



A Woman of Integrity

Looking at your condition now, you are ready to take God to court. You have sized up things and have no better choice. Only a court verdict can settle the matter. But you have an impediment: you don't yet know the court of competent jurisdiction. As soon as you find it, nothing else can keep you from launching the legal battle. You are sure of victory, even if God appeals to the Supreme Court. You know that the case will become a cause célèbre and that whoever hears of it will applaud you for taking such a bold step, for challenging the unchallengeable God. You have waited long for him to give you one answer that will surmount your innumerable challenges. In fact, this is five years you have been earnestly expecting this answer. But God has been deaf, and blind too. He has stuffed wool into his ears and covered his eyes with a plaster. Now you are ready to remove those barriers through the court. By the time you finish with him, he will have better repented of his delay in granting his children's requests. You won't have considered taking a legal action has God not become callous, has he not insisted on breaking your heart. You have waited for him to apologize for his negligence, but he appears unready for any dialogue. Thus once you find the competent court, you will drag him there, despite the emptiness of your pocket. And you will claim damages beyond his resources. Sure.

Oh yes, you think you have a genuine case against God whom you believe in. Your parents inculcated in you his reality when you were still a young girl, and you have no doubt now about his existence, as some do. You have experienced his love on numerous occasions. One was a day you went swimming with your fellow primary school pupils in a river in your village. You were ten then. You nearly drowned and after you were rescued, much water was pumped out of your stomach through your nose and mouth. Another occasion was the accident that left you in a coma for several hours after you collided face-to-face with a motorcycle while you were riding your bicycle to school. The force, a great one, threw you off and you landed hard on the jagged road. Nobody around believed you would survive. But you did.

A third incident that completely erased any doubt you might have about God's love for you occurred when you were about to start university. Your father started suffering from an illness that paralysed his right side for three months. You were grateful to God that the paralysis later left your father, miraculously, even though he is now no longer the man he used to be. The illness sucked his money and his business crumbled thereof. You cried that your dream of studying Accountancy at university had been cut short. Who would carry the financial burden? Your mother? No. She was just a greengrocer and barely made enough income. Your story however changed during your kindred meeting. A member of your *umunna* stood up and promised to take care of your university education. You thought he was joking, but a week after the meeting, he asked you to present your first-year school budget. When you did, he gave you the money in cash, and even added a little on top. You had not believed that the man could do such a thing. If he came from a different kindred, you would have assumed that he was doing you the favour so that he would eventually propose to you. But he belongs to your kindred and so will never marry you, according to your tradition.

Besides, he was already married then with three children. Thus you know from the man's generosity that God's love is still everywhere around you.

Before you started school at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, your parents advised you to be true to this loving God, to remain focused on him, to cling to him despite all odds.

"You have no other God to protect you there," your father said. "If you leave him, he will also leave you. If you trust him, he will carry you like a baby throughout your stay there."

Your mother echoed your father's advice and added that you should not disappoint the man who had decided to fund your university education. "Remember that you are our first daughter and child. You are now a mirror in which your brothers and sisters will always observe themselves."

When you got to the university, your parents' words acted like security guards all around you, checking your excesses, reining you. You therefore resolved to live right with God and to uphold your family ethos. In your choice of friends, you became a sieve. Anyone that could not fit through the pore, you threw out. Even those that seeped through, you further scrutinized. You never joked with going to church, but you did not allow it to encroach on your studies. Each had a fair share of the time you had. When you were introduced to a topic called Abiogenesis, you subscribed to Creationism. You were convinced that the former was a noetic gambit springing from baseless agnosticism whose ultimate intent was peopling Hell. To you, Abiogenesis was porous, confusing, and incredible. It lacked the substance required to explain convincingly how life came about. You strongly held that life was a gift of God, the Maker of all things. In fact, you wouldn't have taken any course hinting otherwise if first-year students were not mandated to take natural sciences that exposed you to that awful topic.

