

# *While We Watched*

*A Short Story*

*Chichi Uba*

**'While We Watched' (A Short Story)**

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In this very moment, I understand the true essence of raw pain. It's like a slow-burning fire, sparking to life from the depths of my heart and spreading uncontrollably through every fibre of my being. With each fleeting second, its intensity increases, burdening me with a heaviness that threatens to steal the air from my lungs. I sprawl upon the earth, watching in a daze the flames and chaos unfolding before my eyes. Nkechi's shaky hands are on me, sobbing uncontrollably and attempting to lift me, but ends up desperately calling for help. I feel my consciousness slipping away...



You see, Chris wasn't just another chapter in the book of my life; he was the kind of magic that emerged from the chaos of unexpected moments. When I embarked on my university journey, I was armed with a resolution to focus solely on my studies and steer clear of romantic distractions. I resiliently adhered to this commitment throughout my initial two years, skillfully navigating through a sea of advances from men. But with Chris, it was a different story, the delightful brown-skinned six-footer with hero instincts gave my heart no choice.

We met during an all-night study session that turned tragic. Nkechi, my bestfriend and coursemate who would usually go with me to our own department was absent that evening which meant I couldn't go to read at our department. Isabella, one of my roommates, convinced me to join her in the notorious Faculty of Environmental Sciences since she didn't want to be the only lady studying all night in her male-dominated Architecture department. I brought along my dinner of jollof rice and salad, purchased at the campus food village from Mama Ada's neighbour, since Mama Ada my regular vendor, had run out of salad. I couldn't eat jollof rice without salad to save my life, thanks to my mother's pampering. Little did I know that the seemingly innocent salad would later be deemed a grave mistake by the doctor.

Stepping into the fourth-year Architecture department with Isabella around 8pm, I was immediately captivated by the tranquil ambience and the proudly displayed creative architectural designs adorning the walls. Six male students occupied various workstations around the room, each engrossed in his studies. We settled into comfortable positions next to each other. Observing the room, I understood why Isabella insisted I accompany her. The prospect of being the only female here all night, even among familiar faces, would have made me uncomfortable too.

As I stood up to discard the disposable plates in the waste bin by the door after eating an hour later, a majestic figure walked in, his study bag hanging casually from his side. His robust

build and confident gait immediately caught my attention, but I kept a straight face as we passed by each other. Surprisingly, he halted and greeted me with a friendly "hi."

"I doubt I've seen you here before," he remarked somewhat playfully, eliciting a smile from me.

"No, you haven't. I came with a friend," I replied, gesturing toward Isabella. There was something about his presence that made me instantly at ease with him.

"That's nice. I'm Chris."

"Mabel."

"Hope you're having a good time in our department?"

"I am. Thanks."

He gave me a thumbs-up and proceeded inside.

After a while, hushed sounds started emanating from my left. I turned and saw two students gathered around Chris. From what looked like a spread of architectural drawings in front of them, he was explaining some design concepts to them. They were making an effort not to distract the rest of us. Curious, I leaned in and asked Isabella about him. With a knowing smile, she shared in a hushed tone that he was their course representative, consistently re-elected since their second year, and regarded as the brightest individual in their department. I was impressed, then made the *mistake* of glancing in his direction again. And for some reason, he looked up too. Our eyes met briefly, and I quickly returned my gaze to my book.

At about midnight, I began to feel unwell. It felt like countless sharp pins were stabbing at my stomach. My bowels churned as if they were determined to expel their contents through my mouth. I signaled to my stomach when Isabella noticed my discomfort and asked what was going on, before rushing out to vomit as I couldn't help myself. Fortunately, I had grabbed a plastic bag on my way out, preventing any mess in the hallway.

Isabella hurriedly joined me outside, alarmed by my sudden illness. As we deliberated on the best course of action, worrying that it was too late to leave by ourselves, Chris emerged and asked what the issue was. I explained stutteringly that it must be the food I ate a few hours ago, as I felt fine when we left the hostel. He recommended that I go to the clinic, as there was no way to predict if the situation would persist through the night. He volunteered to accompany us and got his friend Collins, to come along. With my limbs already feeling like jelly, Chris gently guided me, his sturdy frame providing support as I leaned involuntarily on him.

The walk to the clinic was torturous. I vomited again along the way, cold sweat breaking out over me, and teetered on the brink of unconsciousness. At that point, Chris had to carry me in his arms and hurried as fast as he could. I must have blacked out eventually, for when I opened my eyes again, I was lying on a plain blue-sheeted hospital bed. The typical sterile smell of medication and disinfectants invaded my nostrils, and I could feel the cool flow of intravenous fluids coursing through my veins. As I fully took in my surroundings, I gently tapped Isabella,

who was sound asleep with her head resting on the edge of my sick bed. Her eyes lazily came to life, and she jolted upright as recollection set in.

"*Ah babe, you wan give person high BP?*" she launched at me with hands folded above her head and eyes about to pop out of their sockets.

"What really happened to me?" I asked as I recollected events of the previous night.

Isabella still kept looking unbelievably at me. "The doctor said it was food poisoning. Likely your jollof and salad of last night. I just thank God that you are okay," she said, sighing in relief.

"Yeah, me too," I said gratefully, resolving never to patronize Mama Ada's neighbour ever again.

I inquired about Chris and his friend, and she informed me they left after I was admitted. Surprisingly, the two friends returned to check on us before I was discharged in the evening. I felt touched; they really didn't have to go the extra mile.

"Thank you so much," I said to Chris, and then to Collins, my eyes conveying my wish for better words. Chris simply smiled and said he was glad I was doing alright.

