply.

And in a sense, she was right. It was a fever, the kind that is caused by extensive mental deliberation, aggravated by fear and anxiety. She did not go for her language class on those days, but spent hours holed up in her room, consumed with the fear that she would make the wrong decision. Kayode, in these hours, called frequently to check up on her during the day, and was her faithful nurse when he arrived from work. He was attentive to her every need and saw to it that she was as comfortable as was possible.

However, on the second day of her strange malady, which she had told Kayode was a side effect of her monthly visits from Mother Nature, she was alone at home. Kayode had gone to work that morning. About two hours after he left, she woke up to find that the over-the-counter medication that she had been using was not on her nightstand as usual. She got up from her bed and began to look for it. It wasn’t in her room, or the kitchen or any of the common areas where it was likely to be. Then, a thought occurred to her: Kayode had probably taken it to his room and forgot it there.
Convinced that this theory was the most plausible one, she lumbered to Kayode's room, which was right next to hers. As a general rule, she never went to his room in his absence, out of respect for his privacy. But today was different. She genuinely needed something that was possibly in that room.

Kayode's room was a lot neater than Remi's own, owing to the fact that he was more finicky about putting items in specific places. He hated people moving things from where he was accustomed to leaving them. So, he had books - mostly hard backed books - organized by color and size on a tall bookshelf facing his queen-sized bed. The in-built closet was closed, but Remi felt sure that if she opened it, she would find the clothes hanging neatly from the hangers. His shoes were neatly packed into sectioned squares in a cube-shaped, shoe organizer made from a durable linen fabric. The entire room looked like a four-star hotel room before guests unpacked their luggage and made the room theirs. One could not help being impressed with the level of organization, especially since this room belonged to a man.

As Remi stepped in Kayode's rather organized world, her first thoughts were to search in the side-table beside his bed, which doubled as his nightstand. The little table, made of cherry wood, had just one drawer. As soon as she pulled it out, she took one look at the interior and immediately saw that what she was looking for was not there. The drawer contained a single item: a leather-bound blue journal. Ordinarily, Remi would have closed the drawer and continued her search in another part of the room, except for one thing: there was a single word handwritten in whimsical flourishes on the cover of the book. It was her name: Remi.

She was so taken aback by surprise at her discovery that she sat down suddenly on Kayode's bed. The grogginess she had felt moments before was gone and in its stead, was an all-consuming desire to know what was written in this book which bore her name. Then began the internal battle between principle and curiosity: should she open this journal and read its contents or pretend like she never saw it, consoled with the thought that she was a principled person and it was wrong to violate another person's privacy? It took her less than thirty seconds to make up her mind. In the end, curiosity won.

With trembling hands and her heart thumping so loud she was sure the neighbors could hear it, she opened the journal and began to read it. It took her a full hour to completely digest its contents, and in that time, she went through a whole gamut of emotions, some of which she did not know she was capable of experiencing. She cried, she laughed, she screamed, she even danced at some point. What she read was far better than a Nollywood movie script. And she discovered that Kayode was also an artist.

The journal was a compendium of thoughts by Kayode, expressing how he felt about Remi, in words that he had found necessary to put down in writing. Each section was prefaced by a little poem and a sketch of Remi, with different facial expressions. Remi recognized the sketches immediately. They were reproductions of her personal pictures, which she had sent to Kayode during the months when they were dating in Nigeria. Kayode talked about the depth of his love for Remi and how he knew she was meant for him. It also contained, to Remi’s surprise, Kayode's insecurities and his uncertainties about being able to show Remi how much he cared about her. It seemed that the Kayode who wrote these words was not the same man who she had openly and inwardly criticized for his nonchalance and coldness towards her.

But perhaps, the most shocking part of Kayode's confessions were his thoughts on marriage. He started out by writing that he was determined not to make the same mistake his parents had made. He knew his parents loved each other, and he had no gripe with that. What annoyed him, however, was the fact that his father was guilty of showing too much affection for his mother.
His mother who was extremely manipulative, used her husband's love for her as a weapon against him at every opportunity she had. She knew that she was his ultimate weakness. Kayode who had observed this dynamic in his parents' relationship, had vowed in heart, even before he left for Germany, that he would not follow in their footsteps. So, when Remi came into the picture, he executed the plan he had harbored in his heart for years: he held back showing affection for Remi and instead chose to show his devotion by acts of kindness.