Your determination to live a godly life earned you some contempt. You will never forget a cool evening you were going to Mass at Saint Peter's Chaplaincy, UNN. The streaks of cloud to the west had turned red, a reflection of the red sun whose half had hidden behind the horizon. You had on a white head scarf, a long-sleeved yellow blouse, and an ankle-length floral skirt, your Bible clutched in the left hand against your chest, your neck cocked holily sideways. A twenty-year-old boy returning from Nnamdi Azikiwe Library saw you at Akanu Ibiam Stadium and started cackling. You were going up and he was coming down. As the two of you approached each other, he gibed at you, and you miscalculated your steps and began to move gracelessly as if you had lost control of your legs. You did not know when your Bible slipped. The boy laughed louder and said a beautiful girl like you should not use the Bible to deceive herself while at university. "Grow up, girl," he shouted. "Biblical instructions have become obsolete in our scientific age." You did not talk back. You just picked up the Bible and proceeded to the church, muttering that the devil speaking through the boy would not dissuade you from hearing Father Taddeo Onoyima's forthright homily that evening.

Even your academic seriousness was rewarded negatively by the majority of your classmates. Many of them branded you a triangular student whose whereabouts could always be traced to any of the three locations—the church, library, or hostel. But you never minded the gossips. Their folly was always evident during exams. Then, they would try to curry favour from you. In the exam hall, they would poke their heads to steal from your answers, but you did crook your elbow and splay your fingers on your answer sheet to frustrate their prying eyes. At the end, they would leave the hall bitter with you.

You tried as much as possible to avoid any gathering that could jeopardize your academic success, or portray you as irresponsible. There were many times your roommate Louisa tried to cajole you into joining her sorority, but you felt that their philosophy would

go against your Christian faith, and their activities consume your limited time. She had equally wanted to educate you on how to make money from rich male students, and on how you two could travel to Abuja, the federal capital, at weekends to meet and milk the affluent politicians and other nabobs. She often praised your beauty, saying that your skin was fair, that your height was beyond average, that your shape was very attractive. Such features, she added, coupled with your gaped upper incisors, were what Abuja men crazed for. You needed no one to remind you that she was leading you to Hell. You tried to distance yourself from her, but since she was your roommate, you were unsuccessful. She sometimes showed you the dividends of her romantic adventures, such as money, cosmetics, clothes, shoes, jewellery, and so on; but you did shun them. You knew you would have such things abundantly at the right time.

You were however not insulated from passion. There was one afternoon you felt lonely in your room after your roommates travelled for the weekend. You put on a television brought there by Louisa, and a scene was on where a handsome man was kissing a young woman. Your body gradually became inflamed with erotic feelings, and you wished you had a vibrator or a male student around. In their absence, however, you locked the room, lay on your bunk, and stripped yourself naked. You then began to explore your body with your fingers, and it got to a point that you heard yourself moaning in ecstasy. It was a fleeting moment, but the spasm of pleasure that gushed through your body overwhelmed you, made you gasp with closed eyes. You had never felt anything like that before. When your reasoning came back, you switched off the television and stood wondering what had come over you. The following day, you confided your experience to an elderly woman in your church, thinking that she had a solution. But she laughed and laughed and finally told you that you were not an angel, that it was normal for a healthy girl to feel that way. You didn't think she had told you the truth, so you went to the altar of God and prayed for forgiveness. And days

later, as you thought about that crazy passion, you decided to avoid any close space between you and a male student, for you discovered that you were weak after all.

You finished university without any carryover course. In fact, it was one point that denied you a first-class division. After your one year National Youth Service, you came back to your state, Enugu. It was then time for God to give you a lucrative job as his faithful servant. But did he?