A week later, Chris called me up, mentioning he got my number from Isabella. He asked if I could meet him at Upgate, the nickname for the off-campus area opposite the university, at a reputedly cozy restaurant called New Dawn. I agreed and we arranged to meet the next evening.

My heart began concocting ideas. I must confess that thoughts of him had lingered in my mind since the day we first met. I pondered the kindness he showed me, a total stranger. I warned myself not to get too excited though, as any perceived connection during our encounter might have been nothing more than my imagination. My commitment to avoid romantic entanglements in school came staring me in the face.

"It's a date!" Nkechi enthusiastically exclaimed as I told her about Chris's call.

"No it's not," I said dismissively, despite my heart wanting her words to be true.

"Keep deceiving yourself," she laughed.

For this supposed date, Nkechi chose a modest ensemble of high-waisted black jeans paired with a flowery top, and a multicolored pair of sandals to compliment the top. She expertly styled my braided hair into a central bulb, allowing a few strands to gracefully drop down on the left side of my oval-shaped face, covering a bit of my eye. "As you guys talk *eh*, occasionally use your fine hand to push back the strands from your eye. Flirting 101," she instructed playfully and I rolled my eyes, laughing hard. With a subtle touch of makeup, she accentuated my facial features, completing the look. I protested when I admired her finished work in the full-length mirror, feeling overdressed, given it's a mere Upgate outing. Her respond was sharp, "Not on my watch will you go for that date looking like you're going to buy pepper outside."

I stepped into the New Dawn restaurant feeling a bit self-conscious, but all that disappeared as soon as I saw him. The beautiful flowers, artwork, and unique lighting infused the restaurant with an intimate and homely ambience. However, it was Chris, resplendent in his body-fitted white shirt, with a broad and appreciative smile gracing his face, who truly caught my eye. He

stood as I drew nearer, greeted me with a half-embrace, exclaiming, "You look ravishing," and courteously pulled out a chair for me. Bless Nkechi for her efforts; I would have been damned if I came before this man looking any less elegant, given how intentionally well-dressed he appeared.

I apologized for not getting his number and calling first, considering I was the recipient of his favour. He brushed it off, insisting that God only used him as an instrument of His mercy that night.

"Thank you still. You are a good man," I said sincerely. "You've made me reconsider my perception of Environmental Science students."

"Don't call me a good man, just yet. None is good except the Father," he winked. "And don't tell me you were one of those that thought students of my faculty are all cultists, drug addicts, womanizers, you name it." His eyes held a blend of accusation and playful teasing.

"Maybe a little guilty as charged," I replied, feeling a sense of shame.

"Get ready, we'll sacrifice you to the gods," he laughed and I laughed with him.

Conversations flowed so easily between us; it was as though we had known each other since the beginning of time. The more we talked, the more we realized we had so much in common. At intervals, he would pause and just gaze at me, his mesmerizing deep brown eyes sparkling with warmth and appreciation; I eventually had to playfully give him a look of gentle rebuke.

"I'm sorry, I can't help it," he laughed. "You look beautiful in an angelic way." Then, with his eyes seeking permission, he took my hands in his. "Would you do me the honour of being my girl?"

My heart raced out of my chest, ran a quick hundred meters' sprint in joy and returned, but my outward self was calm and just gave him a shy smile.

His eyes urged me to say something.

"I made a decision to concentrate on my studies while I am here; love can come later," I said, swallowing uneasily. "I like you, but I don't want to get distracted."

"Tell me about it," he laughed. "I had the exact same resolve. Trust me, I'm not just saying this to impress you. This is my fourth year here; I have not asked any girl out in this institution, and I have no girl anywhere else. There's something about you; I'm drawn to you like a magnet. I have tried to fight it, but I have come to accept that it's not a battle I can or even want to win."

He proceeded to tell me that it had been plain torture for him over the last week, as he thought about me all through. He explained that from the moment he set his eyes on me in his department that first night, he felt his spirit drawn to me. The events of the rest of the night convinced him even more. He was pleased that I was focused and promised that if I let him into my world, he would make it worth my while and wouldn't lead me astray.

The sumptuous meal and wonderful conversations with Chris left my heart merry as we came out of the restaurant. I looked up in the beautiful sky with dancing clouds and just felt like taking a stroll.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Chris asked in astonished delight.

“And what are you thinking?” I asked, suppressing my smile; unwilling to just accept that we saw things through the same lens.

He smiled and extended his hand to me, “Shall we?”

From the New Dawn axis, we walked through the busy network of shops and people at Ugate to the Y-junction and onto the pedestrian sidewalk of the major road.

Uturu, a quaint village on the outskirts of Abia State was also the proud host of the state's university. As you approached it from Okigwe, its nearest town, a Y-junction emerge, presenting a choice between two diverging worlds. The right path beckoned toward the bustling university, a hub of academia and ambition; while the left meandered its way to the core of Uturu village, a realm steeped in tradition. Beyond the academic fervor, Uturu revealed a quiet charm. The village felt like a canvas for nature's masterpiece—the undulating lush landscape, stretching as far as the eyes can see until it seemed to sweetly kiss the heavens, left visitors in awe. Okigwe is a fifteen-minute drive from the university on a solitary road, through these awe-inspiring natural scenes. Students, driven by either a lack of interest or insufficient accommodation in the campus hostels, resided in various areas—Ugate, the immediate surroundings outside the university premises; while others ventured into the heart of Uturu village itself, a mere ten-minute drive from campus; or in bustling Okigwe town.

We walked leisurely, looking towards Okigwe, taking in and discussing the generous beauty of mother nature, and made our way back before the pale tint orange sun fully disappeared beyond the horizon.



