Lopsided Honeymoon

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October 12, 2026

Two weeks before I met Judith, I had a relationship with an older lady in my dream. We worked the relationship all the way to marriage, even though she told me several times I could go for someone younger if she wasn't the right fit. I assured her she was. She asked if my family would accept her, and I assured her there was nothing to worry about.

I don't know how long it took us from dating to marriage in that dream. Those things happen in dreams; you don't know if a thousand years passed or a single afternoon.

What disturbed me about the dream was that when I went to pay her bride price in her village, and the guests had started arriving, I noticed people pausing to look at us a beat too long, because it was obvious she was older than me. Even her younger sisters, arriving with their husbands, were older than me. The lady was pretty. I liked her. But I could not bear the shame.

She noticed. So, she drew me aside.

"I can see you feel you have made a terrible mistake. But you have not fully paid the bride price. Everything can still be cancelled. Do you still want to continue this? I won't hate you for it. But tell me your truth. Do you still want to continue now that it is not too late?"

Tears formed in my eyes.

"Please. I am sorry for bringing you such embarrassment. I can't continue."

“I understand,” she said. “And I will respect you for it.”

She did not cry. She went inside, removed the gele and the beads, picked up her small handbag, and left through the back exit. That was when my mother’s younger sister burst into tears.

“Henry! You did this to me? You brought all of us here to embarrass us?”

I woke up ashamed of a woman who did not exist.

The dream stayed with me for days. I became careful not to converse with any woman I didn’t want.

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Judith and I met in Agbor, at a seminar that promised to teach ordinary people how to make five million naira in a year.

Come to Guildhall Suites, the flyer said in a font that portrayed expensive confidence, *and we will show you a proven path to financial freedom.*

Five million naira is not a large sum. But it was the kind of money the average Nigerian had never seen sit still in one account. I dressed well and went, telling myself that even if the seminar taught nothing achievable without capital, I would enjoy the building and free refreshments. I had never set foot in a hotel.

They did not serve food or drinks. They gave us notebooks with the company’s name printed on them, and a can of water each.

The special guests of honour consisted of a lecturer from the biggest university in town, a prominent pastor, the most famous Agbor musician, a barrister, and two friends of the host who had flown in from the USA for the occasion. They gave motivational speeches about seizing opportunities, success, and resilience.

Then the host took the microphone to explain, at last, how one could make five million naira or more in one year.

It required capital, eventually. Buy land worth ₦5,000,000 from them at a cheaper rate in instalments. When you finish paying, the land becomes yours. If you don’t like the location, after another year, they would give you ₦5,000,000. Or invest directly in the company, which would return the money with interest, depending on the size and duration of the investment. For those with no capital, there was a referral scheme: 10% of any land sale you brought them.

“If you cannot raise money to buy land,” the host said, spreading his hands, “can you not go and find people who have money, and refer them to us? We will do the talking. As soon as they buy, your bonus is credited.”

That was when I understood I had wasted my Saturday. But it had been pleasant, being near people of that caliber, treated with ceremony by the staff.

On my way out, I passed a small crowd arguing about the seminar’s actual value. Some called it a genuine investment opportunity. Others called it a social-media get-rich scheme, dressed for a hall instead of a Zoom call.

“They gather people under the promise of free knowledge. Eventually they will try to sell you a

thing."

"Exactly. Like a 'masterclass,' which only turns each student into a coach who sells the same course to the next crowd."

"If those so-called gurus are already making money, why do they need our course fees?"

"That is their income. Turning students into coaches who sell to more students."

I was glad, in a way, that so many people saw things as I did.

Near the gate, I overheard a young woman on her phone, telling someone, "Mẹ tẹtha obọna." *I am coming right away.*

That wasn't the general Isoko you hear announced in radio jingles, but my corner of it, the accent that only comes from my hometown.

I waited for her to finish her call.

Her friends were nearby, blabbing about the new water park on Benin Road. The allegedly largest water park in West Africa. I'd seen the signpost but had never been there. I couldn't afford such leisure.

"Excuse me," I said when the lady hung up. "That was Olomoro Isoko you just spoke. I am from there."

She looked at me, startled. It was the first time I had seen her. Something in her face suggested she had seen hard times.