In your job search, you rummaged through newspapers, surfed the Internet, and applied for as many jobs as you could. You waited for a year, the job was not forthcoming. You waited for two years, but it was still nowhere in sight. Then you began to hawk peanuts along the road as you waited for the third year, which also ended like others. You grew desperate. You became tired of hawking. You could not understand how you found it difficult getting a job in your oil-rich country that prided herself as Giant. You became angry with that name. You were however quick to realize that the problem was not with the name, but with those managing the nation's resources. You wished you were among them so you could demonstrate how the resources should be distributed equally, how effective plans should be made and implemented for the benefit of both the present and the future generations.

When it was four years without you being employed, your worries grew into melancholy. You began to see more of your innumerable problems. Although your parents had not asked you to look for your own apartment, you could sense they had such a thought now. You did not blame them; you should have been contributing to their up-keep, the education of your siblings, the payment of the rent. You were ashamed of seeing your family members wearing the same clothes almost every day. But how could you talk about buying them clothes when you could hardly buy any for yourself? You could not even change the two pairs of shoes you had worn for three years. Despite that the elastic of your bras and panties had expired and that your head scarves and stockings had frayed, you still wore them.

You had also become sensitive to your age, thirty-two. You had wanted to get married immediately after graduation, but you realized that you could not say to a man, “Come and marry me.” Even your “brothers in the Lord” in your prayer group did not consider you marriageable. Five of them had gone outside the church and brought in wives. You wondered whether it was your poor clothing that had dispelled them from proposing to you. Thenceforth, you made sure that your wears were always neat before putting them on, but their beauties had died and you would not be able to resurrect them.

When you got a small job at a cybercafé near Old Park, Enugu, you held it like a treasure, even though you knew you were ten times underemployed. You were able to rent a cheap dark room close to a toilet, change some of your clothes and shoes, and buy some for your mother. The job relieved you of hawking peanuts. Unfortunately, it lasted for only four months. You cried hell when you were sacked, and came home sobbing and hissing like a burning snail. Because you could no longer go back to live with your parents, you started selling roast corns and *ube* at night in the street. But this is a business mostly carried out in the rains.

Since after your dismissal, you had gone to many job interviews. One was bank recruitment. The chief interviewer, a man, liked you and said something that made you hopeful. But eventually you didn’t get the job. Another interview at a plastic industry at Onitsha was conducted by three persons, two men and a woman. One of the men later demanded your phone number. Two days later, he called and asked you to meet him at a drinking joint. You refused. He then said you should forget about the job. And you forgot about it. A similar thing happened when you went for a third interview. In that case, the man in charge plainly asked you to be his girlfriend if you would like to have the job. You were sure that the man had married, and judging from the ridges on his face and his curly grey hair, you placed his age at fifty-five. You did not say no there, but when you left, you cursed that

job, all because you wanted to live your life to please God, to uphold your integrity. The other interview at your Local Government was headed by a woman who secretly asked whether you would agree to share your first six-month salaries equally with her if she helped you secure the job. You hesitated before saying yes. The woman perhaps guessed that you would not honour your promise, and so you failed the interview. You saw that woman as a hypocrite, as one of those shouting for women's right when they stood to gain acclaim but who, fearing that they might lose followers, kept silent on issues they should rather speak up against.

As you lie in your bed tonight, Thursday, the twenty-first February, five years after graduation, your mind returns again to how you can launch the legal battle against God. But you must wait until the outcome of your job interview last week in Enugu for the position of an accountant at a paint manufacturing company. The interview went well but you are still apprehensive of the result. The interviewer, a man, wanted to know your religion, and you said Christianity.

“Are you a practising Christian?” he asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“Are you a woman of integrity?”

You scratched your head and said, “I think I am.”

“How can you convince me about that?”

“I think the best way is for you to employ me, and then make your observation.”

The man smiled. “What a clever answer! You will hear from me.”

You liked him and his manner of approach. You also liked his dressing—a black suit and blue-striped tie. Before you left, he exchanged phone numbers with you. Your hope bubbled.

