

This Little Light Of Mine

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About Troy

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This Little Light Of Mine

In the silence of the dark room he finds his voice but realises he has forgotten how to use it. He clears his throat and tries again, opening his mouth wide as if yawning. Warm air liquefies before him and he blinks twice then half-closes his eyes. He gropes in the dark, tapping the side of the bed and finds his phone. The light from the screen is blinding and he turns down the brightness. He opens one app, closes it, opens another, closes it. He puts the phone back on the bed, screen facing down. The room is once again dark. A sound makes his hand dart, by reflex, and reach for the phone. He hesitates then taps the screen. He sees the message and his voice comes alive with a sob, tears flowing freely from his eyes, fire burning under them.

It is only when his alarm rings that he stops crying. He presses the back of his hand on his face and wipes away the tears, feeling the shame of having an outburst because of a text message from another stranger he will never get to meet. He pulls himself up on the bed, presses his legs together, and slowly lifts them towards the edge of the bed. He lowers them. The right foot touches the floor first, then the left. He lets them stay on the cold floor, hesitant to make the next move. The alarm rings again. He remembers: *the medication helps with the pain*. And although the pain he feels now is not in his leg, he hopes the doctor forgot to mention that the drugs also help with heartaches.

Every rejection, however it comes, is a memory; a way of remembering how he ended up here. A conjuring of the events leading up to the “I love you. I really do. But I have to move on with my life. I don’t want to be, uhmm, what’s the phrase, held back by all of *this*. I’m sure there’ll be someone else for you.” And: “I don’t want to break your heart. That’s why I’m doing this over the phone.” And then: “Just let me be. We had a wonderful three years, I know. But there is more to life, Evans. I have to go.”

It is too late to lock it all out. He remembers the prolonged beeping sound on the phone.

The silence of the other side.

He grabs the chair by its wheel and pulls it towards him. The thin wheel rolls backwards slightly. With one rehearsed move he lifts himself off the bed—his weight resting on his arms—and onto the seat. He breathes slowly and bites on his lower lip leaving teeth marks.

The lights flick on and he switches on the television too. He skims through the channels, trying to find a distraction—something to keep his mind off the silence of his house. The silence reminds him of

things he'd rather not remember, things he wishes he could forget, things that only cause pain when he'd prefer to feel nothing. On the television, a man's with a voice sings about love or something to do with it. He switches off the television, because that, too, he prefers not to hear about.

A sound from his phone, he picks it from the bed.

A new message:

—Hi.

—Hey, how are you?

—Im good. What you up to?

—Nothing much tbh. Just at home. You?

—Well, my friends and I are going out. In Westie. Wnna come?

—I'd love to. I can't.

—Why not?

He wonders whether he should tell this stranger he used to go out every weekend, that he used to love dancing on Fridays and Saturdays. He wants to be honest but honesty has brought him nothing but rejection and loneliness. And so he wonders whether he should reveal he cannot go out anymore. He needs his chair to move around, he remembers the previous message: *Omg!! You are a cripple? Sorry but I don't do cripples.*

Instead:

—I just don't like going out.

—Oh it will be fan. Just come. We'll go to Brew then Havana. ***fun**

—Next time maybe. Why don't you come over we hang out. Maybe watch a movie?

—Lol. Most movies are boring. I liked Black Panther though.

—So you are a Marvel nerd?

—Whats that?

—Nvm. Anyway, I'm gonna go to sleep. It's late.

—Ok. Maybe I can come over after the club. Kitu 3am.

He doesn't notice the silence in the room, the way it takes up space, like a thing capable of being inflated. He doesn't realise his hands are trembling. It has been more than two years since the accident, since he started using the chair. This is the most time anyone has given him on this app.

—3am is late but I can give you my number and you call when you wanna come.

—Ok. Im a bit tipsy and really horny btw.

—Me too.

—Really? When was your last time?

—Two years.

He wishes there was an un-send option. Like words spoken in a conversations it is impossible to take them back. He shakes his head and thinks himself a fool.

—No way! That's a long dry spell. Lol.

—Yeah. I had a bad breakup with my ex.

—Wah! Sorry bout that.