"Olomoro?" she said nervously. "You are from Olomoro?"

"Born and raised."

She laughed.

"Wow! That is my hometown, too."

Her friends were still chattering; one confessed she couldn't swim, another related a date she once had at that water park, followed by the cheer women share when men are the subject.

I kept my conversation with Judith warm and professional, the way I learnt from social media coaches who instruct other men on how to be men.

It worked.

Within minutes, she agreed to take my number. She held out her phone with a shy smile, and I typed my number into it myself.

I left the place feeling ten feet tall.

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A relationship was not my plan for that year. But after days of talking to Judith, I noticed how polite and conversational she was. Every time our talk turned intimate, I found some other topic and

steered us away. Even after we had exhausted hobbies, childhood memories, music, books, and the generic scaffolding two strangers use to test each other, we kept finding new things to discuss.

I used to hear people say they spoke for hours on the phone during their talking stage, and I asked what on earth they discussed. Now I know.

One evening she startled me by saying, "Did you know I am an old woman?"

There had always been something about her – a sadness beneath the cheerfulness, like a stain under a fresh coat of paint.

When she asked that, I understood she must be in her late twenties, maybe older. The talk was everywhere, in the mouths of aunties and old men about women who marry at that age out of desperation, not love. Some claim they would rather stay single than settle. But the criticism finds them, and they have to find a husband by any means; even a man half-finished, or a man with nothing, as long as there is a husband to point to.

I told her, honestly, that I had guessed she was twenty-three or twenty-four. She looked that young and pretty. I reminded her of the girls I'd seen her with at the seminar and told her she fit that bracket.

"Those are family friends or my apprentices," she said. "They call me 'aunty.'"

She asked my age.

"I will be twenty-nine next month."

"You look more mature than that."

People always said so. I asked her age. She told me her date of birth instead of a number, like she wanted me to do the arithmetic myself, so that whatever discomfort follows is technically my own doing.

I did the arithmetic. She was six years and some months older than me.

That night I pulled up the photos she'd sent over the weeks. The woman in them looked twenty-four.

In our next call, she asked if the age difference was a problem. I told her it wasn't.

I had already done the heavy thinking the night before. I wouldn't want to marry an older woman, because of what people would say and what my family would think. I wondered, absurdly, if that dream had been a warning aimed precisely at this.

But I told her age was not a problem. I asked instead about her genotype.

"AA," she said.

That baffled me more than the age had. I am AS myself, and where I come from, a woman still unmarried in her late twenties is assumed to be AS too, someone the AA men take as a favour and expect to be thanked for. I had half expected to hear it. If she had said AS, I would have had an honest reason to leave, one nobody could argue with. AA took that from me. She was not what the gossip said, and I had no exit left.

"What is your own genotype?" She asked.

“AS.”

“Ok; it’s fine.”

I asked about her past relationships.

“That is a topic for another day,” she said. I noticed her voice trembled.

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We let it rest for a few days. When I brought it up again, she was visibly uncomfortable and asked if we could meet in person instead.

We met at a quiet lounge beside a bank on Benin Road. We sat far from other people.

She sobbed, telling me about the men who had used her.

“There is nothing I haven’t done for love,” she said. “They always walked away once they’d taken what they wanted.”

The man she almost married at twenty-five had cheated with her best friend. The next one cheated with a single mother. She cut off men altogether and focused on her business.

“I wish I could remain single without all these dramas from people. Imagine, an aunt once suggested a widower for me to marry as if I was a failure. I swallowed my pride and consented, but before our introduction, he found someone younger. An uncle suggested to me a divorced man whose family, on learning my age, quietly withdrew the offer.”

Now, she said, she did not expect to find a single young man she could be proud to bring home.

“I want someone genuine, who will respect and cherish me, without making me feel bad because of my age.”

That was when I decided to marry her against every calculation I had made. She was pretty, polite, and well-raised. I couldn’t see anything about her that I would resent. I decided to become the man who dignified her pride.

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Three months in, she asked me to meet her parents. Their house in the Government Reserved Area was a duplex with pillars out front like a bank branch. I felt like a hired help who had wandered through the wrong gate.