Tonight, while you are in bed, your mind at the interview, he calls and wants to make a date with you on Saturday at Swiss Garden, one of the modern hotels in Enugu with cool and alluring environment. He promises that the job will be yours once you agree to his terms. Truly the man is handsome, tempting, but his request of friendship as a precondition for giving you a job discomfites you, makes you question his moral background. You tell your friend working at Oceanic Bank about the matter, and she uses the cliché: use what you have to get what you want. You understand what she means and you wonder whether it is that philosophy she has used to secure her own job. As you now think about meeting the man, your head feels as if you were carrying a bag of cement. You know the encounter will definitely lead you into eating the forbidden fruit. You are disturbed. What happens if he breaks the promise after panting on you? How can you abandon the teachings of your faith and sleep with a man just because he has promised you a job. But you cannot understand why the teachings of your faith have not provided you with any employment since five years after graduation. Maybe you should meet the man and have the job.

It is the appointed day, a late Saturday morning. The man calls you to confirm whether you will still make it to the hotel, and you reluctantly agree to be there. He thanks you so much and kisses the phone. You love the kiss and wish the man were your husband.

You have had your bath and are now standing before your closet—sorry, wall hanger—for you have no closet. You are looking for the items of clothing to wear, but none is impressive enough. The hard time provides your purse with nothing to enrich your wardrobe. You select a pair of panties, but it has fraying seams. You wonder how you could wear a rag to meet an important personality from a company you intend to work at. Will you have the boldness to take off your clothes before him? Or will you switch off the light before emotions overwhelm both of you? As you hold the panties, tears stream your face, dropping

on your bare breasts, reminding you that they should have by now nursed at least a baby. In anger, you toss the underwear aside, slump on the floor and begin to sob.

Your phone rings again. It is an ash-coloured Nokia phone you bought second-hand. Because of old age, its screen has acquired countless notches that blur any number calling you, and you have fastened its worn back cover with a yellow rubber band. You wipe your tears with your hands and reluctantly pick up the device from the top of your small, rough wooden table.

“Hello,” the man says.

“Hi.”

“Remember the time?”

“I do.”

“Two pm prompt.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Love yooooooooou.” He kisses the phone again.

You look at the clock on your wall. It is five minutes to one. You keep the phone back on the table, stand up, and begin to worry again about the outfit to wear.

At last you choose one. After putting it on, you want to spray perfume on your body, to smell nobly. You are sure that such a thing makes many men esteem a woman. You pick up a short cylindrical can at the corner of the wall, remove the golden cap, and press the valve. No mist comes out. You press it harder, but hear no hiss. You shake the can and discover that the precious liquid has long gone. You sigh and chuck the can into a bin by your door and decide to go without any artificial fragrance heralding your presence. After all, you think, you have no naturally repelling odour. You are about to step out of your room when you remember that you need to go with a handbag. You turn back, go to the wall where you have hung it, and take it out. It is a cheap bag, and to your dismay, its colour has faded. You

also notice its broken handle which you have not yet repaired since five months ago. You have used the bag for three years and two months. You look at the bag steadily and realize you have inadvertently discovered your major weakness—you are stylistically antediluvian. The bag should have been discarded long ago. You however hang it back on the wall and storm out of the room.

Soon, you are on the road, waiting for a taxi.

“Peeee!” a taxi says, slowing as it approaches you.

You wave and it stops.

“Swiss Garden. You know it?”

The driver nods and asks you to get into the car.

Some minutes later, he drops you at a particular junction and points towards a street. Your eyes follow his fingers straight to the hotel.

“That’s it,” he says.