That was how my beautiful love story with Chris Obiaku began. Nkechi was thrilled for me. She was yet to meet Chris, but was convinced that a guy that would make me ditch my no-campus-dating rule, was worth his weight in gold. Unlike me, Nkechi was a far more outgoing person and loved to play mother hen with me and other people she cared about; a trait she developed as first child with four siblings. She, of course, didn't have a no-campus-dating rule like I did, but was yet to meet someone who really tickled her fancy.

Isabella, my hostel mate and Chris's coursemate, was shocked when I informed her Chris asked me out. “*Eh*, the Chris I know? The one we are starting to suspect might be gay?” She clapped her hands in disbelief and I just stood there laughing. “*Which baba do this juju for you like this?*” And then a sudden realization struck her, “*Wait oh, babe, na me run this connect oh! Oya, come and pay your tithe*,” she teased, chasing me around, trying to grab my purse.

As time went by, Chris became my defender, inspiration and role model. At twenty-five, he was such a loving and God-fearing gentleman and exuded a confidence and maturity beyond his age. Our relationship flourished, and we achieved our set targets for our first academic year together.

Chris spent his holidays in Lagos while I spent mine in Enugu. Typically, we didn't get to see each other during the holidays due to the distance, but the phone and the internet ensured we kept up with each other's daily affairs.

Our final year came with the expected excitement of becoming graduates soon. Statistics was a four-year course, which meant graduating same time with Chris, whose course was five years. Beyond academics, Chris often talked about his desire to get married as soon as possible, and wished for a large family. As an only child, he said his mom was already breathing down his neck about it. He introduced me to her as his girlfriend and always ensured that I spoke with her whenever we were together and she called; once was on a video call. She was a soft spoken woman with kind eyes, the type I wanted for a mother-in-law. And she called me “beautiful”.

On a particular Sunday evening in our second semester, I relaxed to watch a movie in Chris's room. He was in the kitchen, whipping up smoothies for us. He had a penchant for healthy drinks and insisted that I relax while he took care of it. After all, I had braved the scorching sun at the open market to handpick the fruits and vegetables on my way to his place.

I loved the peaceful atmosphere of his room, especially compared to my crowded campus room of sixteen roommates; no thanks to my parents who believed that campus was the safest place for a female student. I ran my eyes over the room, admiring the way Chris aesthetically arranged it, with both functionality and space in mind. A workstation at the left end doubled as a dining area, with his mini-library situated above it. On the right end, was an inbuilt wardrobe overlooking an average-sized bed, always neatly made. A lone sofa leaned on his middle wall; sitting on it, you would directly be looking at his 42-inch television screen and a fine arrangement of sound gadgets. Two framed paintings adorning the walls, and a big flower vase at the right corner, added just the right touch of nature to the off-white-colored room. My beloved was a man of means, but he never let it get to his head.

Chris joined me on the sofa with our smoothies, and I couldn't help but smile as I sipped from my glass. What couldn't this man do well?

“Say it,” he tickled me continuously, as I kept looking at him and smiling.

“You are the best there is and the best there is to come,” I flattered, almost breathless from laughing so hard, but my eyes were filled with deep appreciation for this amazing man. When he stopped laughing and looked at me, I knew he read me right. He put aside our glasses and took my hands in his, opening up his heart to me in a manner he hadn't before. Chris desired a luxurious, peaceful and happy future, with God at the centre. He valued family above all else and understood exactly the qualities of the woman he wanted by his side as he journeyed his life's path.

“I hope I am not dreaming this alone?” he asked, the love and seriousness in his eyes sending my heart racing.

*Is this a proposal?* I wondered.



Our eyes locked in a silent exchange, mine searching deeply, seeking answers that our hearts already understood. His innate ability to communicate with me in this unspoken language defined our special relationship.

“No, you are not, my love,” I assured. While he spoke, it felt like he was reading from my wish list.

With eyes beaming with pride and love, he planted a kiss on my forehead like he would usually do, then quite unexpectedly, proceeded to my lips and gave me a passionate, breathtaking kiss, for the first time.

“I’m so sorry babe, I got carried away...” he started apologizing as he saw my surprised, mesmerized expression. But I silenced him with a finger on his lips and pulled him back to me. His lips were almost on mine when he raised his head to look at me, fire in his eyes as he struggled for self-control.

“Are you sure? I’m afraid I may not be able to hold myself back if things get ...”

“Stop talking,” I responded with a mischievous smile, biting my lower lips seductively.

“Whoa! See my sassy girl. Where did this *you* come from?” He smiled and looked adoringly at me. With his right hand, he pulled back the strands of hair covering part of my left eye. “Mabel, I love you. I have never said this to any woman before. I wish I could open up my heart so you see exactly how I feel about you. I am yours.”

“I am yours too, Chris. I love you,” I responded, meaning every word.

He started to plant kisses all over my face and neck, gentle passionate kisses; each kiss a pledge of his love, sending shivers down my spine. I knew that this man loved me; every action of his, from the first time we met, had proved that. I surrendered to the feelings flooding my being, to the gentleness of his touch. When his lips touched mine again, it was a conflagration. He managed to pull back and searched my eyes one more time, and at my nod, lifted me gently to the bed. In this enchanting moment, I willingly surrendered not just my virginity, but also my pride.

The next morning and throughout the day, I ignored Chris’s calls, not bothering to reply any of his texts or chats. Without any lectures on this particular Monday, I stayed back in my hostel, making it even more challenging for him to see me since it was a female hostel, and males were allowed in only at specific hours. Even at that, Chris would never enter the female hostel. He was not one to take the chance of the embarrassment of half-naked ladies walking about in their space. Nkechi and Isabella separately informed me later in the evening that he was outside looking for me, but I paid them no attention and didn’t explain why.