—It's alright. It's just I've been looking for a meaningful connection with someone. Not just sex but someone genuine.

—Yea. Me too. People are so dishonest out here.

—*Sorry. Gotta go. My friends say the Uber is here.*

—*Ok. I'll just leave my number here and you can call me later.*

The silence rushes back. He closes the app, opens YouTube, and plays some old school dancehall. He shakes his head and shoulders. His legs are still, like they are not part of his body, like they refuse to belong to him. He tries to move them. They are heavy. He winces at the pain. He squeezes his eyes shut and the sound fills his head: glass breaking; metal ramming on metal and flesh alike; tyres skidding on the wet tarmac as the driver tries to step on the brakes; men, women, and children screaming; rain pouring from the open sky like a curse; someone's phone playing *this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine* for the child on her lap; his mother's voice asking him what time he said he'd be home; other cars hooting; onlookers saying how stupid the driver was to try and overtake a lorry in the Salgaa stretch while drunk; ghosts screams from people who died on that same road.

He opens his eyes.

On his phone screen, a sinewy man with thick, jet-black dreadlocks falling to his shoulder sings about how much he loves pussy, and walking around Kingston's streets looking for somewhere to put his cock. A woman dances besides him and bends for him to rub his crotch against her back. He is short; her behind rubs against his stomach instead. His voice was meant for anything else, not singing. When he "sings" the veins in his neck nearly burst. The woman dances, compelled, perhaps by economic circumstances, to be in the video.

3 AM.

He has not slept at all. He wheels himself to the kitchen, opens the fridge and picks out a tub of what he thinks is ice-cream. His last visit to the supermarket was more than a week ago. Since the chair he has avoided public places lest he meets his friends from days before and they ask him—with a look of pity and dread—what happened to him. He has also stopped going to church or work—his office job at the IT firm allows him to work remotely. He misses going to the movies and wonders how soon the new Marvel movie will be available online in HD.

He moves to the sitting room and finds the window open, a gentle breeze billowing the curtains. He watches it until the wind stills and wonders with irritation why the cleaning girl left the window open. He tries to close it but the latch is too high. Outside, he hears the sound of cars rushing past and a dog

growling then howling. The moon smiles upon him, the stars are diamonds pinned to the sky. He tries to close the window again and fails. *Is it time to move to a new house that accommodates his current disposition?* He heads back to the bedroom.

Two new messages:

—*Hey. Saw your number. You still awake.*

—*Hi, I am awake.*

—*My friends just left. Can I come over?*

—*Sure.*

—*Can you pay for my cab? I'm broke aki.*

—*Take an Uber. I'll pay when you get here.*

—*I don't have Uber. Just Mpesa me. I'll get regular taxi.*

He has doubts, but he does not think anything could go wrong with this person. Maybe luck has finally smiled upon him. He wonders if now is the time to admit he uses a wheelchair. He decides against it. The admission has cost him so much and he has paid for it with loneliness.

He sends the money. When he tries to send his location he notices his number is blocked. He shakes his head and curses aloud for being so desperate he did not stop to think. He tries to call the number but it is switched off. He wheels himself to the bed and throws himself off the chair onto the bed. His legs dangle over the side. He wants them removed, cut off and taken away. He hates their betrayal. He hates the driver who caused the accident and ran away, who is probably driving another bus full of unsuspecting passengers. He cries himself to sleep.

When he wakes, his room is filled with a blinding sheet of light. He presses his face against the pillow and remembers a deadline for work—his phone tells him it is three hours away. He closes his eyes and rubs the erection pressing through his pyjama pants. He picks up his phone and opens Pornhub and finds something he likes. The act is short-lived. He closes the browser with disgust, annoyed by the wet patch on his pants. He lies in bed, silence all around him. He wonders if the cleaner will show up today.

He gets out of bed and drags himself to the bathroom, his purple towel draped on his shoulder. This is the highlight of his day—when he can display a sense of independence and shower by himself. He looks forward to it, unlike those first weeks when his mother camped at his house and cleaned him thrice a day. It was her way of showing concern. He wishes it had not been a reminder of how helpless and child-like he was. His mother was not bothered, she would laugh loudly and say: “Now you are embarrassed when I am the one who bathed you for the first nine years of your life.”