You pay him and turn and stand still. Your eyes go to the hotel again. Its surroundings, with some natural trees in colourful bloom, are appealing, and you have never been to a place like that. You have the urge to rush down to the gate, but you feel being reined. You rather turn to your left and walk straight along the busy road, pretending not to have seen the hotel. After a short distance, you stop. You begin to wonder again why you should spread your legs to a man who is not your husband, who has not even proposed to you. You wonder how you will be relating with him at the company if you are eventually employed. Perhaps he could ask to have you in his office, or even in his car. In short, you will then become an object of sensual gratification at his whims. You start walking back to the junction leading to the hotel. When you get there, you cross it instead of taking your left. After about sixty yards from the junction, you stop again and begin to wonder about the same thing. Then you look at your skirt and blouse. You think they will not impress the man. They

will cheapen you before him. But you realize that if you must change them, if you must begin to look fashionable, you must have a lucrative job. And one is almost at your grasp. You recall your friend's advice: use what you have to get what you want. You turn back and decide to go down to the hotel courageously. You have taken a few strides when your phone rings again. You stop and look at the number. It is the man's.

"I'm waiting for you in Room 104," he says.

"Okay. Be there in a few minutes."

Immediately you finish answering the call, a taxi rushes from behind you and almost knocks you inside a gutter. You jump, but you know you are already late as the vehicle not screeched to a halt a few meters from you. The driver comes out of the car, trembling, thanking God for not running over you and for being able to control the faulty vehicle up to that point. You don't know what to tell the driver. You just see the incident as ominous. Without further hesitation, you call the man at the hotel and tell him that you are not coming.

"What happened?"

"I'm not coming. Simple."

"Why? I've got something special for you?"

"To hell with that!"

You look around. The taxi driver has squatted, peeping underneath his car, the right front tire of which has flattened. Time to go home, you mutter to yourself. You have just escaped another death. The incident reminds you again of God's love at work. You flag down a taxi and get in. You want to switch off your phone, but abruptly think otherwise. Before you reach home, the man gives you five calls, all of which you ignore.

The following day, Sunday, you are expecting his call. You know that your attitude to him lacked refinement. But you are now ready to make amends. You will apologize and have

another date with him. Then you will fulfill his desire and get what you want. Unfortunately, he does not call.

As you hawk soft drinks—your new business—at Peace Mass Park on the next Monday, you feel that something is wrong with your brain. You begin to question the wisdom of your action two days ago. You believe the man would have given you the job had you gone to that hotel and granted his request. You would have soon escaped this demeaning business and found yourself in an air-conditioned office, where you will be shuffling sheets of paper and heaps of files, or pressing a computer. You would have become an accountant of a company. But your scruples, coupled with religionism, have coaxed you back to this dreary trade that leaves you sweating and begging people to buy your goods.

It is another Sunday, a week and two days after you disappointed the man. The time is five-twenty in the morning. You normally go to the morning Mass that starts at six, but today, you want to go sometime later. In fact, you want to remain indoors. Although you can't remember when you ever missed a Sunday Mass as a youth, apart from sometime six years ago when you fell ill, you won't be in church today. If Jesus comes, let him take those who are there. You shut your eyes again to sleep, but your mind becomes restless. You whisk yourself off the mattress and take a bucket of water to the bathroom.

When you come back from church later in the morning, you lock your door and lie on your mattress. Some of your thoughts in the past week begin to spring up, the prominent being how to sue God. You are still consumed in the thought when sleep catches you unawares.

The next Monday morning, you are fagged as if you ran a race in the night. At seven-thirty, you have not yet got up. And you are not sure if you will hawk your drinks today at the

park. You roll from one side of your mattress to another, angry with your Creator. Then comes a phone call that changes your life.

“Who is this?” you ask.

“It’s Mr Jerome of Amitex Paints Limited.”

That is the same man who wanted to have a date with you. But he has used another number.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Meet me at nine this morning exactly at the room you had your interview about two weeks ago.”

You feel you mishear him. “Pardon, sir.”

“Are you not Ms Ifeoma?”

“I am.”

“Then meet me there at nine am.”

“What for?” you ask, even though you wanted to say, “I’ll soon be there.”

“Do what you’ve been told.”

You jump out of your mattress. You are not going to miss this opportunity. Not anymore! This suffering must end. Whatever he demands, you will give to him. If he wants to have you in his office, if he wants it in his car, if he wants it in the most expensive hotel in Enugu, you are now ready. You think of scratching money to buy condoms in case if he has none, but the thought shakes you like an earthquake. You conclude that he must have some.