What happened between us was purely consensual; it didn't feel right that I should be punishing the young man. I needed to clear my head and didn't want him to complicate things. Now that the euphoria of last night had worn off, the guilt of going against my Christian moral upbringing had finally set in. Worse yet, while I felt relatively confident that Chris loved me, a part of me wondered if things between us would change now that we’ve had sex. An annoying

voice in my head insisted he had merely played the nice guy card to get here. I decided it was better to walk away than to let him jilt me first; or worse, remain in the relationship, normalize premarital sex, and have to deal with this kind of guilt all the time.

At about 8:30pm, I was headed to food village when I heard my name from behind me. It was unmistakably Chris. I hadn't expected him to hang around my hostel till that hour. My heart sank at the hurt in his voice, just from the mention of my name. What a terrible day he must have had. This guy wasn't the monster I had made him out to be in my head; I really should have known better.

I stopped, but didn't turn around. Chris came over and took my hand, leading me off the road.

“Look at me, baby,” he said lifting my face. “I totally understand. I am sorry, I failed you.”

“It's not your fault,” I corrected, lowering my gaze.

“I take all the blame still. I know you, I should have known you will beat yourself up this way afterwards. I got carried away. I am sorry.” Raising my face and looking deeply in my eyes, he said, “Next time you'll see me naked would be on our wedding night, I promise.”

His sincerity was palpable. Overwhelmed, I broke down in tears and hugged him tightly. “I'm sorry that I doubted you. I love you so much,” I whispered over his shoulders.

He held me for a while, then gently released me and wiped my tears with his palm. “Promise me that we'll always talk anything over before you take any rash action.”

The hurt in his eyes cut through my heart. “I promise.”

He considered me for a while, perhaps to be sure I fully understood the promise I just made, then planted a slow kiss on my forehead. Feeling lighthearted, I looked up at him, a knowing mischievous smile playing on my lips.

“Your lips are off limits now,” he winked at me. Whispering in my ears, he continued, “I don't want to awaken your wild side; we might end up doing it right here on this road. And then, like since the history of Adam, I will have to take the fall for it.” With a playful grin, he dashed off, his hearty laughter echoing in the air, and I followed in hot pursuit.

True to his word, Chris made no further sexual advances towards me. We consciously limited our private times together and found humorous ways to diffuse any sexual tensions between us. Our bond deepened with each passing day, and I felt grateful for a love that made me feel whole and safe. I must have done something good in my past life to be blessed with the gift of such an amazing man.

Then, in a very interesting turn of events, my period decided to play hide and seek with me, sending me into a panic. I had never been late, and I just knew. Still, I did a pregnancy test to confirm. Chris, to his credit, embraced the unexpected twist with the grace of a seasoned tightrope walker. But he wouldn't be Chris if he missed an opportunity to tease the hell out of me.

“One touch, and voila, you are pregnant,” he teased, his mischievous smile in full bloom. “I did say I wanted a large family; still I have to be careful with you, this woman, before you overly make this wish a reality.”

On a regular day, I would banter back without a second thought, but this wasn't a regular day. Sensing this, the love returned in his gentle eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked sweetly.

I nodded, my expression uncertain.

“We're in this together,” he assured me, his hand gently resting on my flat stomach, accompanied by his characteristic forehead kiss. “Let's go have dinner. With the way you are like this, I doubt you've had anything to eat all day.” He pulled me up, embraced me warmly and led me out.



Today unfolded like any other on campus. Excitement and trepidation blended within me, concealing the secret held deep in my heart. We had two weeks until the start of our final exams. As things stood now, I couldn't wait to be done and be off the campus. As we prepared for an early lecture, more like a final revision class for a four-unit course, not even Nkechi is privy to the tumultuous thoughts in my mind. While my inner self grapples with uncertainty, the external me wore a facade of smiles and whistles. Nkechi observed me with a quizzical look, shaking her head at my seemingly happy countenance.

Leaving the morning bustle of the female hostel behind, Nkechi and I made our way to our department, eager to secure front seats for the revision class. She engaged me in conversations during our walk, but my thoughts were preoccupied with Chris. He hadn't called to say “hi” this morning, breaking from his routine. I knew it was a bombshell I dropped on him last night. He must be worried; who in his shoes wouldn't be? He did his best not to show it though, and I reciprocated by not asking any questions, just yet. Since he hadn't called, I decided not to call him either. He needed time to think, and so did I.

With an hour to spare before our lecture, Nkechi and I settled down to study in the relatively quiet class. Some moments later, distant chaotic sounds emanating from the direction of the university's main gate put us on high alert. The subsequent noise compelled us to pack up immediately, as it became apparent that something was seriously wrong.

We rushed out of the department, so did other students from all other departments within our faculty and other faculties around us, panic on our faces. We were greeted with an alarming scene—angry youths chanting war songs and wielding an array of weapons were marching in from the university's central walkway towards the faculties and destroying everything in sight as they moved. Still trying to process the scene, Nkechi dragged my hand and we fled alongside other students in an opposite direction from the hoodlums.

Chris's call came through in the chaos, luckily we were relatively out of the hot spots, so I picked up.

"Babe, where are you?" he demanded fiercely.

"Running for my life", I told him and gave him details.

He instructed me to stay within the campus, preferably in the hostel which should be safer, as Ugate has also been under attack. That was impossible since the hoodlums had taken over the hostel route, so I told him we joined other students headed to the mountain.

"Please, be careful. You know you have to be, right?"

"I sure do," I responded with the much tenderness my circumstance allowed me muster. This man never stopped making my heart melt by how he talked to me, even in the middle of a crisis.

"Don't lose your phone baby," he pleaded through clenched teeth.

I imagined his frustrated helplessness as he spoke and promised I wouldn't. After asking about Nkechi and promising to come get us as soon as Ugate was less chaotic, he hung up.

