Auld Lang Syne

NOW — 15 DECEMBER 2023

Sometimes, our end is an orgasm, the joy of God when he crafted Adam, the pride of Adam when he entered Eve. The euphoria in Doctor Faustus when the devil held his hand. Helen of Troy analogizes it well, this dark phenomenon—because, the moment she stopped to walk alone, I mean the moment butterflies began to flutter in her belly, she choked, like a wild lover asphyxiated at the peak of an intercourse.

"Aren't we all little tragic things?" I whisper into the wind while holding the hand of my lover as we walk down the pavement that leads us to nowhere—nowhere because sometimes, we have to lose ourselves.

I don't hear a response from my lover, and I don't bother to repeat the question or glance at her face to confirm a reception. We are all humans after all—full of diversities? That name, human, binds us together, whether we are dead or alive, whether we are lost or in the right place. Humans, chess pieces. Victims of a recurring fate. My lover is a trunk, and the wind passes through her body as we walk ourselves on.

"Dipo," she calls me with a drawl.

I stop and gaze into her eyes. They aren't deep; they aren't dark. They are bright and sheeny, as innocent as a child's. The smile on her lips spreads to her ears, and she seizes my arm and locks her arm in. Then her head rests on my shoulder. My eyes settle on her head. I kiss her hair, I inhale the smell of peppermint, I moan. And silently, I curse the moment of loss—the phenomenon that makes a man's phallus become limp.

My lover tilts her head and looks up, into my eyes. Then she unlocks our arms. "Shouldn't you stop now?" She smiles. "You have tried."

She gazes into the distance beyond the lamp-lit street, beyond the endless stretch of this pavement, beyond the destination we do not know. She smiles, shakes her head, parts her mouth in a giggle—again like a carefree child—and she turns away.

She begins to run. My lover.

"Sola!— Sola, don't!"

24 MAY 2021

We sit at a round table that is covered in red. An ottoman rests beside me, and on it is a basket bearing a bouquet of flowers and a gift box.

Sola keeps her eyes on me as she sips from the coffee cup. "Something's different about you today," she says, setting the cup on the saucer. She tilts her head, smiling. "I can't quite place it."

"Isn't it natural?" I shrug. "The day's different after all."

She looks around. And I follow. Of course, the restaurant is quiet; servers and guests, everyone is minding their business. There's no artist to entertain, except for the soft Janis Joplin's *Me and Bobby McGee* playing in the background. *What a strange song to play at this time.*

Sola shrugs. "I don't see what's different." She leans forward and winks. "Care to tell me?"

I also lean forward, smiling. "You really like to play, don't you?"

"Of course I do. But," she shakes her head, "this time, I really have no idea."

"Oh really?" I sit back. I've been hearing of things like this; but here it is, happening to me. I laugh. It's the perfect circumstance after all. Don't we all scream because we don't 'see it coming'. I rise from my seat, throw my hands up, and clap, whistling, halting the tranquil in this hall. Then I step away from the table.

The managers understand the cue. Immediately, Janis Joplin's music peters out and is replaced by Simi ft. Adekunle Gold's *Happy Birthday*. I see the heavily-bearded disc jockey nodding with a grin. The hostesses are approaching us with a chocolate cake and balloons and smiles. My lover is a child at heart, and she deserves this much. Maybe the other guests think so too—for they begin to groove to the music, some waving their hands, some singing out the lyrics.

I turn my attention to Sola hoping she can now see that the atmosphere is different, that the entire hall is rocking because of her. All these smiling faces, all these bright hearts. *Just for you.*

But Sola looks indifferent. No, she looks curious in the wrong way. She's like a random guest witnessing someone else's birthday-surprise event and musing, *Aw, what a lucky woman!* She looks at me and shakes her head, mouthing something I do not hear. I hurry to her side and lean over. Before I can say a word, Sola blurts out. "It's not my birthday, Dipo. And it's not yours, is it? You celebrated last month."

I practically freeze, my eyes locking with hers. "Shouldn't you stop the joke now?" I glance at the hostesses grooving while bearing the cake and balloons. Someone already set a wine bottle on the table; people are taking pictures. "Sola. Today is your birthday. You didn't forget, did you?" I try to laugh.

