

## The Very Singular kind of Love

By Chukwudum Okudarue

“Thank you Alfred.”

I say and nudge the car door shut with a loud thud. I use my elbow; my right hand has got a heavy bag of groceries and my clutch bag, my left holds an even heavier bag of shoes. I love new shoes; red ones, yellow ones...having so many are the perks of being Mrs. Kennedy Udoh - Mrs. Nkechi Udoh that is. Alfred - our chauffeur - is going to pick him up from the office and bring him home to a well cooked dinner.

The bottoms of the bags scrape the stairs as I struggle to make it to the front door of our new house. We live at number 1718 Blight road, Brighton now (who would have ever thought Nkechi Mgbonnu would live at number 1718 or anywhere this beautiful for that matter). I look up at the all white house with its black shutters, I want to see if you can notice the window seat that looks out over our lawn (Kennedy has been promising to mow that for a while now) and the short flight of stairs I'm battling with right now; my four feet eleven inches can allow the bags go so high. My hands go up as much as the strain of the bags will allow and I rough it over the last stair (Nothing must happen to these shoes).

I have a right to be four feet eleven, after all Mrs. Udoh is just five. Mrs. Udoh, my mother in law, thinks she is the queen of the whole free world. Just now, if she had heard the car door slam, she would have marched out of number 1718 and rebuked me.

“Ladies do not slam car doors!”

“I'm sorry Ma. I had both hands full and had to put in quite some force to make sure the door shut. I must have overdone it, I'm sorry.” I would have said.

“Then you should have dropped the bags on the ground and shut the door appropriately. Alfred, drive Nkechi up the road and down again so she can do it properly.”

Mrs Udoh would really have done that. The first time I came to her house, she asked Kennedy if I was there to do the dishes.

“Ah ah Mama, this is Nkechi, the girl I have been telling you about.” Kennedy had said laughing timidly.

“I know.” Mrs. Udoh replied. “She's dressed like she here to do the dishes. Nkechi, if you want to stay here, there are a lot of things you'll have to learn.” She continued with a snicker. And by stay here, she

meant 'marry my son'.

I want to do a little victory dance at the top of the stairs, maybe I'll get to it when I finally get into the house. I push the door and wobble to the middle of the living room; the soft coming off the white walls welcome me home. I am still thinking about how best to fill out all this space; we haven't bought any furniture just yet, Kennedy and I continue to think of this our second honeymoon and we want the sort of freedom that a honeymoon gives so we have put off furnishing for now. Kennedy decided we should have the kitchen fitted out though;

"You'll cook, we'll eat and for entertainment... we have each other." He had said smiling.

All the eating and lazing about in the past month still doesn't show (not a shred of fat) I have three kids already; we left them back with my sister in Lagos. They could have gone to Mrs Udoh, but she was out of Nigeria at the time; she and her new boyfriend – General Okon – where somewhere half way round the world (thank God for that) when Kennedy and I had left for England. Mother in law offered to come back home to babysit but Kennedy declined. He doesn't want anything to get in the way of her new found happiness he says.

Wait a minute, the front door is open! I was so relieved to get into the house without having to fumble with the keys that it went past me that the door should have been locked when I pushed it. Kennedy must be home, he must have come back to pick something up or maybe he's back early today, that would indeed be lovely. The only room he could be in the whole house is our bedroom upstairs; it is the only room we inhabit for now. I take the stairs two at a time, (failing ever other stair or so - skirts really shouldn't be so tight) my 4 inch heels clicking the white marble all the way up. Our bedroom has a little bunk bed, Kennedy wanted one because he likes me to rub up on him all night. Actually, coming to England in effect has rubbing on Kennedy as its very cause. One night after the kids had been put to bed in our Lagos home, we had stretched out on the sofa trying to feel like newlyweds again;

"Let's go to England and start anew." Kennedy said.

"Are you asking me to run away with you?" I replied giggling.

"Run away?! Who's talking about running away, no one's running away from anything." Kennedy retorted a little defensively.

"Ok I'm sorry" I say (I romanced the idea that we were running from his mother) "What about the kids?" I asked.

"They'll be fine, we'll give them to your sister till we are settled in, then they'll come to us after the school year. I want you to myself for a while" he said nestling into my neck.

We stayed up all night planning. It had been very exciting... and the excitement hasn't stopped.

I go anywhere Kennedy goes and especially love business trips (we always find someone to take care of the kids). I might not exactly do anything on these trips (except maybe shop) but I won't say I'm totally useless. I wake up early and get Kennedy ready for his meetings. And even if he doesn't say so, I know it helps because he always asks me to go with him every time. I happily stay out the business; it can be really boring when Kennedy starts talking figures. I have to pick up some interest though; I mean I should know how we have everything we need plus all the little extras. This much I know the money really isn't his. Kennedy manages his mother's various businesses so you could say the money is hers. But she makes sure he is very comfortable and of course the better he does, the more we stand to inherit.

In turn, Mrs. Udoh inherited a lot from her father who was a successful business man back in the sixties. She never fails to tell me how much Kennedy looks and takes after him. She even told me once that he was the first man she ever loved and Kennedy's the second. "Where does that put your husband then?" I should have asked.