I met Nkechi's gaze, and in her eyes I saw a reflection of the fear that I felt. Together, we hastened up, striving to match the hurried steps of other students. Then suddenly, screams emanated from students ahead of us who had rounded off the faculty of Environmental Science building, hoping to take the tarred road through the clinic to the mountain side, as they encountered another batch of hoodlums. This time, we all fled in different directions. I didn't let go of Nkechi's hand.

About two hours later, after running from pillar to post, narrowly missing direct contact with the hoodlums, being hit by flying objects or trampled upon by other fleeing students, we arrived at the foot of the mountain, at the far end of the campus. The area had a humid feel because of a nearby spring. It also had rich-green carpet grasses and we collapsed on them from exhaustion. This spot, often visited for picnics, provided a temporary refuge for us, the first batch of students that arrived and more students that kept trooping in. The male students took charge, their anger and determination written on their faces as they used tree branches to barricade the area, ready to engage the strange youths in whatever form they wanted if they dared to come here.

I finally learnt the story of the day: the attackers were youths from the university host community, Uturu, possibly aided by friends and sympathizers from neighboring communities. Their motivation stemmed from the death of a young *illustrious son of the soil*, who was also a non-academic staff member of the university. His corpse was found in the bushes along the main road between the university and the Uturu community three days ago. The villagers firmly believed that cult members from the university were responsible for his death, fueling their desire for vengeance. The rumours had it that the night before, they held a village meeting and sent out their youths on that morning to wreak havoc.

During our desperate run for safety, we witnessed the wanton destruction of the university buildings and properties. Students who were unfortunate to get in the way of the hoodlums,

got thoroughly beaten. Business owners just opening up for the day, hastily locked up their shops, and sort refuge. The surprise attack and their overwhelming number gave the hoodlums a significant advantage. Amid the chaos, questions ran through my mind: Where was the police? Where was the university security? How could this madness be going on for hours without any intervention?

We remained hidden for another hour, cautiously emerging when the surroundings appeared to be calm. Hunger pangs and dizziness started calling my name, but I kept my complaints to myself, holding onto Nkechi for support. I wondered what was happening with Chris. He had called again in the heat of the chaos. When I asked about the situation at Upgate, he called it pure insanity, and urged me to concentrate on being safe. We were relatively safe now, but his phone was no longer reachable. I tried not to worry too much, convincing myself it was likely just network congestion.

Surveying the surroundings as we came back to main campus, I was astonished by the massive destruction. Cut tree branches and sticks were littered everywhere. Windows of faculty buildings and lecture halls had their glasses shattered or hanging precariously on one side. The screens of the ATMs I passed were all shattered. None of the hoodlums were in sight; only disheveled students, going about in a state of shock. Nkechi and I joined the mass of students heading towards the gate—better to leave now before another chaotic episode unfolded. I'd feel a lot better when in Okigwe.

Upgate bustled with activities as students poured out from various private hostels and the campus gate, hoping to find vehicles to Okigwe, but none was in sight. More destruction of the surroundings was apparent, but I had no time to take it all in. We learnt that the hoodlums had taken to the Uturu village route. Instinctively, most students took to the Okigwe route, walking briskly. I couldn't bring myself to join them, not without Chris. Despite Nkechi's attempts to persuade me otherwise, she joined me as we sprinted towards Emerald Hostel, Chris's residence.

Chris was not in his room and his phone remained unreachable. His hostel was in disarray, with things littered about and various building surfaces damaged. The entire place was eerily empty, intensifying my worry. Balancing concern for Nkechi, who understandably was eager to escape the surroundings, with my determination to find Chris, we joined the exodus to Okigwe while scanning the crowd for any sign of him.

Ahead, students struggled to cram themselves into any vehicle that came through. The atmosphere though still tinged with caution, seemed no longer charged with immediate threat, so we chose to continue with our tired walk, rather than get hurt in the bus struggle. Suddenly, commotion erupted behind us, and the sound of running feet filled the air. *What now?* I was at my breaking point. I pulled Nkechi to the side of the road, yielding to those with the strength to run. I expressed my fatigue to her in a manner that told her not to bother persuading me. She'd always been the physically stronger of the two of us, but I could tell from her questioning look that she knew this was no mere fatigue issue with me.

"Where is Chris? I am carrying his baby", I blurted out desperately.

"Mabel!" She hushed my name, staring at me in horror but barely had time to process the information when Helen, a colleague of Chris who knew we were dating, rushed past. Breathless and pointing backwards, she called out to us, "Chris, they have Chris!"

It took a moment for Helen's message to register, but as it did, my feet started to run instinctively against the human traffic, Nkechi in pursuit. The students gave way to me as I approached, understanding that a toad does not run in daytime for nothing.

I gasped for breath as I arrived the Y-junction. Gathered there were onlookers who, clearly terrified and ready to flee, had their eyes fixed on a scene playing out some distance ahead. The hoodlums, lost in a dance of chaos, reveled amidst the crowd, brandishing their weapons in a sinister circle.

*Where were they holding Chris?*

I forged through the onlookers, my heart pounding in my chest, then it stopped altogether as the dancing mob circled out widely and I saw him.

*Oh my God!*

Chris was in my direct line of sight—stark naked, his flaccid penis dangling between his legs in full glare of onlookers, as he staggered helplessly. His enviably sculpted masculine physique, which usually radiated strength and agility, was battered, covered in sandy dust and dripping blood from almost all points. Staggering between his assailants, desperately seeking an escape route, he was still being beaten mercilessly with all manner of weapons. Another unfamiliar male, tall and robust like Chris, endured the same brutal treatment. Their assailants seemed to find amusement in their helpless struggle.