She giggles. "The situation is awkward already, Dipo, but, well I can just play along." We both stand upright. Sola begins to beam, her eyes dilating with what looks like surprise. One hand to her chest, the other to her mouth. Then she hugs me tight. She waves to the hostesses, spreads her arms and embraces them. 'Happy Birthday'-calls course from the guests, and Sola waves back at the well-wishers.

"Happy birthday to you," I sing for her. Light the candles on her cake and watch her blow the flames out.

#

"Played it well for you, right?" Sola laughs as she reclines in the passenger seat and puts on the seatbelt. "I mean, what were you thinking?"

I gaze at her, resisting the urge to step out and slam the car door. "It's not funny, Sola. You're making me feel bad."

"Ah... I'm sorry."

"Tell me, what is today?"

She looks away. "My fake birthday."

"May 23rd, Sola. We celebrated your birthday on this date last year. All through high school, all through our undergraduate years, May 23rd has always been for you. So what has changed? Why did we come to this restaurant in the first place?"

Her face turns in my direction, a frown forming on it, but she doesn't look at me.

"Sola? And I didn't celebrate a birthday last month. My birthday is in December. We both know this. I don't understand what joke you were trying to make inside there. I almost felt embarrassed. A guy who arranges a surprise party for his fiancee on the wrong date, huh?"

"My birthday is not today! What is wrong with you? And what is all that talk about birthdays in high school and university? When did I meet you? Last month, Dipo. Last month!" She tugs her wavy hair behind her ear and looks out the tinted window. "Let's go. We should even rest first before talking about this, cause I don't understand."

For a moment, I feel like a madman. Like an idiot. But I refuse to act like one. I only turn the ignition and press the brake pedal. And as we drive to my apartment—Sola has recently moved in with me—I remain quiet and keep my gaze ahead. Until the moment when I begin to sense a shock:

"Are you okay?" Sola asks me in the most innocent voice, her eyes scanning my face. She reaches for my face, caressing my chin. "Talk to me, dear."

24 MAY 2021

6:10 AM

I launch Google Photos and browse the grid of albums I recently created on the software:

—*Family*
—*Childhood*
—*2018 Birthday*
—*2019 Birthday*
—*2020 Birthday*
—*High School*
—*University of Nigeria*
—*Me & Sola Moments*
—*Sola's Birthdays*
—*NYSC*
—*Randoms*

Sola has been a part of me as far as I can remember. And so she has a place in all the albums in my library. I open the Family folder, and there she is, standing with my mom and dad and two sisters as we pose for a family photo on New Year's Day. She was roughly ten at that time. I was eleven. My mom, beaming a smile, had her hands on Sola's shoulder in an affectionate way. Sola was grinning in that picture, one of her incisors missing. She wore beaded long hair and was twirling the end of her side locks. She lived close-by with her family who were our friends—sadly, her parents are now deceased; they both died in an accident on one of the days she was spending time in our house. That day, as Rod Stewart's *Auld Lang Syne* played, Sola held my Mum's hand, whining, "Allow me to join the photograph. I will marry Dipo." Everyone laughed, but my eyes were on Sola, my mind supplicating the Deity, that this carefree little girl be truly tied to my future. I walked to Dad's side and raised his arm, letting it rest on my shoulder, and I took a deep breath and mumbled, *Amen.*

My birthday is not today! What is wrong with you? And what is all that talk about birthdays in high school and university? When did I meet you? Last month, Dipo. Last month!

I throw back my head, put my phone away. "Gosh." I pick it back up and browse the folder named *Sola's Birthdays*. The timeline features photos dating eight years back. Many of the old photos originally were physical copies scanned and archived on my cloud storage. And in virtually all of them, I am there by Sola's side. Not only that, her birthday photos are time-stamped *May 23.*

My birthday is not today! What is wrong with you? Sola's voice echoes in my head.

8:40 AM

Sola comes to me, waving her phone in my face. She's all smiles, although her face looks puffed up thanks to a long night of sleep. She'd fallen fast asleep as soon as we came back home last night. "The birthday surprise yesterday was one of the best, you know," she says, grinning. She sits on the arm of the one-seater chair I'm sitting on and snakes a slender arm round my neck, kissing my cheek.

