

I trudged the steps to my apartment, feeling the weight of exhaustion on my shoulders. It was just past 2 am and my night had been a wild one that left me feeling out of place and craving the comfort of my own space. To this day, I still wonder how extroverts do it.

I unlocked the door and walked inside, greeted only by the hum of the refrigerator. I kicked off my heels and wiped my feet on the mat as I closed the door behind me.

My thoughts were disordered, and I tried to make sense of the events of the night as I made my way to the couch and sank into its soft cushions with a sigh. One thing was certain, I would never agree to attend another one of Osi's parties again.

I had always been content with observing rather than participating. But that night, Osi had encouraged me to "come out of my shell," saying "it'll be fun. There will be music and drinks!" None of that appealed to me, but I went anyway, and what did it get me? A depleted social battery, a headache, and sore feet from wearing those death traps I called heels all night.

I closed my eyes, reliving the night through snippets of the conversations, laughter, and music. It was all a blur. Despite the rush of adrenaline from being surrounded by people and the energy of the night, I couldn't shake the feeling of being an outsider, as if I didn't belong in that world.

One moment stood out in my mind, though. I remembered the back of Osi's house, the breeze blowing across the back of my neck, and the smile of a stranger. Osi was determined to introduce me to every person at his party as if I was some guest of honor so I managed to escape the crowded house through the back door in the kitchen to get some fresh air and recharge.

I hadn't been outside for long before I heard the door open again and the sound of music escaped. A young man walked out, muttering curses under his breath as he approached where I was sitting.

I couldn't help but notice his confident gait, and as if sensing my gaze, he caught my eye. He paused and tilted his head. The lights from the house were bright enough to cast a glow on his face.

"Uh..." he glanced around nervously before looking back at me, "you're looking at me like you don't know me."

I raised an eyebrow, "I don't."

He appeared surprised, "Really?"

I crossed my arms, "Yes. Who are you?"

He looked confused for a moment before his eyes sparkled with mystery. "I'm nobody," he said as he walked closer to me, "mind if I sit?"

I didn't respond because I didn't want him to sit, but he seemed to take my silence as "yes," so he sat next to me.

"Wow, the sky sure is pretty tonight," he said, and I could smell the alcohol on his breath. He was drunk.

But he was right. The night sky was a masterpiece dotted with sparkling diamond-like stars that shimmered brightly. The stars looked like fireflies, gracefully moving across the vast sky, while the moon, resembling a glowing pearl, cast its silver light on us.

"Why are you here all alone?" the stranger asked. "There's a whole party going on inside."

"I don't like parties," I replied flatly, and then wondered why I had even responded.

"Why not?"

I glanced at him, "What's there to like?"

He shrugged, "I don't know. The drinks. The music. The women and men."

His response was so much like Osi's that I laughed. "That sounds fun and all, but I don't think I'm built for it. I admire the people who have the strength for it though."

"Hmmm," he narrowed his eyes at me as if he could somehow read my mind.

I rolled my eyes and looked back up at the sky. He was definitely drunk.

"Well, I can understand you," he said after a few seconds. "I...well, I don't like parties either."

Now it was my turn to say, "Hmmm," I played with the hem of my dress. "You don't seem like it."

"I have to attend parties like this and meet people," he said defensively. "My manager says it's good to make connections."

"Manager?" I turned to him and his eyes opened wide. He had that nervous look on his face again, as if he had revealed something he shouldn't have.

"I'm a musician," he said, offering me a fake grin.

"Oh," I blinked at him, "that makes a lot of sense."

Osi was one of the biggest producers in the music industry. I had already met multiple artists I didn't know, popular video vixens, and a guy dressed in a pink teddy bear suit. Apparently, that was his brand.

"That's why you expected me to know you," I said to the stranger. "Sorry, I don't listen to music much."

He gasped dramatically, "What?! Why?!"

I shrugged, "I've never been a fan."

"So, what do you listen to?"

"Podcasts."

He groaned like I had blasphemed against God. "That must be so sad."

I smirked, "What's sad is being forced to attend parties when you don't want to."

He pouted, "It's not my fault. I love making music, but it's the fame part of it that I don't like."

"Who doesn't want fame?" I asked.

I was a writer with multiple self-published African dystopian novels, yet I was still unknown. Fame was a glittering prize, a dazzling illusion that constantly eluded me. I yearned for years to have my books receive recognition, to be the subject of discussions and reviews, and to be the next Suzanne Collins. I would imagine myself standing on the grandest platform, receiving accolades, and being loved by millions.

"It's a strange feeling though," the stranger said softly, "to be loved by so many people."

I glanced at him and he took a deep breath.

"A lot of the time," he said, "I feel like I'm standing on a tightrope, high above a sea of faces, all staring up at me with adoration. The wind is howling, the rope is swaying, and I'm trying to keep my balance, trying not to let them down. Every step feels like a dare, every breath feels like a prayer."

I tried to imagine what that felt like, tried to use my knowledge and ability with words to convey his feelings and thoughts. But all I could come up with was one word: dizzy. A person on a tightrope, struggling to keep their balance, would be

dizzy from the height, dizzy from the pressure, dizzy from the knowledge that a single misstep could send them crashing into the unknown.