Time froze as I stared in disbelief, unable to comprehend the brutality happening before my own eyes. "The next time you see me naked would be on our wedding night", he had said to me. Overwhelmed, I collapsed to the ground, letting out a loud cry that drew eyes in my direction. How did this happen? I needed to wake up from this nightmare.

I snapped out of my dejection almost immediately. This was my Chris; what could I do to help my beloved? With some machete-wielding guys as shield for those behind with Chris, I wondered how to get close to him. What could I achieve alone?

I scanned for the police or any authority figure to assist, but found none. I couldn't understand how this level of madness would be happening on a university premises and no help whatsoever was forthcoming? Turning to the crowd, desperation in my eyes, I jumped and shouted hysterically, "Help! Save them! Somebody help!" My voice was drowned by the hoodlums' victory chants, but that didn't stop me. Though sympathetic glances were thrown my way, nobody made any real move to help.

Two sympathizers started talking by my left. One was blaming Chris and the other student for being cultists and killing the Uturu indigene. He didn't feel sorry for the extreme measures taken against them, but was only worried about me, who may be their relation or lover going

through the pain of watching them being manhandled this way. The other fellow with him instantly rebuked him, saying no, the young men being tortured weren't cultists, but innocent residents of Emerald Hostel, whose only crimes were resisting the village youths from attacking their hostel. They were only unfortunate to be used as scapegoats as the Uturu youths were already bent on blood for blood.

I closed my eyes as I immediately understood what must have transpired that got Chris in this situation. Knowing him, I couldn't even ask him not to be the hero he was, as protecting and defending those he knew and cared about was ingrained in his DNA. If only heroism didn't come at such a huge price! He defended others, somebody should come through for him in his time of need too, right? I jumped and shouted even more hysterically, "Help! Save them! Somebody help!"

A group of brave individuals, including two familiar faces from Chris's department and Collins, approached from the opposite side of where I stood, ready to confront the outwardly positioned machete-wielding guys. I wasn't certain whether their response was prompted by my hysterical pleas or if it was part of a pre-existing plan. The face-off took a dark turn when, after a brief, heated negotiation, the hoodlums menacingly raised their weapons, forcing the individuals into a hasty retreat. Hope dwindled within me, crushed under the weight of their courageous yet futile effort. Exhaustion and heartbreak threatened to overwhelm me, but I refused to succumb to the encroaching faintness.

Then the worst happened. Like the chilling climax of a horror movie, Chris and the other student were bound together back to back with a firm rope, their hands fastened by their sides. It took about eight men to restrain them, as they struggled desperately with their last strength. In the blink of an eye, two tyres appeared and the bigger tyre was placed around their necks. Understanding the gruesome implication of this ritual, I started screaming on top of my voice, akin to a madwoman, dared to inch closer to the ruthless hoodlums in protest, but they chased me back with their weapons.

Chris who had his head bowed resignedly, probably saying his last prayers, raised his head and turned in my direction at that moment. The agony evident in his bloodshot eyes as he looked at me, pierced through my soul. I fell brokenly to the ground, overwhelmed with indescribable grief, my outstretched hand reaching out as if I could bridge the cruel distance between us. The moment of sorrow was abruptly interrupted when one of his assailants, sensing what was going on, hit him on the leg with a heavy stick. Chris tumbled violently, dragging the other student down with him. Their painful screams echoed through the chaos, resonating within my own body.

In a surreal daze, I watched as a plastic container was callously opened, and the acrid smell of fuel permeated the air as it was poured over them. The ominous flicker of a lighter followed, and the ascent of bright yellow flames and thick dark smoke to the skies signaled the culmination of it all - my Chris was being burnt alive! How I managed to keep breathing in that

moment remained a mystery. The world around me blurred into slow motion as I sprawled upon the earth, certain that my heart had just been mercilessly torn from my chest.

The sounds of swift footsteps filled the air as people started running again, but I couldn't care less; my entire world was confined to the harrowing scene before me. Amidst the chaos, the acrid, charred, metallic stench of burning flesh assaulted my senses, the flames still licking hungrily at what was once the vibrant essence of my beloved. Denial clawed at my mind as I grappled with the horrifying truth, suffocating beneath a wave of despair.

Somehow, Nkechi found me. I knew from the tender hands that held me. We had lost touch earlier in the commotion. Her sobs and desperate calls for help echoed in my ears as she tried to pull me from the ground I had planted myself. Eventually, stronger arms carried me up; I dozily saw it was Collins. I felt weightless, and the idea of dying seemed oddly welcoming. How could they be so brutally murdered, *while we watched* and did nothing?



I woke up screaming from a bad dream where Chris was lynched and found myself on a hospital bed, my hands held tenderly by Nkechi and Collins.

“Where am I? Where’s Chris?” I asked breathlessly, but my two friends persuaded me to calm down, that I was safe.

“I’ll get the doctor,” Nkechi said in unsteady voice and disappeared from the ward, her hand over her face.

I turned to Collins who couldn’t look me in the eye.

“I wasn’t having a bad dream, was I? Chris is gone.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, tears streaming down his face, “I truly am.”

The horrible incident of Chris’s murder all came back to me, but I couldn’t even cry. Collins elaborated on how Chris rallied the men in their hostel during the Upgate destruction spree by the hoodlums, urging them to unite in safeguarding their people. Together, they fortified their gate and strategically positioned themselves, armed with whatever makeshift weapons they could find. Despite their valiant efforts, the hoodlums when they encountered resistance at Emerald Hostel, called for backup from the rest of their crew attacking other hostels, and became of overwhelming number. They pulled down the gate, and overpowered the male students after an intense struggle. Chris and Ben, the other student tragically killed alongside Chris, were swiftly identified as the formidable figures in the group. Thirsty for blood as a perverse form of vengeance, the hoodlums singled them out, beat them into submission, and dragged them away as scapegoats. Stripped of their clothes, they were paraded through the roads of Upgate to Uturu, amidst heavy beatings. They were eventually brought back to Upgate, to the Y-junction, where they faced the horrifying fate of lynching. While all these happened, the police, who had their post a few meters from the Y-junction, whether out of conspiracy, nonchalance or lack of sufficient manpower, did little or nothing to stop the disaster.



