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SHIFTED ILLUSIONS

by

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Synopsis

Kesiena Oha is a twenty-five year old ambitious artist living in London. Just coming out of a bad relationship, he tries to put his life back together.

Four years earlier his father had suddenly died in Nigeria, and Kesiena is in an emotional turmoil. He feels guilty for the little time he had spent with his father when the retired judge was alive. The loss of his father and despair at his country's economic ruin, continue to torment him. He leaves the farm he has inherited to travel up north to consult with his favourite sister. Convinced that he can not fulfill his ambition as an acclaimed artist in Nigeria, he decides to leave for Britain, and hopes for the recognition of his works alongside the great artists of his generation.

In London Kesiena begins a love relationship with Omote that is doomed because of their conflicting personalities. Although the relationship ends, Kesiena's loneliness pulls him back to Omote for the occasional rendezvous. When he leaves her bed after a passionate night, he decides to end even that; about time he thinks. Kesiena arrives at his new flat to find that it has been burgled. An investigation by a cynical Sergeant Diplock does little to convince him that the culprit is not his neighbour Hugo, a revolutionary anti-capitalist and animal rights campaigner. Out of the subsequent suspicion and tension between the two neighbours, Kesiena and Hugo begin to see things that they like about each other, and a friendship develops.

Tega is a twenty-four year old school teacher. The orphaned daughter of a Nigerian war hero, was five years old when aunty Ovigwe adopted and brought her to England. Kesiena first meets her on a train in London when he is returning from the Tate Gallery, where a painting of his has been rejected for the second year in a row. When he meets Tega again by chance at her aunty's shop at Deptford market, they strike up a friendship that leads to a whirlwind romance and marriage.

Shortly after their return from a honeymoon in Scotland, Kesiena's old flame unexpectedly comes knocking on their door. Omote is pregnant with his baby. Kesiena is at least relieved that his newly-wed wife is not at home when the ex-girlfriend shows up. The unexpected pregnancy and resulting child will continue to hunt him long after a disillusioned Omote returns to Nigeria. Kesiena battles with his conscience to hide his love child from his loving wife and still keep a happy home. Worse still, his innocent professional encounter with an alluring Mrs. Dickinson will bring problems of it's own. When Mrs. Dickinson asks for a nude

portrait done, Kesiena does not bargain on the unforeseen return of her husband, who thinks a stranger and his naked wife alone in the house has an obvious interpretation. The man is set to kill Kesiena. Luckily, the police comes to his rescue, but the arresting officer is the vindictive Sergeant Diplock.

Kesiena has narrowly escaped with his life and returns home, but the happy family life is soon torn when Tega falls victim to leukaemia. Whilst the wait for a suitable bone marrow donor continues, an emotionally devastated Kesiena will nurse his dying wife for the remaining eighteen months of her life. When not nursing Tega, he throws himself into his painting. In the most prolific period of his career, Kesiena creates his greatest masterpiece; a portrait of his dying wife that will eventually gain the acceptance of the Tate Gallery, an achievement his beloved wife does not live long enough to see. Kesiena accomplishes the ambition that brought him to England, but loses the greatest love of his life. Now his young son must accompany him back to Nigeria to lay his wife to rest.

Chapter One

What had been advertised as a fully furnished lounge was consisted of a wornout sofa, reading desk and a high back chair. The kitchen was by no means the largest in the world, but it had a cooker and a refrigerator. It would serve its purpose. Like the kitchen, the bathroom/toilet wouldn't need a scrub, both were spotlessly clean. Kesiena liked that. *Cleanliness is next to Godliness*, a phrase he had used so often, he wasn't sure of its origin but still it had always come naturally to him.

He followed the Letting Agent towards the next room. It had a sizeable bed in the corner and a chest of drawers. Taking in the sight, Kesiena nodded to himself. The curtains were blue with green stripes, almost matching the navy blue carpet. Stale and thick, the atmosphere was stuffy. He breathed in the unpleasant lack of fresh air and walked through the open space between the bed and opened wardrobe. He felt as if he was being followed by the eyes of the unhappy Letting Agent. When Kesiena had arrived for the appointment twenty-five minutes early, she was having her lunch break at her desk in the cramped office.

Kesiena could tell she didn't like the interruption. She seemed uncomfortable eating in his presence, not that he was watching. She had hurriedly put away the bowl of salad and hungrily guzzled down the can of diet coke. Neither spoke during the ten minutes walk up the hill. Kesiena enjoyed the warm breeze. The overweight Letting Agent hated the punishing uphill climb, he could tell.

The windowsill was clean, the lack of dust generally was one of the things he had noticed. He released the catch, threw open the window and took another look around the bedroom. He noticed that the single bed beside the empty wardrobe had no headboard, but that did not bother him. The smaller of the two bedrooms would serve as his studio. He wanted a place quickly. He would get rid of the bed anyway. The bed he had slept in these last days at the Bed and Breakfast had been terribly uncomfortable. The sag in the middle of it had been a painful affair. His back still ached. Every night at the wretched B&B had been preoccupied with unpleasant thoughts.

