

# Black Butterflies

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I became afraid of Molue buses the day my mother told me how my closest cousin, Anifa, lost her parents. It was an accident: a molue lost its brakes at the Oshodi-Abeokuta expressway and rammed into their car, injuring and killing several people. I remember riding on the bus a few times with my mom, the heat, the rush, the scary height and shape of the bus. People who want to save half of the transport fare standing in the bus aisle with their hands on the railings so as not to fall when the bus bumps into potholes. I hated Molue buses. A few years later, after many casualties caused by the buses, I was glad when the Lagos State government replaced Molue with BRT buses.

Anifa's father was from Enugu, and her mother, my mother's sister, was of Yoruba descent. Her parents had met while growing up in Oshodi. Anifa has been living in Oshodi with my mom's eldest brother, my uncle since her parents' demise when she was two. After their passing, my mother's family added Remilekun to Anifa's name as a reminder that she was the mark left behind by her mother. Remilekun, a short form of Oluwaremilekun, which means "God has wiped my tears", is also my name because my one year old sister had died before I was born.

On Anifa's bedside table is a purple diary sitting beside her lamp. She recently designed the diary's front cover with black paper butterflies. The butterflies, zigzaggy, thin lines, drawn with a black pen, fall over each other on the cover of her diary. When I asked why she chose butterflies, she said it was because they have short lives, like the lives of those who meant so much to her.

"They have refused to stay long with me," Anifa said. "Nigeria has taken them away from me."

I held her hand to console her, and we both burst out crying. In Anifa's diary are pictures of her late parents, as well as significant childhood memories, such as her first birthday, nursery, and primary school graduation ceremonies. There are also pictures of Emeka. Emeka was my cousin's lover before EndSARS happened, to douse the flames of their love forever, leaving emptiness and deep

sorrow. She also appeared in most of the pictures of him in her diary.

“Remi, even the Yoruba say a person’s child should die rather than go missing. What do I know has happened to Emeka?” She said, as we looked at one of the pictures together. She started to cry again. “If he’s alive and somewhere in this world, why has he not contacted me? The Emeka I know wouldn’t do this to me.”

And I mumbled something about his safety, or amnesia.

I knew Emeka more from Anifa’s praise of him, as I met him only twice. But he left a great impression on both occasions. The first time was when I stayed in Oshodi with my uncle’s family for a week to attend an event in the area. It was in mid-May of 2018. Anifa was on holiday from school, and I was still processing my university admission. We were alone that day when Emeka visited. When he came into the room, he and Anifa hugged for some minutes until I coughed. They had not seen each other in months. Because he was coming, Anifa plaited her hair the previous day. Watching them hold each other’s gaze made me jealous.

“Hello, you must be Remi,” he said to me.

“Yes, and you are Emeka.” I smiled, nodding. He was tall, dark, and broad-chested.

Shortly after Anifa introduced us, they started talking. They spoke for hours, unable to take their eyes or hands off each other. This was after speaking on the phone all day long. Shortly after he left, it started raining, and Anifa was seeing him off. I was worried at home, because Anifa is susceptible to cold. But I was relieved when Emeka brought her back home in a hired taxi cab just to ensure her safety. That was their love, beautiful and selfless.

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On days like the one in which I hold hands with Anifa, reminiscing about who Emeka was and what he meant to her and what his disappearance symbolises, I remember every tragedy this country has thrown at me. Every tragedy that makes me live with fear makes me wake from my sleep, hallucinating. For two years after the Dana Air crash that occurred close to our home in Iju Ishaga, I wanted to disappear into the wall anytime a plane passed. I would clasp my hands over my head and ears anytime a plane was hovering in the sky. It took a year before I stopped. Same as the Boko Haram insurgency until my dad was forced to stop watching the news at night. Not knowing the tragic events happening calmed me down a bit. Also, the Jos crisis - I don’t remember much, as I was a child, but I do remember us running. I remember people hiding, rocks, machetes, and fear. And I know how all this shaped my parents, my family, and my life. All of this was what I was born into, and despite being an adult now, the fear still lurks, always trying to peek its head. In my adult age, the most brutal of all these traumatic events is the police brutality that took Anifa’s lover and dashed my remaining hope in this country.