Mr Jerome is already waiting for you at a desk in the office when you enter. You can see he is more handsome than you think. He is in a white long-sleeved shirt and grey trousers. He has a smooth, long face, and lips set in well-defined arcs. He smoothes his red-spotted tie as you come in.

“Have a seat,” he says.

You sit down and inwardly admire his number two as he dabs his head gently with his left hand. You can’t imagine any other hairstyle more fitting to him than this one.

He brings out a file from the drawer and keeps it on the desk. “Ms Ifeoma Onyekwe, right?”

You nod. His voice appears different today, soft, titillating. It pulls an erotic chord in your heart. Already, you can imagine him on top of you right there at the desk. And you are prepared.

He looks in your face with a steady gaze. “Where do you come from?”

You are uncomfortable with his eyes on you. But you answer his question anyway.

“Awgu, right?” he says.

“Yes, sir.”

He leans back on his black-leathered seat. “How old are you? Forget about the biodata in your file.”

You wonder why the question has come up. “Thirty-three.”

He leans forward and opens the file. You know it is yours and even if he is so much interested in your date of birth there, it is the same with what you have said. He begins to flip through the file, his lips pouted as one whistling. Sharply, he glances up and stares in your face again. You can’t meet his gaze, and so feast your eyes on his broad shoulders.

“Actually,” he says, “I’m from Udi. I was in Britain for six years where I studied Business Administration at both graduate and master’s levels. I received a frantic call from my dad demanding that I return. He is now sixty-two. I wanted to stay abroad for sometime longer, but his insistence that I come back altered my plans. When I returned home, I learnt that my younger brother and only sibling, a twenty-year-old university student, had died as a result of secret cult activities at his school. Dad advised that since he is growing old and he

has no other children, I should stay around and oversee this company. He explained that those managing its finances weren't sincere. I thought about the matter for days before deciding to stay. Within the few months I've been around, I've discovered that my dad did not lie. The chief accountant and some other cashiers have been conniving and defrauding the company. I resolved to look for someone trustworthy as the chief accountant. I've put many people to the test, but none qualified for the job. When you came and told me that you were a woman of integrity, I decided to make a date with you at the hotel to prove your claim. By not meeting me there, you have demonstrated truly that you can be trusted." He picked up an envelope and handed it to you. "It's your employment letter. You start work tomorrow."

You think you are playing a part in a drama. You open your mouth. You close it. You want to say thanks. The words refuse to come out. You want to embrace him. Fear holds you back. You want to jump up, but you think he might feel you have some elements of madness. You bend your face on the desk and shed tears of joy.

The man stands up and taps you on the shoulder. "Come along with me."

You lift your head and get up and follow him through a door that opens to a hallway. He walks towards the extreme and turns left. Shortly, two of you are inside a wide room furnished with elegant office furniture.

"Here is your office," he says.

"Me?" you shout, awed by the coolness and neatness and largeness of the place. "Work here?"

"Yeah. And there is your position." He points to a desk with a beautiful computer. "If you work hard, you will be rewarded handsomely."

The next morning, you are introduced to other relevant members of staff, and afterwards, you head for your office. Once you unlock the door, you look at your faded high heels and feel they may dent the shiny tiled floor. You lift the right leg, tread gently on the

floor, and do the same thing with the other leg, like one skulking. Then you stop and raise your head and see what you were blind to see yesterday because you were unable to choke back tears of joy. On the wall opposite your desk which was on the left hangs a black plasma television, the size of one part of a squarely quartered door. Also hanging on the wall but to your right is an air conditioner. You close the door, move to your desk, sit down, and feel on your buns the downiness of the cushioned seat. The desktop screen stares at you. Since you are not new to handling such a machine, you press the CPU button by the desk and it flashes a blue light. As you turn to the desktop again to complete the booting process, a knock comes on the door. You spring to your feet as if you are committing a crime and are about to be caught in flagrante delicto.