I gaze at her up close. My jaws clench on their own accord. *Sola, what's going on with you?*

"I was going to upload a WhatsApp status today, and I saw all the pictures. You know, it was as if I was drunk all through yesterday and needed to see something to trigger my memories, hehe." She shows me a picture in which I'm presenting her a bouquet of flowers and a gift box. "I like this one in particular. Awn, you're so sweet." She kisses me again. "There are videos, too. See eh, our wedding is in fourteen months, right—"

"Sola?" I call quietly, my mind chaotic. *Yes, our wedding is fourteen months, but...*

"Why? You look distressed. Are you okay?"

1 JANUARY 2022

New Year's Day.

Sola wakes up grabbing a blanket and wrapping it around her. Then she casts furtive glances around. She was fast asleep in my arms all night, and was calmly in my mind as I pictured the new year, how it will be spiced with a heavy dose of her.

But the colour of her face at the moment is white. Colours appear boldly on white. Sola's face is a graffiti of alien emotions. She is bawling, she is screaming, she is throwing things, breaking things, and repeating: "Who are you? Where am I? I'll report you! Who are you?!"

When the spike heel of a stiletto grazes my head and draws blood, I hurry towards Sola and embrace her tightly. So tight she must be feeling tied up. I struggle to keep her in this shape for several minutes, telling her nonstop, "I'm Dipo, your lover. Remember me, Sola. I'm Dipo, your lover."

Soon, she turns limp, her body warm. My nostrils ache with the sensation of grief.

#

Sola wakes up. It is evening.

"I feel tired, Dipo," she tells me when she opens her eyes to see me seated by her on the bed.

I sigh and clasp my hands in relief. "Sola mí."

15 DECEMBER 2022

It's my birthday today. I'm 32. Sola isn't here with me, at least for now. We ought to be married by now, hehe. But Sola wants to have a good job before tying the knot.

Well, today, she has a job interview that will take the whole day if she impresses early enough. "It's the biggest law firm in Abuja, so I'll need to do a lot to prove I'm worthy," she told me yesterday.

She informed me again this morning. "If I get this job, Dipo, I swear, I'll come home screaming," she said, buttoning up her white shirt. "I'll scream so loud our neighbours will hurry out. They'll want to see what has happened to Dipo's bae." She turned to me and grabbed my pyjama top by the collar, making a face. "And I'll tell them, 'See what the Lord has done!'"

I bursted out laughing at this and poked her nose lightly. "You don't have the balls."

She laughed. "If a lawyer can't be *bally* and dramatic, then she is a bad egg to the bar."

"*Ball-ly*, yeah," I giggled. "But I—"

"You will see."

"We'll celebrate my birthday later in the night, then?"

"Yeah, after I come home screaming. But em, Dipo, don't call me until I'm back, you get? In fact I'll have to use Flight mode. But you understand the reason, right?"

I nod, pulling her close. "Don't worry, I'll let you stay focused. I'll wait for you."

It's night now. And I'm still waiting to hear Sola's screams. If it happens, then I'm certain that even I won't be able to contain her joy, hehe. My birthday celebration will be heavily spiced with the celebration of someone's dream job. It will be perfect—two lovers living a fulfilled life.

My phone rings.

"This is Inspector Lati, calling from Maitama Police Station, Abuja. Are we on to Mr Dipo Laniyan?"

#

Sola is sitting on a bench in the lobby of Maitama Police Station. She hasn't committed a crime, an officer told me. "We found her standing aimlessly in the middle of Shehu Shagari Road. Not only was she obstructing traffic, she was also endangering her own life. What if something had happened to her?"

I hurry to Sola and crouch before her, cupping her hands. "Sola?"

"She has been here since afternoon, sir," the officer's voice interrupted me. "She didn't seem to know where she was coming from or her destination. She couldn't tell us anything until this evening when we decided to check her bag for any means of identification. We found your number in her emergency contacts. We couldn't reach the others."

I ease up my feet with clenched fist. "Really? You guys ehn? Why didn't you check her bag since morning? Why did you have to wait until now? Do you think she's nothing just because—"

"Di-po," Sola calls quietly.

I crouch before her and touch her face. "Sola? Are you okay? Why didn't you call me? Did you lose your way?"

"I don't think she lost her way—"

"Can you leave us!" I snap at the nagging officer and redirect my attention to Sola. With a tender touch, I run my index finger along the contours of her face, delicately tucking away strands of stray hair. "Sola, we should go home."