This was the revelation Remi had waited for, but now that she knew these things, it was a bitter-sweet. You see, now there was another man in the picture - Olisa - and she did not need to go and rummage in any drawers to find out how Olisa felt about her. He plainly told her so and showed it by his actions. Remi was now in a quandary and she asked herself bitterly over and over again, why it had taken so long to make this discovery. All along, she had thought that Olisa was the single added complication in her life, but now it was clear that both Kayode and Olisa were wrinkles she had to iron out. Remi was troubled.

"Why is it that once a woman is off the market, all these highly attractive, highly desirable, uber sexy men start taking a keen interest in her?" Remi asked herself, referring of course, to Olisa. The irony!

"Where was Olisa when I was single and searching? And why did Kayode not explain his struggle to me from day one? I would have understood why he--" And that was when she remembered. That look, that struggle she had seen in Kayode's eyes during their argument. Now, she firmly understood it. What would she do with this new piece of information?

Assailed by an army of questions which refused to let her be, Remi returned the journal to its habitat, and resumed her search for the medicine. She found it in the medicine cabinet behind the mirror in Kayode's bathroom. Then, she ate, took a shower, took a few pills to quieten her thoughts and managed to go back to sleep. When Kayode returned from work, he apologized for leaving the medicine in his room. If he noticed that someone had been fiddling with his journal, he certainly did not show it. And he did not mention it to Remi.

The following day was a Friday, and it was the day Olisa was leaving for Nigeria. By then, Remi knew what her answer would be. If she chose to go back to Nigeria to continue her relationship with Olisa, she knew she could use the ticket she had on hand. You see, she had purchased a round trip ticket on her way to Berlin, instead of a one-way ticket. But she would not be using her ticket that day. As much as she struggled with this decision, Remi decided against calling Olisa to tell him her decision. She simply sent him a text message with the following words: I am staying in Berlin. Olisa did not reply.

Remi had assumed that he would at least let her know he got her message, but Olisa was silent. In fact, his silence lasted for two weeks. In the meantime, life continued as normal for Remi and Kayode, and they continued with their wedding plans. Slowly but surely, thoughts of Olisa began to fade from Remi's mind. At least, she convinced herself that she would forget him. She decided that it was wise to move on with her life, and she devoted all her energy to doing just that.

But one day, out of the blues, Olisa sent Remi an e-mail. It was exactly two weeks after he left Berlin. Remi was on her way back home after class when she checked her e-mail messages on her phone, a routine daily habit. She was about to delete an e-mail with the subject line "It's not over," when she saw the name of the sender: Olisa K. Adigwe. Remi nervously opened the message and read it almost breathlessly. It was a very long letter, and she sat down on a park
bench to read it. She read the letter three times, and each time she asked herself if she was dreaming. Was this man serious?

It had taken Olisa several days to collect his thoughts together before he sat down to compose that e-mail. He had never stopped thinking about Remi since he left Berlin. The silence on his part was self-enforced by all the strength he could muster because Olisa did not believe in forcing a person to change her mind. He believed that where emotions and logic collided, logic usually prevailed in the heart of a wise person. Olisa considered Remi to be wise and took her one-line response to be evidence that she had made a logical decision. He had returned to Nigeria with every intention of moving on with his life, but as the days dragged on, there was something that became increasingly clear to him; he could not stand to be away from Remi. In fact, being away from her actually increased his fondness for her. Countless times he had picked up his phone to dial her number or send her a text. But Olisa was a creature of habit. He had a bad habit of giving problems just "one-shot." The every-effort doctrine was not part of his personal mantra. That day on the beach with Remi, he had made his case and given his relationship with her the "one-shot."

Something strange happened to him when he got back to Nigeria. He began to re-think his decision to leave Remi alone, to respect her wishes. The "one-shot" rule began to look more like a sign of weakness than a wise principle. The thought that kept recurring to him was that he had to fight for what he wanted, and that fighting meant giving more than one shot. Finally, on a Saturday morning, after a long drawn-out battle with himself, he decided to put this new principle into practice. He felt that Remi would be reluctant to answer her phone or reply his texts, so he resorted to a less direct method to communicate his thoughts to her: e-mail. She had told him several times before that the only e-mails she ever deleted were those unsolicited marketing ones. She pretty much kept everything else. With this in mind, Olisa carefully composed his first letter to Remi.