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I was on the bed in my room, going through my phone, shivering and weeping after the shooting at the Lekki Tollgate. Then I heard my dad’s phone ring. His reaction piqued my interest.

“Subhannallah, ni Mafoluku,” he said hesitantly. I heard my mom jump out of bed. My siblings and I hurried into their bedroom, too. From my dad’s countenance, we could tell something horrible had happened at Oshodi. Oshodi was where most of my mother’s family lived.

I went on Twitter and searched Oshodi, and the news I saw made me sit abruptly on the floor. The

Lekki Tollgate shooting had caused a bloodbath there. The hoodlums have taken over the streets, shooting, burning, and destroying public property and anything or anyone that came into their view. From tweets and videos posted online, I could see that the Makinde police station in Mafoluku has been set ablaze. Shops and properties were being destroyed. Area Boys with past grievances were using the opportunity to attack one another. People were running, getting shot and dying.

I did not wait to hear from my dad anymore. I ran out of their room and called Anifa. She was weeping on the phone.

Remi, Emeka. I saw his mom. She was running. They attacked their shop. I stood on the balcony trying to see Emeka until Alhaji told Sarah to drag me away. Not a trace of him. His phone was switched off. His mother was shouting his name as she ran. I am so scared. I can feel it. Something terrible has happened," Anifa said all at once, not pausing for a breath.

The only thing I could think of saying was that everything would be okay. I was still shocked at how quickly a peaceful protest had morphed into this due to the government's failure and ploy to dissuade protesters. The same protest that brought millions of Nigerian youths together regardless of all our differences has been forced to turn into a massacre after the unprecedented shooting.

I dropped the phone on my bed and wailed, trying to wrap my head around this country's obsession with violence. Nigeria broke my spirit that day. I switched off my phone and locked myself in the room. This country has happened to Anifa before. Why did it choose her again? A very important prayer in Nigeria is "May Nigeria not happen to you." It reads as a joke sometimes, but I take it seriously, as I say it every day for myself and my loved ones. "May the incompetence, bad governance, and injustice in this country not cut our lives short or kill our dreams. May we survive this country and its uncountable woes unscathed." But sometimes prayers like these are too late.

I didn't know I was also mourning Oshodi that day. Every second day of Eid since we relocated to Lagos, my mom would take my siblings and me to Oshodi. We had many stops in this big city, from Banjoko street, Bolade Oshodi, where my grandmother lived, to Airport road, where another of my mother's brother and his family lived, to Adekunle street, another of grandpa's homes, and where many relatives lived, and Ishola Imam, Mafoluku, where the party goes down. Oshodi was that special city that held my childhood together, and gave me the security of family. We would arrive and drop our bags at Banjoko Street with my grandma, and from there, visit every other place. When my grandma started getting older and my aunt got married and had to move out, the family got a house help for grandma, but my mom would still send me to visit her every weekend. I was 14 at the time and in senior secondary school. How I loved those days! I would arrive in Oshodi on Fridays and leave on Sundays. Grandma wouldn't let me work, even the tiniest thing, such as turning on the television; she would say electricity is dangerous and would do it herself. It was always amusing; the only thing I helped her with was running errands. I would sit and listen to her tell me stories of her life, most of them repetitions and what an interesting, incredible life she had.

These days, despite living close to Oshodi now, I try to avoid the city because the memory breaks me. Grandma is dead, most of my cousins have dispersed, or are married and away, and EndSars happened, and Oshodi is no longer Oshodi. Sometimes, I pass by Banjoko Street, where my grandma used to live, and the family has now rented out, and I just wave at the house, feeling like a complete stranger. It breaks me. That house used to mean a lot to me.

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It is now four years since the massacre at the Lekki Tollgate, I am holding hands with Anifa to console her, and both of us are weeping and staring at her black-painted butterflies scattered

everywhere in her diary like Nigerians scattered everywhere in the world wondering where in the world Emeka is or, God forbid, was, wondering where he disappeared to, wondering if he's still alive. In these four years, police brutality has not stopped, nor has corruption or injustice; the system keeps getting worse. Yet, in these four years, I have watched Anifa in different stages of grief. I do not know what stage she is in now. I only know that she is still drawing black butterflies over her diary.

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