

# The Man Called Kayode

*A short story*



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In the village of Umuala, a woman's worth was not measured by her kindness or strength, but by "the ritual of the five men."

The elders called it Ikwā Nwuyé—the Rite of Marriage. Once a girl turned twenty and found a suitor, she would be summoned to the hut beside the village square and made to lie with five able-bodied men.

These men were handpicked, each at least thirty, each a landowner with goats, chickens, and ancestral blessings.

Afterward, they would declare that she was worthy of marriage.

Finding a suitor was merely a signal; it meant you were ready for the rites to begin, a preparation for the one, among the five selected men, who would choose you.

The selection of the men was rumored to be more than just physical qualifications, whispers in the dark of night spoke of an ancient, unseen force that guided the decision.

The old ones said the gods themselves chose the men, that the selection was written in the stars long before any of the girls were born.

Those who spoke of it in hushed tones never dared to mention it aloud. But the fear in their voices was enough.

After the ritual, if more than one man desired her, it was an abomination.

And the only way out, was if one of the five was an “only son”. That was the only way to appease the gods.

She would choose him, and the ritual would be complete.

But if there was no “only son” among them, she would be deemed unsettled and subjected to another round of selection the following year, with a new set of men.

The rite could only be performed once a year for each woman, starting at age twenty.

No girl was allowed near Mmiri Ndụ—the sacred stream that sustained the village, after the age of twenty-five if she was still a virgin.

The river goddess was said to be jealous of untouched women and would swallow them whole.

And so, year after year, girls endured the ritual.

Not for love.

Not for family.

But to survive

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Nnena was different.

Sharp-tongued and stubborn, she turned away every suitor her parents brought. One man claimed her shadow moved before her. Another swore her eyes burned like a curse. Some

called her a witch. Others, a child of misfortune. Still, she didn't care, and she often wondered why they did, when they were setting stones.

She would not surrender her body to tradition.

She was twenty-four and eleven moons old. One month to twenty-five. One month to death, if the stories were true.

One night, her mother came into the room and fell to her knees.

"Nnena," she whispered, tears tracing her cheeks, "you think this is rebellion, but it is suicide. Do you want to die a cursed virgin? The stream will not spare you. I have prayed. I have begged the gods. No answer comes. You must go through the rite."

Nnena looked away, moonlight from the small opening on the wall casting shadows across her face.

"If death is my only freedom, then let it come. But I will not be used like a calabash at a wine feast, passed from hand to hand until I'm dry."

Her mother wept louder. "Even the river will cry for you. But it will not stop it from swallowing you"

"Must you always talk like this? Look at your elder sister, Amara, she obeyed. And now she has children, land—"

"Children born of torment". Nnena cut in sharply, anger edging her voice. "A husband she never chose. You call that life?"

"It is survival, Nnena," her mother shot back, almost screaming. And in this village, survival is all we have. Please! I can't lose you."

Still, Nnena would not bend. She stood up from the mat and angrily left the hut.

She had never been in love. She could not see the point. Not after witnessing the brutality every year.

It was impossible.

When her friends Uloma and Adanna told her of their secret affairs, she looked at them with worry.

Clearly, they weren't thinking straight.

Why love a man, when you cannot marry him? Why waste your time on escapades, when the same men were the ones raping you?

Why believe a fable that the river goddess was jealous of untouched women and killed them if they had not been "gang raped" before twenty five?

How could any of this possibly make sense?

Did villagers not know most young girls were already disvirgined before the so-called ritual? These men took pleasure in the chance to lie with women freely, because the so-called gods them to.

No, she would never give her heart to a man. Never, she said.

Until Kayode.

He arrived in the village like a shadow before dawn; tall, well-groomed, cloaked in stories. He was not like the others. Even his name was foreign. "Kayode."

She liked the way it felt on her tongue. His voice was warm. His laughter, deep and true.

They met by chance at the edge of the forest when she was gathering herbs, and she was struck immediately.

Their love bloomed like a secret flower in a forbidden garden, wild, beautiful, and doomed from the start.

He spoke of magic that didn't need altars,  
of love that didn't require permission,  
of distant lands where women walked unburdened by shame, and she listened, hungry for escape.

Each night beneath the iroko, they wove stories of a life beyond Umuala.

No gods. No rites. Just them.