"But you have to keep moving forward," I whispered. He glanced at me, and I knew he heard me.

"I keep smiling, keep waving because they're counting on me, they're loving me and believing in me. It feels like the greatest gift in the world, even if it makes me feel like the loneliest person alive sometimes," he said, staring at his feet and chuckling bitterly. "Ah, I'm too high and drunk for all this, and I feel like I'm trauma dumping on you."

I realized I didn't mind, so I shrugged and said, "It's fine."

"I don't even know your name," he said. "Wait, no. Don't tell me."

"Why not?" I asked.

"I think there's something beautiful about it," he said, stretching his arm to the sky as if he wanted to touch the moon. "You know a big part of me now, but don't know my name. I think it just goes to show how weak a name is. You can know a person's name, but not know them."

I snorted. "Jesus, are you always this deep when you're faded?"

He chuckled. "Only sometimes."

We sat back in silence, staring at the stars, and listening to the music coming from inside the house. I wondered if Osi was looking for me. He never took long to notice when I had escaped.

"I wish for fame and recognition a lot because it comes with privilege and honor," I found myself saying for no reason. "I know it's a great weight to bear, but when you feel loved, seen, understood, and supported, there's nothing quite as powerful and valuable in this world."

I listened to the stranger take a deep breath, wondering what he was thinking. Then I wondered why I cared about what he thought. Maybe I felt obligated to give him a piece of myself in return for the piece he had given me.

"I used to think that too," he said. "About how being loved by many people was a testament to the person I was, and how if they saw the good in me and appreciated what made me unique, it would somehow make me worthy of anything. I wanted to be true to myself and also make everyone happy."

"Do you think you've been able to handle that pressure?" I asked.

He smiled, "To be honest, no," he replied. "It's not just the pressure that makes me uneasy. It's the fear of losing it all. As an artist, a lot of what I do depends on whether people love my work and me, and I used to worry that they would stop if I didn't constantly improve. It's also hard to know what to do with all the love I receive. I want to connect with everyone, but how do I show love to so many people at once and still stay true to myself? It's a tall order, and I know I've lost sight of who I was."

"I see," I said sympathetically.

"Yep," he grinned childishly. "Now I just attend stupid parties with my manager and get high and drink just to get through it."

My heart ached for him, so I did something unexpected. I took his hand. "You don't have to resort to that," I said.

He frowned slightly and looked at our hands. "Resort to what?"

"Drugs," I said, biting my lip. "Just to escape."

He tilted his head and smiled, revealing dimples for the first time. "Don't we all love to escape at times?"

"I guess so," I said, letting go of his hand, but he kept his gaze on the spot where mine had been.

He was about to say something when the back door opened and the music flooded out as Osi stepped outside. I stood before he noticed me, and he smiled when he finally did.

"Cuzzo!" he yelled, using his annoying nickname for me. "I've been looking for you."

"I just needed some fresh air," I explained as I walked over to him.

Osi's gaze shifted to the stranger. "Bro, I thought you left with your guys."

"Nope, I'm going solo tonight," the stranger said, standing next to me. "The lady here was just telling me that she doesn't listen to music."

Osi looked amused. "Yes, my cousin is like that."

The stranger raised both eyebrows. "Cousin," he repeated, then turned to me and smiled. "Before you go, I have a recommendation for you," he said, leaning in and whispering a song title and artist into my ear.

"I think you'll like it," were his last words to me.

Back in my apartment, I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling. I grabbed my purse from the ground and searched for my phone. I turned it on to see a missed call and a text from Osi, asking if I made it home safely. I texted him back and opened my music app, typing in the name of the song and artist that the stranger had recommended to me.

The song came up quickly, and I grabbed my earphones, put them on, and hit play. Although I didn't listen to music often, I was no stranger to the rush of emotions that washed over me whenever I heard a good song. But this was different. It was

raw, like discovering a hidden gem, hidden away in a dusty old attic. As I listened, I could see it shining like a beacon of light in the dark.

The artist's voice and melody danced across my ears, painting vivid colors of sound. Each chord struck a chord within my heart, and I found myself swaying my head to the rhythm, humming along, and getting lost in the story being told. A story about a sad boy who found his expression in sounds. A story that said it didn't matter who listened because it was just him and his music.

As the song ended, I picked up my phone and stared at the artist's name. I know it was him, the stranger. But I had to be sure, so I swiped over to Google and typed the name in. When his pictures popped up, I smiled, but my smile faded as I scrolled down.

"He's pretty popular," I muttered to myself.

A recent article caught my eye, and I paused my scrolling, a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. The words on the screen felt like a physical blow, knocking the breath from my body.

"...Found Dead in Apparent Suicide."

The sound of my heartbeat thundered in my ears as I read the details. He had left the party alone before midnight.

I know I saw him leave.

He was found in his car with a gun in his hand and a bullet in his head.

The world around me faded to a blur as tears streamed down my face. My thoughts raced as I tried to make sense of the senseless. The events of the night came back to me - his laughter, his smile, the sadness in his voice when he spoke of his life. Everything flashed through my mind like a slideshow set to a soundtrack of sorrow. The silence of the room was deafening, only broken by the sound of my sobs.



At that moment, I wondered if the dizziness could ever be worth the fall.