He started out explaining to her why he never called or texted or communicated with her after receiving notice of her decision. He went on to assure her that he had no intention of hurting her and that he desired her total happiness. Love, true love, he said, was something most people never experienced in their lifetimes. Life was too short to play games and he certainly did not want to start at this stage. His feelings for her were genuine, and he had never felt this way about anyone else, not even Amaka. As far as he was concerned, he told Remi, she was his soul-mate and that if she searched her heart, she would come to the same conclusion about him.

Remi received Olisa's letter with mixed feelings. She was thrilled to hear from him, but she was also alarmed at the fact that she was so ready to forgive him and welcome him back into her life. Had she not made a firm decision to go all the way with Kayode? What did this double-mindedness say about her ability to commit to a relationship with anybody? Remi convinced herself that Olisa was not just anybody; he was a true friend. An irreplaceable friend. As long as Remi put the "friend tag" on Olisa, she felt less guilty about carrying on this friendship with him without Kayode's knowledge. Furthermore, she reasoned, she was sure that Kayode had female friends, maybe even ex-girlfriends whom he kept in touch with, even though she still had no positive proofs of this. What she was doing with Olisa was just keeping in touch with a friend, nothing more. Remi told herself this over and over again, that she actually believed it. So, she sent an overjoyed Olisa a reply expressing her happiness at receiving his e-mail and indicating her interest in remaining friends with him. Olisa did not care what label Remi put on their relationship. As long as he was communicating with her, he felt he still had a chance at winning
her heart and claiming her as his prize. That was how they both began to write to each other every single day for the next five weeks.

The words they wrote to each other bound them together more tightly than ever before. These letters bridged the physical distance between these two people and without realizing it, each fell deeper and deeper in love with the other. Remi woke up with Olisa on her mind every morning and Olisa's mind was filled with thoughts of Remi almost every minute he was awake. Every time Remi replied Olisa's e-mail, she assuaged her guilty conscience by telling herself that they were *just* friends. And since neither of them mentioned Kayode or the upcoming wedding in these letters, reality was kept at bay. They both created and kept his fantasy world alive, where the only two people that mattered were Remi and Olisa. Everything and everyone else who threatened to disturb the artificial peace in this world was promptly blocked out. That included Amaka, and Kayode.

Since Remi discovered Kayode's journal, she began to look at him more closely. It was after that discovery that she noticed the pronounced changes in his behavior towards her. He was decidedly warmer, friendlier and made deliberate efforts to make her happy. But Kayode's re-birth came rather late as Remi was wrapped up in her deepening relationship with Olisa.

This entire time, Remi was still planning the wedding with Kayode supporting her all the way. It seemed contradictory that she was still planning to marry Kayode when her heart belonged to Olisa. But Remi kept up with it. The days rolled into weeks, and eventually five weeks passed. It was now roughly one week to the wedding.

On a Saturday afternoon, Remi and Kayode were treated to a surprise engagement party organized by Kayode's friends. They had both gone to the house of one of his friends, for what they thought was his birthday party. But when they arrived there, they were shocked to find out that they were the guests of honor. Amidst all the festivities and drinking, Remi forgot her cell phone at this friend's house. She, of course, did not realize that her phone was missing until they got back home at around 11 p.m. She wanted to check to see if Olisa had sent her another e-mail, and that was when she discovered that she did not have her phone with her. A mental retracing of her steps followed, and she realized that she must have left it at the party. A quick phone call by Kayode to the friend confirmed that the missing cell phone was indeed at his house. However, being that it was already late, she and Kayode decided wait until the following day, which was a Sunday, before going back to retrieve the phone.

Remi could not sleep that night. She was worried that if Olisa had sent an e-mail and did not receive a reply within a few hours, he would think that something was wrong. Worry drove her to get up around 3:00 a.m. in the morning to find a way to send Olisa a message. She stole past Kayode's room, taking extra care not to make any noise. Of course, using Kayode's phone was out of the question. Her only option was to use the desktop computer in the living room.

As soon as she logged into her mail account, she was not surprised to see that Olisa had sent an e-mail. It was a routine reply to her e-mail. They had not bothered to change the subject line or start a new thread or conversation. They had just both been hitting the reply button, so that all their e-mail messages to each other were in one single, long thread. The first e-mail in this thread was of course, the initial e-mail Olisa had sent Remi from Nigeria several weeks back.