But even as she laughed in his arms, a sliver of doubt hid beneath her joy, too faint to name, too sharp to ignore.

Still, she held on. Because in a world that only took, Kayode felt like the one thing she had chosen for herself.

He knew about the tradition, about Ikwā Nwuyé, and he knew time was against them.

Stories had been told of women who refused to participate, clinging to their chosen suitors, and dying like chickens halfway into their marriage.

It all began, they said, when the daughter of the first traditional native doctor was raped by a group of five hunters. She didn't survive. Her spirit wandered the village for years before possessing the river goddess. Her blood was said to have spilled into the river, sealing the curse, and so her vengeance birthed the ritual that haunted Umuala.

She died at twenty-five. And so, the rule was born.

But Nnena didn't believe it. She had read enough books to know it was nothing but a fable, a curse fabricated by the native doctor's wife to make the women of the village suffer the same fate as her late daughter.

Still, the decades passed. The myth turned into law. And no one dared defy the chief priest.

Not even her.

All fathers submitted their daughters. It wasn't up for discussion. Their only hope? That only one of the men would make a choice, or that one of them would be an "only son"

If none claimed her, she would wait a year, then come back and repeat the process. And if she could not find a match till she turned 25, Mmiri Ndụ would claim her.

Girls were always relieved when one of the five men turned out to be an "only son". At least then, they'd only endure the torture once, even if more than one of the men wanted to claim them.

The reason, they said, was deeper than tradition, it was balance.

Rivalry among men over a woman who had already been taken by all five, was seen as a curse upon the land. It disrupted the harmony the ritual was meant to enforce.

Only sons were the exception. They represented the white flag, a sacred truce in a violent tradition.

A woman who bore only one son was believed to possess spiritual authority, she had given everything and held nothing back.

In honor of her sacrifice, the gods allowed any woman undergoing the rite to choose such a man as a suitor.

Not out of mercy, but to prevent rivalry and restore balance.

When more than one man wanted the same woman, it was seen as an omen of unrest, a curse. Choosing an only son ended it. A single name, a single claim. Whether he wanted her or not, her choice sealed the truce.

Two weeks before her twenty-fifth birthday, Kayode said, "Let's run. Tonight."

It startled her, but something in his eyes told her he had been planning this all along. How thoughtful, she thought. Finally, I will be free from the shackles of this village.

She looked at him, heart pounding. "Where will we go?"

"Far. Past the rivers. Past the hills. Where no one knows Ikwā Nwuyé. Where love is enough." She laughed at herself for ever doubting him. He was all in.

All those nights beneath the stars hadn't been fantasy. He meant every word, every promise of freedom, of love without rituals, without pain.

For the first time in her life, someone was choosing her, not as a prize, not as a duty, but as a partner.

She packed only what mattered, her herbs, her beads, the little wooden flute her father carved when she was seven.

That night, she had only wavered when she saw Ogechi, her little sister, who had just turned twenty, sleeping soundly on the mat.

She stooped down and kissed her forehead, adjusting the wrapper that had slipped off her shoulders.

“Don’t worry Ogechi”, she whispered, “I won’t let them hurt you, I’ll come back to take you with me. Just wait a little.”

She wiped a tear as it traced a warm path down her cheek, then stood with resolve.

The night was thick with silence, broken only by the occasional rustling of palm leaves and the distant hoot of an owl.

Without a backward glance, she slipped into the darkness where Kayode waited.

She moved like a shadow, each step a silent defiance of all that bound her. When she reached the edge of the compound, her breath caught, there he was, leaning against the base of the iroko tree, exactly where he promised he'd be.

His arms were crossed, his eyes scanning the dark path ahead, but they softened the moment he saw her.

Without words, he reached for her hand. She gave it freely. Together, they began the journey that would either lead to freedom or the wrath of the gods.

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They crossed four villages, braved storms, wild animals, and hunger. She stumbled. He lifted her. She bled. He wrapped her wounds. She cried. He kissed her tears. He was her escape. Her savior.

On the fifth day, just before dawn, they arrived in a small compound tucked between tall palms. A quiet village. A quiet promise.

He led her inside the little house, fed her, held her, made love to her again and again, like he was trying to erase the world she had fled.