'I will take it,' he said to the woman standing at the doorway.

'Okay,' she said absentmindedly. 'You will have to pay the deposit first.'

‘Yes, but I don’t want the bed.’ He pointed at the stained mattress. The B&B experience has cemented his phobia for old beds, besides it was only a single. She shrugged her broad shoulders. ‘You can get rid of it if you want.’

Twenty-five years old and back to square one, he was not really sure in what direction his life was heading, but he knew he would need all the luck in the world.

He finished unpacking the last of the boxes that contained his belongings. Afterwards he flattened all eight empty boxes and stuffed them into refuse bags and carried the bags out to the rubbish skip. With all the boxes out of the way, he set about arranging the flat. First, the clothes into the empty wardrobe. Afterwards he went to the kitchen to sort out the cupboards. Utensils, pot and pans were soon in the order he liked things to be. Then he rearranged the lounge.

He had just got the stereo connected when there was a knock at the door. He glanced at his watch, it was one o’clock. Three hours before the bed was due for delivery. He put down the screwdriver and went to the door.

‘Hi man,’ grinned a slim young chap with a baseball hat worn back to front. He was about the same age as Kesiena, same height, but slightly taller. He had very tanned skin almost obscuring the freckles that dotted his face. His blonde dreadlocks dangled over his shoulders, and the rough beard emphasised the general unkept appearance. His eyes were dim almost shut. Obviously high on something, Kesiena thought. But the stranger appeared to be harmless and happy with himself. He was wearing a pair of brown khaki combat trousers and a black T-shirt with the inscription “*Save The Planet*”. In his left hand was a can of lager and a thick joint in his right. After observing him indecisively for a moment, Kesiena returned his friendly smile.

‘Hi,’ he said to him.

‘I’m Hugo, your neighbour,’ the stranger said, still smiling. ‘I live upstairs, how you doin man?’

‘Fine thank you, I’m Kes,’ he said. They shook hands. Kesiena noticed that despite his unsteady posture, Hugo had an unexpectedly firm and commanding handshake. ‘I just moved in this morning. Still sorting the place out. I’m not making too much noise am I?’

‘No, no that’s cool man, no problem,’ he said slowly. ‘Just thought I should, you know kinda introduce meself you know.’

‘Ah, thanks,’ he replied cordially.

‘I’m a bit free right now, you want any help man?’ Hugo asked, still maintaining the happy grin.

‘I am okay actually, but there is just the bed I need to take out to the skip,’ Kesiena said. ‘I’m having a new one delivered at four o’clock.’

‘That’s no problem man, cool, cool.’ Hugo seemed uncomprehending, but nonetheless nodded agreeably and let out a puff of smoke. Guided by the breeze, Kesiena took his first inhalation of the second-hand marijuana smoke. The unpleasant smoke seemed to travel straight up his nostrils and down into his lungs. Unable to suppress it, he coughed painfully and took a couple of steps back for Hugo to come in, but he didn’t. Hugo stood rigid at the door.

‘Do you think you can help me with the bed?’ Kesiena asked a smiling Hugo.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he replied instantly. ‘You don’t mind me spliff, do ya?’

'It's okay no problem.' Kesiena said and he followed him into the flat. The stereo in the corner immediately caught his attention.

'Nice,' he complimented. 'It's a Sony yeah?'

'Oh yes it is,' Kesiena nodded.

'I used to have one of those,' he continued. 'Groovy, real cool,' he added standing in front of the stereo. After a few moments waiting for him to follow, Kesiena called him.

'Hugo, are you going to give me a hand with the bed?' He pointed towards the bedroom.

'Yeah, yeah, you want to take it out, right?' He stepped away from the stereo.

'Yes,' Kesiena reminded him.

Hugo put his can on top of the centre table and followed him into the bedroom. Holding his joint between his lips, he lifted one end of the bed whilst Kesiena carried the other. They manoeuvred the bed out of the bedroom, through the lounge and out of the front door. They dumped it in the skip outside the next building, which was presently undergoing renovation work.

'That's Mrs Drinkwater, watchout for her,' Hugo said, gesturing towards the old lady in the adjoining garden. 'She talks for England.'

Kesiena glanced at his neighbour on the left. The elderly lady squatting over a flower bed was busy minding her own business. Her front yard was a picture of nurtured blossoming plants.

Hugo came back with Kesiena to collect his can of lager, but decided to prolong his welcome. No harm in getting acquainted with the neighbours, Kesiena thought. He offered Hugo a chair whilst he carried on. As they spoke, Kesiena got a better picture of him. He could tell that Hugo's appearance and use of Cockney slang were deceptive. He was hiding the real person behind the masquerade. He was not a true Londoner. After many years in London he could tell that easily. Hugo's dreadlocks were not real either. However, he seemed well educated and generally knowledgeable, a university degree perhaps, he was quite informed on international affairs.