Weakened but resolute after these details, I summoned the courage to call Chris's mom. Thankfully, her husband was with her, I gave him the heartbreaking news instead. The shattered parents flew in from Lagos to the East the next day. Collins, Nkechi and I waited to receive them at Okigwe, but only Collins proceeded to the university with them, as I was in such a bad shape. I then left for my family home in Enugu.

In the three days since my return home, not even my mother could coax me out of my room. I mustered the strength to share the basics with my parents: a riot erupted in school involving the villagers and students, resulting in the tragic death of two students. Consequently, the school had been indefinitely closed.

As the only child, I had grown accustomed to the warmth of their pampering. However, my tears and self-imposed isolation tested their patience, especially since I remained silent about why I felt profoundly affected by the tragedy at school. I could sense my mother's desperation; she had tirelessly attempted to break through my emotional barricade without success.

A week went by quickly, yet little changed with me. I simply stared blankly and cried all day. Ah Chris! I could still see his handsome face, his charming smile, the adoring look he gave me. He was gone, gone forever. All that remained were memories; memories that brought both laughter and tears. Who could ever love and pamper me, or speak as sweetly as Chris did to me? With him by my side, I had confidence that the journey ahead, though daunting, was bearable. What was I supposed to do with my life now? If a good man like Chris could be cut down in his prime, in such a gruesome manner, what then was the meaning of life?

Nkechi called frequently. That lady had been far too kind to me. I sometimes felt like I would never be able to fully measure up to the standard of care she brought to our friendship. She asked to come over and stay some days with me, but I declined, because I was yet to break the news of my personal tragedy to my parents. Collins also stayed in touch as best as he could. My mom's patience was wearing thin; I could sense it. She had been covering up with my dad regarding my need for space, but had told me she didn't know how long she would be able to keep up the act, so best I spilled the beans on whatever was going on. I usually confided in her about my life issues, but this particular news weighed too heavily on my lips.

I welled up with fresh tears as my mom brought my dinner to my room. Now she'd had it. She was about to go call my dad when I pleaded with her not to, that I wanted to talk to her alone. Relieved that I was becoming reasonable, she agreed and sat beside me on the bed, gently caressing my hair, her kind eyes urging me to speak freely.

I looked at her, my lips trembling, wondering how she was going to take the news. "I'm pregnant, Mom. Chris, my boyfriend, was one of those killed in school." The words spilled out before I lost my composure. My mom's expression morphed from eyes widening and mouth agape, to a blank, vacant stare. I couldn't discern which revelation left her more stunned—the new life growing within me or the tragic death of Chris. While my mom had some knowledge of Chris, I never conveyed the depth of our relationship. Pregnant? She probably would have vouched that I was still a virgin. How disappointed she must be.

"Your dad must hear this, and now! You'll not send me to an early grave, Mabel," she said after recovering from her shock, standing up to obviously go get my dad.

"Mom, please; he'll kill me," I pleaded desperately.

"You should have considered that earlier," she retorted, closing the door behind her. Left alone, my only instinct was to retreat into the bathroom and shut the door.

I couldn't bear to face my dad; dark thoughts began to creep into my mind. *Jump through the bathroom window! Use the broken tile beneath the washbasin and slit your wrist! Fill up the bathtub and drown yourself in it!*

I shuddered from these evil thoughts. How could I break my parents' hearts that way? How do I explain to my God that I committed suicide? Chris fought dearly for his life and here I was contemplating to willfully take mine? Fresh tears flowed down my cheeks as I remembered how badly he fought to live, most probably thinking about me, his parents and especially our baby on the way, only having gotten my pregnancy news a night before his murder. I thought about the dinner we had afterwards that night, at New Dawn, and how really sweet he was to me. How he adamantly insisted on walking me to my hostel on campus despite it was getting late, dismissing any suggestion of me hopping on a bike as usual: he was already thinking of our baby. And what an enchanting stroll it was. Intertwining my hand with his as we walked the smoothly tarred campus paths, the bright stars bearing witness to our love, he met the questions in my eyes with an adoring smile, creating a bubble of warmth within me. How would I have known that it was going to be the very last beautiful moment I would spend with him? Unfortunately, life gave no advance notices. I firmly resolved to face any circumstances to keep his legacy.

My parents entered my room together. From the bathroom, I overheard my dad asking my mom about my whereabouts.

"I left her right on the bed. She couldn't have run out without us noticing," she reassured him. Coming to the bathroom door, she pushed it, saw it was locked from inside and declared, "She's in here."

I sat on the bathroom floor, tears streaming down my face. My dad unleashed threats of fire and brimstone, yet I resolutely refused to open the door. I knew he wouldn't resort to violence; it was the anticipated disappointment in his eyes that I couldn't stand. Frustrated, he stormed away, the door shutting behind him with a finality that echoed through the room. My mom implored me through the closed door to come out, expressing concern about the toll my incessant crying was taking on my well-being. Despite her pleas, I persisted in my wailing.

Exhaustion set in eventually, rendering me too weary to shed another tear. When my mom no longer heard any more sounds from me, she resorted to banging on the bathroom door and calling my name loudly. Her hurried footsteps faded as she rushed out from my room, only to return moments later with my dad. She sounded hysterical as she urged him to pull out the door from its hinges, certain I must have hurt myself. She really could be melodramatic!