They spent the day wrapped in each other’s arms. Time lost all meaning. It felt like a dream, too tender, too perfect, too fleeting. Too good to be true.

She had done it.

She had finally escaped.

She was finally free.

But dreams she would later learn, always ended.

It was just before dusk, as the cicadas began to sing and the shadows stretched long across the earth, that he shifted, sitting up straight on the mat.

“We need supplies.” He said, looking down at her face and brushing her hair. “We don’t have enough to last a week. Will you be alright on your own for a while?”

She nodded, adjusting her wrapper around her chest, her heart already missing him.

“Don’t open the door for anyone unless you hear my voice,” he added, his gaze holding hers. “I won’t be long.”

She watched as he packed his bag, each movement precise, deliberate. Then he kissed her forehead, soft, lingering, and stepped out into the fading light.

The door clicked shut behind him.

For a long while, she sat in silence, replaying the way he looked at her before he left. There was love in his eyes, but something else too. Worry? Regret?

She shook the thought away.

It was a few minutes past midnight when he finally returned.

Her heart leapt at the sound of his voice calling her name through the window.

He kept his promise. He came back.

Relief washed over her like warm rain, safety, at last.

She unlatched the door. They stood facing each other in the quiet.

Without a word, she stepped into his arms, holding him tightly. She pressed against him, the thin wrapper doing little to muffle the feel of her breasts against his chest.

Heat surged where they touched, deepening the ache between them. Her breath slowed. He was here. He was real.

Then he reached behind him and shut the door.”

“Take off your clothes,” he said gently.

She smiled. “Again?”

He didn’t smile back.

Someone had lit a fire outside, its flickering flames casting long, uneasy shadows across the room.

But she obeyed. Slowly, deliberately, she removed her clothes and lay naked on the mat, her eyes never leaving him. She tried to read his expression, but it was the same unreadable look she had seen before he left that evening.

He stomped twice on the ground. A signal.  
The door suddenly creaked open.

From the shadows, five men emerged, tall, scarred, silent. Each marked by Umuala. Each bare-chested.

Nnena's heart pounded as she instinctively backed away, a scream tearing from her throat.

"Kayode?" she called, her voice desperate. "What is this? What's going on?"

No answer.

He turned his back to her, stepped outside, and slammed the door shut behind him.

Her panic escalated. She screamed again, thrashing against their hold, but they were stronger.

One by one, they stripped her, of dignity, of hope, of love. Her cries for help shattered in the air, but no help came.

They thrust deeper, taking without mercy, relentless in their brutality.

Through the window, by the flickering light of several torches staked into the ground, she saw the chief priest arranging ritual items on a wooden table, and behind him, her mother, father, younger brother, and Ogechi. Faces blank. Silent.

And then, she understood.

Kayode was not a stranger. He was familiar, though not in the way she had believed. He had come from elsewhere, far from their village, from Umuala. But he had not come for business as he had claimed.

He had come as a final resort.

Her parents had carefully placed him in her path, knowing she would trust him, knowing she would fall in love with him, knowing she was wild and would run away with him.

She had wondered why her father had been so silent, why her mother had not squealed in joy at the prospect of a suitor, even when she knew it meant preparation for the ritual.

It had all been a trap.

Running away had been her idea first. She had confided in him, and he had told them. And they had planned this evil.

Her rebellion had been her crime. Her love, her undoing.

The rite had simply changed its mask.

As pain wracked her body and her soul unraveled, the memories blurred, the laughter under trees, the kisses in the dark, the whispered dreams.

All of it, lies. She shut her eyes tight, tears flowing freely.

She stopped struggling long ago.

She didn't even know when the last man had finished.

The weight of the shame was too much to face, and she couldn't bring herself to open her eyes.

It wasn't until she smelled the familiar scent of his body, Kayode, that she dared to look.

His face was blank. His expression unreadable. He didn't look at her.

He had played his part. She was the trophy, he was the trophy bearer.

Without a word, he stooped down and lifted her limp body from the mat, preparing to hand her over to the one who had claimed her.

She looked into the eyes of the man she had once loved.

Where she had once seen fire, she now saw only ash.

Where there had once been stars, there was now darkness.

And in that moment, something in her died.

In the end, the river had not swallowed her.

Love had.

And all that remained was the silence of a girl betrayed by the man called Kayode.