Although Remi had expected a letter from Olisa, she was shocked when she received his message. What shocked her was the content. He was going to be in the Berlin that Sunday and wanted to see her. No, needed to see her. He would not leave Berlin without seeing her.

Remi almost screamed when she read his message. Although they had been writing back and forth to each other every day for the last couple of weeks, Olisa never mentioned coming to
Berlin to her. This was his way of surprising her at the last minute. Remi was excited, but she was also worried. What if she could not control herself when she saw Olisa again? The bond between them had grown even stronger than the last time she saw him and she was not sure how she would behave in his presence. Would she throw herself into his arms and allow him whisk her back to Nigeria?

With all these questions firing away in her head, she quickly composed a reply to Olisa's message agreeing to see him at the time and place he had chosen. Just before she sent the message, she thought heard Kayode moving about in his room. He was a very keen observer, and it was only a matter of time before he came to find out what she was doing at the computer at that ungodly hour. In her haste, she added another e-mail address to the "CC" section. It was kayforever2002@yahoo.com. This was Olisa's other e-mail address, which she remembered him giving to her on the same day he met her. All this time, their string of e-mails had been sent using their respective g-mail accounts. The temporary panic she was thrown into forced her to include this additional e-mail address as insurance, to make sure he would get the reply in both his e-mail accounts. She hit send and by the time Kayode came to the sitting room to see why Remi was up, she had opened a new browser window to cover her tracks. All Kayode saw was Remi looking at gift ideas for brides to their grooms. Sweet deceit!

The following day, both Remi and Kayode returned to the friend's house to retrieve Remi's phone. Olisa had asked Remi to meet him at 5 p.m. at the Panorama Café at Panoramapunkt in the Potsdamer Platz. She had every intention of being punctual. So, she told Kayode that she wanted to do some sight-seeing on her own that afternoon. He volunteered to come with her, but she gracefully declined. Having pre-accounted for her absence for the next few hours, she set off for the agreed venue.

Technically, Remi was not lying when she said she was going to do some sight-seeing. Located on the 24th floor of the Kollhoff Tower, the Panorama Café was famous for its breathtaking views of Berlin. From that height, one could see many of the popular landmarks, which dotted Berlin's landscape, and formed part of the city's rich history. After a 20-second ride in the elevator, reputed to be the fastest one in Europe, she reached the 24th floor and immediately began to look around for Olisa. Although she was an hour early, she knew he could possibly have arrived early too. But he was not there. So, she ordered a cup of coffee and sat down waiting for him to arrive.

Not quite five minutes after she sat down to enjoy her beverage, someone tapped her on her left shoulder. Could Olisa have arrived so quickly? She held her breath as she turned around to face her shoulder tapper. She almost spilled the hot liquid on her laps, for as soon as she turned around she came face-to-face with the last person she expected to see at the café: Kayode. He wore a look of defeat on his face which scared Remi even more than the fact that Olisa could walk in at any minute.

"Oh … emm … Ka-Ka-Kayode! What are you doing here? I thought--" Remi started.

"Sit down, Remi. We need to talk," Kayode said in a quiet but firm voice.

Remi obeyed and sat down. She did not like the bad feeling that began to creep up. What could Kayode possibly want to discuss now?

"Don't worry I won't be long. All I want you to do is to listen. I will do the talking. And I'll be gone before he gets here."

On hearing the last part, Remi felt her heart drop and she felt sick to the stomach. Kayode continued without giving her a chance to recover. Taking a deep breath, he first of all
apologized to her for his detachment. His explanation was a repetition of the words she had read in his journal.

"You don't look surprised and I know why. You read my journal, didn’t you?" Kayode asked a bewildered Remi. He went on to tell her that he knew she had read his journal. He had noticed that it was placed in the far left corner of his drawer, when he typically put it in the rightmost corner. He did not challenge her then because he felt that she was entitled to know what he thought about her, especially since he had done such a poor job of communicating it directly to her.

"I hope you liked the sketches. I'm sure you recognized them." Remi did not answer. Shame had robbed her of the power of speech.

"Does he draw too? The other guy … Olisa … " Kayode asked suddenly. He was watching Remi intently and his words had the intended effect on her. Uncomfortable was an understatement. She wished the ground would open up and swallow her right that minute. But it didn’t happen and Kayode was not through with her yet.