Her family received me warmly – her aristocratic father especially. Once he noticed me staring at the framed photographs lining the hallway, he asked why I was so interested in them. I found myself giving him not just the names but full biographies. There was Alfred Nobel, Albert Einstein, Ernest Hemingway, Friedrich Nietzsche, Nikola Tesla, Abraham Lincoln, Joseph Stalin, among others. I not only identified faces, but I also gave dates, context, and small ironies of their lives.

They stared at me, amazed, as though I were the host and they were the guests.

Judith’s eyes had a glow in them I hadn’t seen before, something that made her look younger than her photographs even managed.

Looking young, I noticed, was their family trait. Her youngest sister, twenty-five, could pass for eighteen. Her brothers looked like boys fresh out of secondary school, though two of them already graduated with BSc. and each owned a car.

That was the day I understood I might not marry Judith after all – not because of anything said, but because of hierarchy. Her personal bathroom alone, attached to her own room, was the size of the single room I lived in, the one I shared a toilet block with six other tenants on a street I would never have brought her near.

At the end of the visit, she sensed the shift and asked what was wrong.

"I am sorry for bringing you this far," I said. "Please find someone who can take care of you."

She laughed it off, thinking it a joke, until she saw that I meant it. Then she asked to see where I lived.

I told her I would rather drop dead.

Judith started calling me on video calls after that visit. I didn't take them so she wouldn't see the walls behind me.

The next invitation was to her shop instead, a fabric-and-décor showroom on Old Lagos Road that sold imported furniture, aso-oke, and the kind of curtain materials that one alone could wipe out my entire savings.

Earlier, she bought me new jeans trousers, a new polo T-shirt, and new sneakers for the visit. Those were the most decent clothes I had worn in years.

I stood in her shop feeling like a gigolo.

After that visit, I cut off communications with her.

She gave me the space for a week. Then she called from an unknown number after I stopped expecting to hear from her.

"Good evening, dear," she said warmly, as though I had not vanished on her at all. "Come to the shop this evening. I have something for you."

I was crazy about her. But I did not want her to suffer for my shame. I apologised for disappearing, and she asked me to come anyway.

She had sent the apprentices home already when I got there. She sat romantically on my lap – the first time we had been that close. She was sweet, unbothered, and glad to have me back, as if I wasn't the lucky one. Before I left, she sent ₦1,000,000 into my account.

"Perhaps there are things you have been wanting," she said. "Nobody must know."

That was the first time in my life I had a million naira sitting in my account. I was ashamed, but I needed the money badly to improve myself. I couldn't reject it. I told myself it was a loan I would repay in the future. Two weeks later, she added ₦500,000. I moved out of the room where I shared a toilet with strangers into a self-contained flat in a better part of town.

On the first night I lay on the new mattress, ashamed of how well I slept.

She was excited to hear I moved to a better accommodation. But she didn't say she would come and see it.

Her father invited me to their house one Sunday afternoon. The family was as warm as before, still impressed to have me around. After lunch, her parents took me aside to their car park.

"Is it true you are in a romantic relationship with Judith?" Her father asked.

My palms sweated, and my heart beat violently.

"Yes, sir…yes…yes, ma." I stammered, unable to hold eye contact.

"There is no problem," he said dismissively. "You are a handsome, intelligent young man. As long as your intentions are genuine, you have our full support."

"You are always welcome to our home," his wife said, smiling pleasantly.

I broke into tears.

Sometimes that is all it takes. Total support from a source powerful enough to make your own doubts feel unnecessary.

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The following month, we visited my family's compound, and I introduced Judith to my people. From there, events moved faster than I could follow. Her family had waited years to hear that a man had come for her, and they were not about to give me time to change my mind.

Tradition required me to see her parents and uncles one after the other, buy them drinks, and ask formally for her hand.

Judith personally bought me clothes and shoes, and paid for things I needed, but traditionally, the bride price itself, and the accompanying rites, must come from my own sweat.

My mum, uncles, aunties, and elder siblings pooled what they could to help me meet it.

After that, her parents handled everything else.

The reception was glamorous, held at an event centre in Agbor where we were based. We booked hotels for relatives from distant places.

All happened in the same town where I was just another broke guy in the neighbourhood.