Birds outside his window sing, not privy to the sadness he feels.

He perches on the toilet seat and kneads his stomach as if to jumpstart his bowel movement. He holds his knees and hears the splash, a stone thrown in a pond. One of the side effects of the medication: he does not shit with ease. Another stone drops in the pond, he breathes with relief. He wipes himself, flushes the toilet, and opens the shower. The jet of water splashes on the darkened scars on his torso and rubs soap over them, massaging gently, begging them to go away. They are like war marks, the wounds caused by the shards of glass entering and exiting his body, as he lay on the tarmac surrounded by strange faces, his lower half still trapped in the wrought metal of the car, waiting for an ambulance.

His phone beeps. He fights the urge to get out of the shower with foam still clinging to his armpit hair and pubes. He finishes his shower, ties a towel around his waist and walks slowly towards the bed, leaning on the wall more heavily for support. He winces at the pain but he tells himself pain is a necessary part of the recovery process. He remembers those are not his words but the doctor’s.

He does not check his phone. Instead, he dresses in loose-fitting sweatpants and a grey t-shirt and sits at his desk. He works, an Afrobeat mix in the background. A song he has not heard in a long while comes and he remembers how he and his ex loved dancing to this particular song. When the chorus comes on he remembers: “Listen, Evans I love you so much and I will never leave you.”

He switches off the music.

He works in silence.

Two hours later he emails his boss to report his finished work. He cracks his knuckles, the popping sound makes him smile. He leans back on the chair and stretches, spreading his arms wide until his shoulder have some bit of strain. He moves to the bed and finally checks the message.

—*Hey, it's me. Sorry about last night. I didn't mean to block you.*

—*Why did you do that?*

He wants to add an angry emoji but leaves it.

—*I don't know. I'm sorry.*

—*I can send back the money.*

—*No need. I just thought you were honest at least. You could have just told me you needed money instead of conning me. It was not nice at all.*

—*I dint con you. That's why Im saying I can send back the money.*

—*You can keep it. Don't text me again.*

—*Pls don't say that. I have told you Im sorry.*

—*Can we meet up?*

This is the point he thinks things should end, the point he should walk away, and, maybe even delete this app. However, since the accident and the break up—*the desertion* as he thinks of it—this app has been the window through which he can see the dating world, perhaps his only hope of meeting someone who will accept him and fill the absences in his life. Although he has been unsuccessful on so many occasions, he knows at some point the world will hand him *something*. In the bleakness of everything around him, he chooses to cling to a strand of optimism, something he never really had before. But then those days the world was at his feet, he had all the attention he wanted, and he could go to a club in Westlands and come back home with whomever he wanted.

He is filled with a longing, a yearning to go back in time and live a life where he did not board that bus, where he did not phone his mother and say: “I have never spent Christmas away from home. I will be there on the 23rd.”

And then there are other longings too, that cannot be ignored or pushed aside with the wave of a hand.

—I don't think we can meet up. Let me be honest with you, I was in an accident a while ago, and I now use a wheelchair.

—Oh. Your photo doesn't seem like you are disabled.

—It's an old photo. Taken about three years ago.

—Oh ok.

He knows what *that* means. He knows that form of brevity that is a substitute for silence. He has seen this response so many times but still the finality of it shakes him. He puts the phone down and goes to his computer. He goes through the folder of his movies and wonders whether to re-watch *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He ends up watching an animated film instead. Halfway through, he feels tired and falls asleep on his desk.

Dreams are the worst part of his day because in his dreams he has to confront what he is afraid of the most. He has a dream in which he is standing in the middle of a black river that looks like a road and cars are zooming past him at bullet speed. One of them goes through him and then another and he feels a slight pain when they do that but it builds up as more cars do the same until he is on his knees. He sees his mother telling him to get out of the way but his legs cannot move so he stays kneeling down until, at last, his ex appears and tries to stop the cars.

He wakes up from the dream shaking. Beads of sweat cover his face, his back is drenched in sweat, and his fingers tremble as if he is feeling cold. He calms himself and remembers the doctor always telling him to count backwards—ten to one.