"You're wondering how I found out, ba? Me too." He told Remi that he had known about Olisa Adigwe for a while. On a Thursday afternoon, shortly after Remi and Olisa began seeing each other regularly, Kayode had to attend a business meeting in another part of town. He had stopped at a café that afternoon to grab some coffee on his way. The café he happened to visit was none other than Café Isabella, where Remi and Olisa was so deeply engrossed in their conversation that they did not see the customer who stared at them from the moment he entered the café to the minute he left. He instantly recognized Remi whose face was imprinted on his heart. He could pick her out from a crowd of strangers from any angle. Those hours of sketching her pictures had seared her peculiar features into his mind forever.

When he saw her with Olisa that day he had struggled with the urge to confront her with his discovery, but had resisted the urge. He believed in her and felt that she would not do anything to compromise their relationship.

"Do you know he asked me to leave Berlin and come with him to Nigeria?" Remi asked in a sorrow-laden voice.

"Well, I do now. I'm not done yet. Just listen."

Kayode told her that after that initial discovery, he decided to be more open with his emotions, but she was too blind, too involved to see these changes. Meanwhile, his faith in her remained steadfast and he believed she would make the right decision.

After the first day when he saw them together at the café, Kayode could not get Olisa out of his head. There was something strangely familiar about his face that he could not place his finger on. All he had was Olisa's face. At that point, he did not know his name.

"That is, until this morning after you sent that e-mail," Kayode continued. Remi's eyes grew bigger and bigger until they looked like they were going to pop out of her head. They didn’t but Kayode continued his revelation.

"After you left the computer, I went back to my room and I was going to go back to sleep. I picked up my phone and saw that I had a new message. As soon as I opened the message, I knew that I was not the intended recipient. I have an old e-mail account that I hardly ever check anymore. I mostly use my g-mail account, as you know. So I was surprised to get an e-mail at that abandoned mailbox. The e-mail address, you'll be surprised to know is kayforever2002@yahoo.com. And the e-mail was from you."

Remi stifled a scream. She realized her mistake immediately. Olisa's secondary e-mail address was so similar to Kayode's own that her mistake was plausible. Olisa's correct e-mail
address, which in her haste, Remi had mis-typed was kayforever2000@yahoo.com. A simple typographical error on her part was her own undoing.

"Of course I read the e-mail and then everything became clear to me. I finally knew the name of the man who was competing with me for your affections. Following the hunch I had had for weeks, that feeling that I had seen this guy somewhere, I did a quick Google search with his name. The answer I was looking for was there. It had been there the whole time. Remi, you deserve to know the truth."

"What on earth do you mean, Kayode?" Remi asked puzzled.

"Do you remember my cousin, Kanyinsola, the one who lives in the UK?" Kayode asked.

Remi nodded.

"Good. We attended the same secondary school and were in the same class. About a year ago, she had sent me a link to some pictures of some of our old classmates. They were all at a wedding, which was featured on Bella Naija. The name of the bride was Amaka something … I can't remember her last name. But the groom's face I will never forget. He was one of those half-caste kids. And his name was Olisa Adigwe. Remi, you've been dating a married man."

That last part was a bitter pill to swallow and the realization that she had been having an affair with a married man was too much for her. Hot tears of grief and pain began to roll down her cheeks.

"You know, I almost wrote to him to tell him to leave you alone. But that's not my place. This is between you and him. Whatever you decide--" and here, his voice faltered, "What you decide is fine by me. I blame myself for everything." That was the last thing he said. Kayode got up and made as if to walk away. Remi leapt to her feet and begged him to come back.

With tears in her eyes, she begged for his forgiveness. He offered it without restraint and asked for her forgiveness too. And for the first time since they met, Kayode held Remi in a long, warm embrace.

"I have no reason to go back to Nigeria. My future, my happiness is here with you in this city. And Kayode, for as long as you live here, I will stay in Berlin." Shortly after, they left the café hand-in-hand.

* * *

Remi and Kayode still live in Berlin as husband and wife. Raising two little children in a city they have fallen in love with, it is hard to imagine that just a few years ago, one of them was considering leaving Berlin.

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About the Author

Sharon Abimbola Salu was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria where she lived until she relocated to the United States of America. Her stories are mostly set in Nigeria, and she writes the kind of stories she would like to read. A professed lover of spicy foods, she loves experimenting with new recipes, to the dismay of non-spicy food lovers. Apart from writing, photography is her other hobby.

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