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Judith was radiant throughout the ceremony, as though marriage was the next scheduled event after survival. But the moment we arrived at my rented flat after the ceremony, and she saw the washed-up one room, a narrow, unfurnished parlour, a small, shabby kitchen, with a bathroom whose warped door cannot fully close – something in her changed.

She sat on the edge of my flat bed and began to cry. She didn't allow me to come close to her.

"I knew you were not rich," she said, mournfully. "But I never let myself picture this." She looked around the place as if it were evidence against her. "People will say I groomed a young man to

escape being laughed at, and anyone who sees this place will believe them." Her voice broke. "This marriage has changed my life. I don't know how to cope with this."

I felt embarrassed, but I understood, even as it frightened me. Until then, I had thought I was the only one in this marriage with something to be ashamed of. I tried to console her, but she couldn't stop venting her disappointment.

We spent our first night apart, that Saturday, in a silence neither of us knew how to break. I couldn't remember the last time I felt so sad.

On Sunday at service, she performed composure the way I had once performed biographies for her family, polished, and watched by everyone.

In the evening while we were alone again, she said, "It's like I am suffocating. I can't focus. I need a few days away from this marriage to find myself."

"Okay," I mumbled, because what else can a man like me say? I thought I was doing us a favour by marrying her. "If that will help you."

I went through our marriage photos and felt ashamed of myself.

"Touch me," she mumbled, when I thought she was already asleep.

We did it clumsily.

On Monday morning, she packed a bag, her face tight with grief and disappointment, and left.

I stood in the doorway of my flat, married a few days, afraid it was already finished.

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For three days, her number would not connect. I went to her parents' house; she was not there, and they had heard nothing either. People began asking after my wife, and I did not know what to tell them.

"She travelled," I said.

"Without you? But you just got married."

"It's an urgent business trip," I lied, and hated the taste it left in my mouth.

I was reduced to a liar who even a child could see through because I married Judith.

On the fourth day, she answered every message I sent, one after another, as if opening a row of doors she'd locked out of spite. She called me on video call.

"How are you, sweetheart?" I managed to say.

"I am fine now," she said and began to cry. "I am sorry, darling, for my reaction. I needed to be somewhere nobody knew me so I could organize my thoughts. I miss you so much."

"Where are you?" I asked, glad past the point of dignity.

"São Vicente."

“Where is that?”

“Cape Verde. Oh god, just come over. You don’t need a visa, just your passport. Please. I am booking your flight right now.”

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I had always wanted to travel, but never imagined it would happen through a temporary, lost, newly wedded wife.

When I landed in Mindelo on a connecting flight from Senegal, it did not look like anywhere I had pictured. The town climbed a hillside toward the sea in blocks of ochre and faded blue. The Portuguese-colonial buildings were sun-bleached to the colour of old photographs. A low, sad music came from somewhere. It was unlike the amplified gospel or afrobeat at home, and the air smelled of salt and grilled fish rather than diesel and dust.

Judith met me at the airport, rested and composed, dressed the way she did in her parents’ duplex rather than the way she’d dressed crying on our bed.

She hugged me tightly and stayed there like a child. I couldn’t ask her the questions I had carried on the plane the whole flight over.

In the hotel room, it was not clumsy this time. It was passionate and consummating.

That evening, we sat on a terrace above the water, the sky orange over Monte Verde.

“Darling, do you feel you have made a terrible mistake, marrying me?” She asked.

I turned to look at her, remembering I had heard something similar in a dream from a woman who did not exist, two weeks before I ever laid eyes on Judith.

“No,” I said. I noticed she was looking at me. I sighed heavily and said, “I was only disappointed in failing you.”

“Don’t say that, please. Will you continue to choose me like this, even in my worst?”

“I love you. And I know you are a good person. So, yes.”

“Are you sure?” Her eyes sparkled like that day I recited biographies at her parents’ house.

“Yes,” I said and kissed her temple.

She kissed my lips.

In the dream, I had said no and let her leave. I had thought the dream was a warning. Tonight it felt more like a second chance, and I did not know whether I said yes because I loved her or because I was afraid of losing her.

Below us, someone was singing a slow, sad line over and over in a language I didn’t understand but followed anyway.

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