Ten...nine...eight...

A notification on his phone.

Seven...six...five...

Another notification.

Four...three...

He breaks the counting and picks up his phone. It is a message from his service provider asking him to donate towards the Safaricom Marathon for the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. He remembers when he took part in the marathon three years ago, and how the sun was hot and he was sweaty and sticky as he ran the dusty high-grassland roads. He had told himself that he would take part in the marathon every year for the cause. All that changed after the accident. Now he only wishes he could walk again. No aspirations to run marathons or climb Mount Kilimanjaro or do a trek along the sandy beaches of the coast. None of that. Just be able to walk from this room to the next and the next. And to dance again. He wishes for nothing else but a time when his life was whole and he could go wherever he wanted to whenever he felt like it. He realises now that he had never thought of it as a privilege, that simple act of putting one foot forward followed by the next. He had never stopped to think of what life would be if he had been born without that privilege. Now he embodies that reality and sometimes he finds himself wondering what he did to deserve this.

Nothing. He answers himself. He knows that, as difficult as it is to admit, life happens that way, every single day, and the fact that it is not one's reality does not mean it does not exist.

He decides to go out and get some fresh air. He feels suffocated by the silence in this house, and often finds himself regretting the decision to reject his brother's offer to move in with him. He regrets shutting down the proposition from his mother to have someone else come in to take care of him. He was used to his freedom—absolute, uninhibited freedom—and he knew someone else staying with him would mean an end to that. Back then, naturally, he had not come to terms with his new life in the chair.

Outside he wheels himself on the concrete slab that was added to his veranda when he was discharged from the hospital. He goes around the house twice, looking to see if any of his neighbours are around. No one seems to be in the vicinity so he goes back into the house and sits in the living room, consumed by the terror of silence and loneliness once more. He goes to the bedroom and picks up his phone. He checks Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to while away time but there is nothing of interest going on them. He has not uploaded any photos of himself on any of the platforms since the accident. He wonders if he should close them down.

After an hour, he finds a response to the earlier conversation:

—Hi, sorry I went silent. Was a bit busy. Anyway, what you up to?

He responds: *Nothing much.*

—*Wanna meet up today?*

—*Told you I can't.*

—*I can come over.*

—*I'm okay with that but I hope you are comfortable with who I am.*

—*Yup. Im cool.*

—*What time?*

—*10.30pm*

—*That's a bit late. Maybe 8.30?*

—*I'll try.*

—*Let me send you my location.*

He hopes the fact that there has been no request for money this time means he has finally found a genuine connection. He pushes the previous events aside and tries to focus on the fact that this is the first who has agreed to meet him since he got on the app. Even though it is still a few hours away he phones the cleaner and asks her to come over and tidy up. He tells her he will pay extra if she comes right away.

When she arrives he has tidied his desk and tells her to clean the kitchen even though there is not much to clean in a house where barely any cooking happens and there is rarely a visitor. She polishes the surfaces, he nods to show his satisfaction. His body feels awake, he wheels himself around at a pace she has never seen him move before. When she is done he pays her and thanks her for coming on such short notice.

Afterwards, he calls Domino's to order two large pizzas. As he waits for the delivery he has a second quick shower. He puts on a pair of black sweatpants and an orange t-shirt with black sleeves. He rubs

some cologne on his neck and wrists. He checks his phone every ten or so minutes and wonders if time has slowed down to frustrate him. He plays some music to distract himself but he does not listen to it.

At 8.30 PM he wheels himself to the living room and waits near the door. His heart races and he can feel drops of sweat form on his back. The t-shirt clings to his skin. He counts.

Ten...nine...eight...

He checks his phone.

Seven...six...five...

Still no message.

He dreads the thought of getting to one without a call or a knock at the door. He closes his eyes and tries to make the time move faster. He hears the music coming from his computer. He does not recognise the song. He waits by the door telling himself to keep calm and wait until 9 PM.

He notices the window from last night is still open, but the air is so still and the curtain stays unmoving.

He did not remember to ask the cleaner to close it.