I imagined the emotional turmoil my dad was grappling with — torn between his pride, anger, and love. He called out gently to me, asking me to open the door so we could converse as the family we were. I reluctantly unlocked the door, but didn't open it, instead knelt on the cold tiles. The door swung open, revealing my dad looking at me with suppressed rage and maybe pity, my mom behind him. I lowered my face in shame, fully aware that his heart was breaking. I presented a pitiable sight. My once-beautiful face had paled from grief and self-imposed starvation, I needed no mirror to tell me that. What parent, no matter how hardened, wouldn't soften at the sight of such profound suffering?

"Come," he calmly implored, extending his right hand, but I persisted in kneeling.

"Come, my daughter, please." The endearment and his gentleness overwhelmed me at that moment, and the realization that I had disappointed this loving father of mine brought fresh tears to my eyes. I cried profusely, and he approached and carried me out in his arms.

My parents were disappointed beyond words, but luckily for me, they understood not to throw the bathwater away with the baby. They didn't raise me to be irresponsible, so why did I have to bring such shame upon them? Oh, how her fellow Christian mothers would mock her! She could no longer walk proudly in the streets because her daughter had covered her face in mud. What had she done to deserve this? My mom kept yelling at me. My dad had always been a man of few words; the hurt in his eyes spoke volumes more than his lips ever could. He had showered me with ample affection all my life. That moment, I knew that I had hurt him deeply. I refused to think that I was a wayward child. No, I was not! I was a good daughter and a diligent student. It's not self-pride, just a healthy recognition of my own worth. I understood that was partly why my parents were so disappointed in me; my record was too spotless to be tainted this way.

What could I say? I fell in love. It was so beautiful that we got a little carried away. Now I had some explaining to do, and Chris wasn't beside me to help with the right words. All I could say was that I was sorry. My situation was made even more complex by Chris's tragic death, an only child of his parents. That was probably why my dad was so weakened.

Two days later, I heeded my dad's instructions and made a call to Chris's mom. I informed her that my parents would like to speak with her and her husband at their earliest convenience. In the evening, she returned the call with her husband, the phone on speaker. It was an awkward and heartrending phone call, as my dad extended heartfelt condolences about their son's death and calmly revealed the delicate news of my pregnancy. His embarrassment was palpable, evident in his nervous gestures and the piercing gaze he directed at me while speaking into the phone. Within the two days that preceded the phone call, my parents had probed me about Chris and the nature of our relationship. I did my best to provide honest answers; I owed them that much.

Chris's mom erupted into suppressed cries and joyful exclamations upon learning about my pregnancy. From the few times we had spoken through Chris's phone, I knew she liked me. His dad, much like my own dad, seemed to be a man of few words. He carefully chose his words

and did his best to navigate the delicate matter without causing offence. Expressing appreciation to my dad for the honour of being informed, he pleaded to have a face-to-face discussion on the subject. He assured us he would set aside his commitments for the weekend and come down to our home in Enugu with his wife.

Chris's parents arrived at our home, bearing an aura of profound sadness, yet maybe a glimmer of hope. The vitality that once graced his mother's face had vanished, leaving her appearing older than her years. My parents welcomed them with empathetic warmth.

As I approached his mom, she enveloped me in a tight, wordless embrace, her eyes already welling up with emotion. She took her time to look me over, a smile breaking through amidst tears. She hugged me again, and I found myself on the verge of tears as well. I felt so much respect for this woman, for raising Chris, a rare breed of a man. She didn't deserve this kind of pain. But I couldn't question God.

His dad gave me a warm embrace and gently inquired, "Did he know?"

I responded with a nod, maintaining shy eye contact. The elder closed his eyes and just shook his head, letting out a long heave. Chris had such a striking resemblance to his dad. I couldn't even begin to understand the man's pain.

"God's hand is in this," said Chris's mom, raising her hands and eyes to the heavens. While I was not sure about God's hand being anywhere – I was still hiding from Him for committing fornication – I understood that my pregnancy was a source of solace for the bereaved family. My parents understood this too, even though they wouldn't explicitly say it. Their anger towards me had dissipated. They had even taken me to the hospital to ensure my health was excellent before the visit of the Obiakus. My mom now focused on taking care of me, while my dad's demeanour suggested he had resigned everything to fate.

After everyone had settled down and Chris's parents acknowledged that they believed I was indeed carrying their son's child, my dad asked me what I wanted. Chris's mom immediately fell to her knees, tears in her eyes. "My daughter, please, have our baby. Give us something to live for," she implored. I knelt down too to meet her since she refused my plea for her to rise, my tears streaming down freely. "I know you have your final exams and the rest of your life ahead of you. A child without his father beside you is certainly not what you need right now, but please, for our sake and for the love you have for him, give us the gift of his baby. In fact, we've decided we'll no longer play a leading role in the potential legal clash between the university and the Uturu community. The justice Chris would want is our happiness even though he is gone, and that would come when we focus on taking care of you and our grandchild instead. You won't regret this," she pleaded fervently.

What else could I want? What I carried within me was the only consolation they had for their departed son. How would I deny them that? It almost felt like a miracle that with everything I've been through in the last three weeks, the little one in me was doing okay, as the doctors have confirmed. For that alone, I was immensely grateful. I wanted to have Chris's baby — a perpetual reminder of the wonderful person he was and the bond we shared. I didn't mind

sacrificing a year of my life for that. I was determined to safeguard my pregnancy with everything I had. If our baby turned out to be a boy, I would name him Chris and endeavor to raise him to embody the qualities of his father—the only perfect gentleman I ever knew.

