



st Night

I don't

remember how long I have been standing here. Maybe for four hours or more. But it's been quite long. Not far from where I am. Angela is busy talking to a man in a red car. She is trying to strike a bargain for both of us, I think.

The night is cold. So cold that I wish I were back in our room. There I would have shut the windows and the door against the wind and wrapped myself in bed. It is harmattan season, but this one is the driest I have ever seen. Somehow it feels as if the wicked wind has teeth that can cut deeper than razor.

I can see Angela straighten up. She turns away from the car and begins to come towards me. The driver does not drive away immediately. He hoots his horn after her, but she ignores him. He starts his car and drives off towards the other girls across the road.

By Chux Okei Ohai

Angela spits into a gutter and looks up at me with a frown.

'Can you imagine! That crook wanted to pay only five hundred naira for a night' she says, hissing. 'I told him to go sleep with his own mother'.

As she is talking, I see the girls on the other side rushing towards the red car. It is a rat race. They run like starved dogs after a piece of bone. They struggle as if their lives depend on it. Ah, what am I saying? Of course, their lives depend on it. Our lives, Angela's and mine, depend on it.

'Cheap bastards! Angela says, abusing them. 'Whores are fit for the gutter!'

Even as she says that, one of the girls stumbles and falls into the gutter near them. Another girl suddenly pushes the one behind her and receives a hot slap for her trouble. The slap sounds like a clap of thunder even from the distance. The girls begin to fight. And then the red car drives away.

Angela laughs. 'Fools!' she says. 'Look at them look at what they are doing. Just look at them!'

I say to her: 'come, let us leave this place'.

'I am not going anywhere' she says. 'Where do you think we should go?'

'Anywhere, Angela. But not this place. The police could come now and arrest us'.

'They won't arrest me - o. Why should they? Am I fighting anybody? Abeg, **I'm not going anywhere. I have to earn my daily bread**'.

To be honest, she has said the truth. She has to earn her daily bread. Same for every girl on this road tonight. We have to earn our daily bread. It is better than stealing. But me, I am afraid. I fear the police. I have heard stories about them. I have heard of what they do to girls like us - well, count me out for now because I have not done it yet. I have heard that they will beat you and force you to do it with them. Then they will ask for money.

And when you fail to pay them, they will put you in jail and forget you.

Do you doubt me when I say I have not done it? It is the truth, I swear. Although I am twenty-five years old, I am as green as a plant in flowering season. I am so green that if Jesus comes right now, I believe I will count among those people who will go to heaven straight away.

But this night could make the difference: I am afraid.

The girls are still fighting, but we are not looking at them. If they want to kill themselves, let them go ahead. Life must continue.

Another car stops near us. It is a blue Mercedes Benz. Again Angela rushes off towards it, but not until she calls my attention.

'Tina, this looks like a big fish!' she says.

Tina is what she calls me. But my true name is Ebere. Tina is my Lagos name; my adopted one, for the purpose of, you-know-what.

If my people back home learn that I have switched names, what will they say? If my dead mother discovers what I am about to do, will she not curse me from her

grave? Will she not gnash the remains of her teeth and wish she did not give birth to me?

But I have to survive. Survival is the word. That was what Angela told me when I came to Lagos from our home-town, depressed and ragged.

'My dear, survival is not the game for snails here' she said to me. 'When a girl comes to Lagos she has to grow wings and learn how to fly faster than an aeroplane.'

She has taught me, first, to grow wings and secondly, to fly very fast, even faster than a rocket.

She made me discard my clothes. She said they were too old and out of fashion and I looked like an ugly duck each time I wore them.

'You will need good, sexy city clothes. Not these rags' she said.

Then she let me have some of her clothes. Fine-looking things, they were. She gave me halters, gowns, body - huggers, and wicked minis. She let me help myself freely from her cache of powders, body creams, perfumes, hair creams, toilet soaps, lipsticks, mascara, eye shadow, everything.

She has taught me to hate my dark skin. 'Your skin is too dark' she said. 'No man likes a very dark girl these days. If you must survive in this Lagos, you have to make your skin light'.

So I have learnt to rub bleaching creams on my skin. They call it skin-toning here. But I prefer to call it bleaching. Now I am no longer dark. I am light. Almost like the white woman I saw yesterday. If my mother sees me now, she won't recognise me, I swear.

I have learnt to strike a good pose. I have learnt to walk like a proper city lady. I can walk like a cat, swinging my hips and rolling my bum wickedly to attract lustful stares from men.

Angela has made me put aside my name like an offending piece of rag. 'That name is too bush for you' she said. 'In this city every sensible girl wants to be known by sexy English names and not ugly native ones like yours'.

And now she calls me Tina.

Everybody now calls me by that name. To them, I'm the new girl from a bush village who has just seen the light.

I'm Tina, not Ebere anymore. **And tonight I'm going to cut my teeth.**

One more car pulls up behind the Mercedes with a loud screech of its tyres.

Angela looks up briefly from the Mercedes and motions me to attend to the new car. I spy a girl moving very fast towards the car. I have to be quick, too. This is the moment. My heart beats so hard that I think it will jump into my mouth. I am afraid. I have never done this thing before. What do I say to the man in the car?

A draught of cold wind pierces through my lycra gown. I shudder. My feet stiffen a bit and drag. I see the girl coming closer. Angela screams at me: 'Tina!'