At the top of the staircase I do my dance – Kennedy is home. I smell his perfume coming from the bedroom. I bob in to fling myself on him and find Kennedy sitting on the bed. He looks like someone took the fight out of him with one punch. It's scary, he never looks like this.

"I thought she was happy, she has been with General Okon for about six months now. That why I felt comfortable leaving Nigeria" He says more to himself than to me.

"She's here?" I ask. "When...why didn't she call to say she was coming?"

"I don't know" Kennedy says getting up "You might have to count me out of dinner tonight; I'll probably be with her all night."

"Can't she leave us alone? Ever since we got married, she has been on our case, Kennedy this, Kennedy that...I want my husband." I want to say.

My mouth has been bought. Mrs Udoh pays for my clothes, cooking and cleaning, I could never let an outburst like that get out in case it gets to her ears. Mrs Udoh can hold a grudge – the rechargeable alkaline kind.

"Okay, I'll have breakfast ready when you get back in the morning." I say instead. I hate my mouth.

"Thanks love." Kennedy replies and rushes off without a kiss goodbye.

It's back down to the kitchen (a little less gingerly). I'll whip up something light to eat, there's no point going all out if Kennedy not here. I start pulling out the groceries from the bag and see a file Kennedy brought home from the work on the kitchen table. Inside are deeds of some buildings his mother owns.

This must be what is so important; I wonder why Kennedy didn't tell me, it must be very personal.

Alfred would be either at the office waiting for Kennedy or on his way back. Either way I can't wait for him, I go for my phone and call the cab service. As soon as the cab drives up to the front door, I jet out (making sure to lock the door) and give the driver the address to Mrs. Udoh's house in Brighton. We would have stayed there when we came to England if we had told Mrs. Udoh about our plans to relocate. Kennedy doesn't want us living there any way. He hasn't even taken me to see it yet, every time I ask he keeps putting it off. The last time I asked he said he doesn't have a lot of pleasant memories growing up there. He told me his parents were always fighting and there was this one time, at eighteen, he had to kick his father out for beating his mum so much that he broke her wrist.

"I could kick him out because I was much bigger than he was and he was dead drunk...after that night the marriage was practically over. Life with mother after that became quite unbearable, she became very clinging. There's this chair she would make me sit on and ..." Kennedy said looking very vulnerable trailing off. Kennedy never says anything bad about his mother; I want to hear the end of that story.

As the cab winds through Brighton's streets I muse about why Kennedy wanted to come back here, maybe it is because this is such a beautiful town with its many parks, squares and crescents (and of course there's the Royal pavilion). Being by the sea also made it easy to relocate, it's kind of like Lagos. Kennedy must have a lot of other pleasant memories, (an old girlfriend perhaps - I certainly hope not!). The cab drops me off in front the house and drives off and I wonder why I had not done this a long time ago. I didn't need Kennedy to take me to the house he grew up in; I could have paid the cab. It must be my mouth again; there would have been a lot of explaining to do if Kennedy had found out.

Mrs. Udoh house is a bit smaller than ours. It's painted in earth tones not like ours that is all white. The whole compound is filled with smooth brown gravel stones that crunch under my heels. The gardening is immaculate, she no doubt has a groundskeeper anytime she away, I look around for him / her. Seeing no one I clutch the file close and walk up to the front door to knock. It's open, (this day is beginning to be filled with a lot of "open doors" isn't it?) it must be very urgent business for Mrs. Udoh to leave her door open, very urgent business indeed for her to have arrived Brighton without warning and immediately send for her son, I push the door and go in. Inside, the living room looks fantastic, its colours blend very well with everything outside, in it I see a lot of things in it that I would want in mine. I want her exact same paintings and arabesque artifacts that litter everywhere, I take a mental picture of where everything goes so I can decorate our new house just like this. No one's down here so I must go upstairs. The house doesn't make any sounds of its own so I climb the stairs quietly. I do this with the balls of my feet so my heels can

dangle in midair. I'm actually scared, scared that Mrs. Udoh would emerge and question this intrusion to her beautiful home. This is silly; I am family and have a right to be here. I am not the errand girl bringing home the boss's file from the office, I am the boss's wife; I climb the last two stairs with courage. On the landing I move with my new found courage to the only room I hear sounds coming from. It sounds like the legs of a chair scrapping the wooden floor. The door is ajar, (yet another open door) with all my courage now gone I push this timidly. Inside, Kennedy's sitting on a chair - no doubt the one he spoke so dreadfully about - in what looks like his old room, the room's got soccer trophies and pictures of footballers on the wall. Mrs. Udoh is astride him, her hand bunching up her skirt to reveal ugly stretch marks, with her tongue all down his throat and she's crying. The tears wet her eyes, well up and dribble down already laid tear marks. Neither of them sees me; they are so caught up in...in this. Looking at those stretch marks I think - 'Mrs. Udoh isn't so perfect after all'. I focus on those stretch marks so I can blot out (as if that would ever happen) this obscenity that will sear me forever. At this time tears of my own begin to form. Something tells me this alien love had been here way before Kennedy and I ever thought of coming to England. In fact, it had been waiting for us to arrive.

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