He took another hit on of his marijuana and rested his eyes on Kesiena.

'African, right?'

'Yes I'm, Nigerian,' he replied.

'I am a European,' he said melodramatically. 'Englisssh!' He added, throwing back his head and roaring with laughter at what he considered an hilarious exchange. Kesiena couldn't help but laugh along. It's not very often introductions were made at national and continental levels.

'Anyhow, one love is all we need man,' Hugo said and stopped laughing.

'Yes, one love,' Kesiena agreed.

'Been in England long?'

'Four years this summer.'

'You like it?'

'I have my moments, but generally it's good.'

'You are an economic immigrant,' he declared authoritatively.

He stopped smirking and sat upright to study Kesiena's reaction, waiting for a response. Kesiena could tell he expected a denial, a drawn out debate on immigration.

'People travel for a variety of reasons, economics is one of them. Perhaps you are right, I'm an economic immigrant.'

'Anyway, that is the problem with capitalism,' he said dragging more smoke down into his lungs. 'Some have too much, some don't have enough,' he added.

'That is how the world operates and always has.' Kesiena said.

'So what exactly do you do? Not on benefits are ya?' he asked.

'I'm a freelance artist, painting.' Kesiena replied. 'How about you, what do you do?'

'I'm a campaigner with N.G.O.'

'N.G.O.?'

'Yeah man, environmental, animal rights and generally anti-capitalist stuff, you know. We are the New Generation Operatives.'

'I see, that's interesting.....'

The barking of a dog could be heard from upstairs, quizzically Kesiena looked across at Hugo sitting cross-legged enjoying his lager.

'That's my dog, Castro,' he said. 'Yeah man, there is so much crap going on in this world,' he relit the joint. 'People need to stand up against all this disgusting exploitation that is going on around the world.'

'I guess so.' Kesiena replied with little interest. He diverted his attention to the connection of the television. As he did, he half listened to Hugo's ideological condemnation of The IMF, The World Bank and other financial institutions around the world. He was making some sense, but as his onslaught continued Kesiena became aware that he was rapidly confusing the G7 with The World Bank, The United Nations Security Council with the United States, and The Commonwealth with the European Union. Surely, the marijuana was now doing most of the talking. He was getting fed up and had to find a way of stopping the New Generation Operative campaigner.

'Can you help me move this sofa please?' He interrupted him.

'Yeah man.' Hugo replied.

Kesiena wondered if Hugo still remembered his name. He stood up and they silently moved the sofa to the left wall of the lounge so that it was facing the fireplace. Afterwards Hugo sat back and continued his denunciation of capitalism. He diverted his criticism to Nigeria.

'Yeah man, even in your country. I was watching television the other day right,' he ranted. 'I couldn't believe what Shell was doing to them people that live by the river. I tell you yeah, that is the kind of environmental and capitalist bullshit that pisses me off!'

Under normal circumstances, Kesiena would consider it a patriotic duty to defend the honour of his beloved country. But in its present pariah status he decided there was no point. Nothing to defend, not after admitting he was an economic immigrant. In humiliation he ate the proverbial humble pie in front of a marijuana intoxicated Hugo.

'That is the way of the world,' he replied, in-between coughs resulting from the smoke that was gradually choking the room. He walked across the lounge and opened the window for some fresh-air.

'That is why people must stand up and speak out against capitalism and environmental degradation.' Now in an excited mood Hugo stood up, gesticulating as he went on condemning both the Nigerian government and the multi-national oil petroleum company Shell. 'I tell you yeah, what Shell does at Ogoni, they can never, never do it in this country. Because, if they ever, ever try it, even for one single day, we will take our campaign to the bloody Houses of Parliament and if the government does nothing, we will go to Waterloo and burn down their capitalist arses!'

'Yes, but in Nigeria things have a way of happening differently,' Kesiena said. 'Remember Ken Saro Wiwa?'

'The bloody Nigerian government killed him, didn't they?' Hugo said rhetorically.

'Yes, that's the way of military dictatorship, opposition is not allowed.'

'Absolute bollocks!' He exploded again taking another swig of his lager. 'I tell you yeah, never mind nuclear weapons and all that crap, capitalism and the exploitation of the environment is what will ultimately destroy this damn planet!'

'Please, take it easy.' Kesiena found himself trying to pacify his angry neighbour. Luckily the door bell rang; thank goodness he thought.

'The delivery people,' he said to Hugo.

Taking the last drag from his marijuana, he followed Kesiena outside to meet the lorry driver. Hugo helped him carry the bed into the flat, after which he decided to leave, much to Kesiena's relief. He got out the air refresher and gave the flat a good spray, but to no avail: the place stank of the illegal substance. Resigning himself to the foul smell he went back to what he had to do, making the flat liveable.



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