#

Sola says nothing even after my car pulls up outside the apartment. She says nothing even after we enter the living room. After a long time looking spaced, unresponsive to my tender words and gestures, she eases up her feet and walks into the bedroom.

After a while, I go to check on her. She is sleeping.

I walk to my reading table, power on my MacBook and check the storage for a copy of the cover letter I'd helped Sola write. I find the contact information of the law firm's office. And I call.

It doesn't connect. Of course, it won't. Office hours are over.

I call the officer from Maitama Police Station.

"I was trying to explain things properly but you were impatient," Inspector Lati says.

"What else did you find?" I ask him.

"We have standby medical professionals for trauma cases, Mr Dipo. They examined her when she began exhibiting symptoms of behavioural impairment. And although she's not physically affected by anything, our professionals believe she should get some therapy. If you wish to see the report—"

I end the call in worry. *Is Sola depressed?*

My stomach churns. *Suicidal? Did she really go to the highway to...?* It doesn't make sense. Even if it does, I should rule it out.

I sit by Lati all night, my eyes on her face. The more I gaze at her, the more the memories of her overwhelm my fears. So, I decide to remain by her, at least until she wakes up. No new-job celebration. And no birthday revelry, for the first time in my life.

15 DECEMBER 2023

It's my birthday today. I'm 33. And, I tell you, it's been one year since Sola last spoke. She eats, she moves around, she watches TV, she orders magazines. But she barely steps out. She writes a lot too, and she locks her writing away in a mini safe that used to belong to her father. I don't know what she writes, and I might never know.

The day after the incident, I called that law firm again. It was during office hours, so it connected. The desk officer checked their records. They said Sola didn't appear for the interview. "She was one of the first five people scheduled for the morning examination," the young man explained, his voice heavily nasal. "Our director had even sworn to back her personally. Miss Sola Adeyeye had a huge chance—"

I hung up. I didn't need the remaining information. I just wanted to know whether the previous day's event had any links with Sola's dream agency. And it turned out there wasn't any.

So where did the change come from? Why did it come to my lover?

There is a creak sound behind me. "Don't move," came the voice.

I hear the rumble of a boom bass speaker. I hear the robotic call, *CONNECTED.*

Then I hear the soft piano chords kicking off Rod Stewart's legendary soul music, Auld Lang Syne, a song often played on New Year's Eve in many parts of the world to mark the end of the year and to usher in the new. I shake my head. *Auld Lang Syne. Times Long past.*

Should old acquaintance be forgot?
And never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot
And the days of Auld Lang Syne?

"Happy Birthday," the voice comes, this time, clearer.

I turn sharply without needing an instruction. "Sola," I cry. She stands before me, smiling, wearing beaded hair with locks dangling by both sides of her face. She had been inside all evening making her hair, I see. This reminds me of her childhood. Of the times when life wasn't strange.

I spread out my arms and hug Sola tightly, sniffing sobs and remaining like that for a long time.

"Let's take a walk... Dipo," she says to me, smiling calmly in my face.

#

"Aren't we all little tragic things?" I whisper into the wind while holding the hand of my lover as we walk down the pavement that leads us to nowhere—nowhere because sometimes, we have to lose ourselves.

I don't hear a response from my lover, and I don't bother to repeat the question or glance at her face to confirm a reception. We are all humans after all—full of diversities? That name, human, binds us together, whether we are dead or alive, whether we are lost or in the right place. Humans, chess pieces. Victims of a recurring fate. My lover is a trunk, and the wind passes through her body as we walk ourselves on.

It feels like pity, but it isn't. It is love—a trap-like love. I remember my prayer from when I was a kid: that the deity should mesh Sola into my future. She is mine, and I am hers. Through thick or thin, I must stick with her. Her therapist diagnosed a rare case of Alzheimer's Disease. It is wild, but what can I do? Whether the memory dies or not, love is an immortal being. And though our ends come at the peak of our best lives... we are after all winners before losers.

My lover tilts her head and looks up, into my eyes. Then she unlocks our arms. "Shouldn't you stop now?" She smiles. "You have tried."

Soon, I see her back melting into the darkness ahead. And as I call her name, running after her, we slip further into it.