A woman comes in. She could be in her late forties. In her hands is a flowered ceramic tray containing a china cup of coffee and a white plate of sandwich. She places the meal on your desk and says it is all yours. Before she leaves, she points to a fridge by the wall on your left and says you can find cold water there. When she is gone, you take in a long breath and exhale from both your mouth and nose. You can't recall the last time you took this kind of meal, in this kind of room. After eating with relish, you can't help muttering, "This is the type of place I should have been long ago." You belch.

That very morning, you resolve to give in your best, to ensure that the finances of the company are handled with prudence. You begin to draw a plan in your head on how to block any vent for financial mismanagement. You will insist on probity and will never be perturbed should some unscrupulous workers taunt you for your policy.

That week and the next, Mr Jerome gives you some training to help you get acquainted with the way things are done there. You are happy with the exercise; it gives you an insight into the enormous task you are going to face and how you can launch your plan.

Your first salary comes promptly, two days before the end of the month. Even though you started work in the second week of March, nothing is deducted from the pay. Before you get home in the evening, you go shopping at New Market. You buy a new iPhone, iPod, golden wristwatch, some underwear, four pairs of shoes, two handbags, six dresses, many brands of cosmetics, and other things. As you step onto your door, you seem to perceive for the first time the pungency of the toilet; the odour makes your stomach churn. When you enter your room, your eyes move randomly. You know you are not supposed to live there. It is a place for an animal. You notice the cracks on the walls, the rotten wooden window, the sagging ceiling discoloured by the droplets from the leaking roof which you have begged the landlord in vain to repair, the cheap unsupported mattress now flattened almost to the same level with the faded torn carpet that has begun to graze your feet. You keep your shopping-bag on the table, pick up the floor mat, and stuff it into the bin. You have bought a better one. Irritated by the fustiness of the room, you open the bag and take out a bottle of perfume and spray it all around the room. You inhale the sweet smell deeply and exhale. You keep the perfume on the floor, sit on your mattress, and conclude that it is time to move out of this cell. But that will be after your third salary because you will share the present one and the next with your family members.

It is now almost three months you started with the company. Mr Jerome has not made any advances on you, but when he calls you this Friday afternoon and asks you to meet him in his office after work, you know that he has been unable to subdue the embedded animalism in him and that he needs you now as an outlet. What kind of man could do a woman such a favour unconditionally? you reason. Anyhow, you will grant Mr Jerome's request. After all, he is handsome and you have tasted his money. No going back!

But it is not what you have imagined that you see. The man, seated across from you at a desk, scribbles something on a piece of paper, folds it, and hands it over to you. You unfurl it. When you see *Would you be my wife?* written in a blue cursive, your heart lurches.

“I’m very serious about it,” he says, looking in your eyes.

You bend your head forward and start fiddling with your fingers, your eyes moving from your new black suit to your natty black handbag on your laps. You will not say yes right there, even though you have been craving for a husband. You know that no woman hell-bent on maintaining her worth before a man will give an instant affirmative answer to that kind of question, at least in your own generation and part of the world. That will suggest self-devaluation, and the man may back out. Some men like a woman whose love is difficult to win. Such a woman they treasure; such a woman they adore. As you ponder the question, you are able to tell Mr Jerome to give you some time for feedback.

He does.

It is now six months later, but something happened in the immediate past. You got married to Mr Jerome and moved out of your smelly cell. The reception took place at Swiss Garden with many personalities in attendance. Your parents and siblings could not help soaking your wedding gown with tears during your bridal dance, when you and your groom were showered with crisp naira notes by your guests.

As you sit in your office this Monday morning, something is moving in your body. And where? In your womb. And what is that? A baby. You pat your belly with your right hand; you pat it with your left. You close your eyes and smile and smile. You wonder whether your present status is real. But it is.

END

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