I move fleet-footed to the car and make it to the driver's side just a fraction of a second before the girl. Surely this is

a rat race and only the fittest can win.

I bend towards the driver. He looks young, just about my age. But it is not his voice that I heard next.

'Hallo, sweetie,' a deep, manly voice addresses me from the back-seat. I peer again and see a man point a finger at me. 'Come this way' he says.

I obey. Then I am standing near this man and staring into his handsome and well-groomed face. He is rich, I can see. He smiles. And, oh God, I can die for that kind of smile.

'Good evening, sir', I greet him:

'Good evening, sweetie. Jump in and let us go'.

I won't jump into this car yet. Didn't Angela teach me to strike a bargain first? That is what I will do.

How much should I charge him? Five hundred? No, Angela won't like it. She will say I am too cheap.

Perhaps a thousand will be alright. But won't Angela think it is too small? Okay, two, three thousand is it then.

I am about to tell the man I want three thousand naira. But my tongue fails me. He waits, still smiling. Something tells me he knows. He knows why I hesitate like a fish approaching the sea-shore the first time. His smile widens. I feel his eyes all over me. I feel them strip me, till I'm naked as the first day I was created.

Then I heard him: 'How much for a night?'

'Three thousand' I heard myself say. Angela will be happy to learn this.

To my surprise, the man nods. 'No problem' he says. 'Jump in'.

My heart skips a beat, lurches again, and beats a wild rhythm. My hour of trial has come. It precedes my baptism. The man's last words echo deep in my soul, amplifying quickly till the sound nearly knocks me out of this world...

JUMP IN! JUMP IN! JUMP IN! JUMP IN!

But suddenly another voice, tiny and pleading, cuts it short. I know that voice. It is the voice of my kid sister's fatherless baby. It is asking for food. The child is worn out with crying for its mother's milk. It will have nothing else except this. But my sister herself is starving. When the mother starves, her breasts dry up, and the child gets no milk.

My sister is sick. She is sick in the heart and body. Her arms are frail and her heart is so weak that she cannot lift her finger to do anything. Eclipse threatens her sun. Her lips turn down at the corners with bitterness. Life has been unkind. Men have been beastly. Yet her child must live.

I heard the child cry again. It's anguish mingles with its mother's tears and turns my insides mushy...

Angela's voice send me hurtling back to earth.

'Tina, what's up? Your man is waiting' she says, frowning.

Sure my man waits with a wide smile plastered on his face. And her man waits, too.

'Here is the spare key' she says again, passing it to me.

'You know how to find your way back, don't you? The number is sixteen and the street is Olabinjo, remember'.

Her man hoots his horn the third time. And off she goes, with a wink to me.

My heart nearly stops beating as she drives off in the blue Mercedes. My only link with sanity is gone!

And my man waits.

I have to make a choice. The biting cold urges me to it faster. With icy fingers it waves the choices in my face.

JUMP INTO THE CAR OR...

I heard the tiny whimper of my sister's child. I hear its mother's groans and my dead mother's painful sighs. My stomach rumbles. No food. Angela and I ate only once today. Only garri soaked in water. No groundnuts, no salt or sugar.

JUMP INTO THE CAR NOW OR...

My rich man sighs. I sigh, too. My mind is made up now. I will follow him. I will jump into his car and ride with him to my baptism.

The car is warm, pleasantly warm. It has a stereo set and fine music is playing. I am sitting next to my man. Ah, he is truly rich. He is a big man, not fat. His rich perfume fills the air inside the car. He leans towards me and holds my hand. His touch feels cool against my flesh. His eyes are near now. I can feel them, even in the half dark. When he speaks to me and calls me, a stranger, his 'sweetie, his voice caresses, tingles me.

The driver drives fast, makes a few turns, and then we are in a quiet street.

'My name is Bayo, sweetie' my man says. 'What is yours?'

'Tina' I say.

'That's a lovely name. And you are a lovely gal'

'Thank you' I say. Then I ask him: 'Where are we going?'

'We're going to my house' he says.

'Your house? Isn't your wife there?'

The man laughs. 'My wife? I have more than one wife. Five wives!'

He laughs again. But it is not the sound of his voice I hear. It is the cry of my sister's child...

Suddenly there is a loud sound. A gunshot. 'Stop there! Somebody barks, from nowhere.

'Robbers' my man whispers, fearfully.

Then the figures emerge from the darkness. One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six of them.

The driver slows down the car. The leader of the policemen, a tall, wiry fellow, orders him to park by the side of the road.

'Where are your particulars?' the cop asks our driver. The latter hesitates and nervously glances backward at Bayo, his master. My man trembles, looks at me. His smile is gone and in his eyes I see fear. The fear of what? I do not know. His palm moistens against my flesh. And I can even hear his heart drum a hard tattoo.

'Are you deaf? Show me your particulars!' the cop barks again.

The driver stammers: Oga... My Oga... he.....

'No particulars, eh? Okay, come out, and open your boot'.

The driver obeys. My man sighs nervously, mops his brow, and beckons to the cop.

'Officer, please, a word with you' he says.

'I don't want to discuss anything with you. I'm doing my job'.

'Officer-'. But the cop moves away to inspect the boot. Trembling, my man gets out of the car. I wait, wondering. Time passes in a rush. The night stands rigid, mute.

Suddenly the cop shouts.

I jump out of the car, wondering... I stand beside my man, Bayo.

'Arrest them!' the cop orders his men, waving his torch-light in our faces. 'They are murderers!' he says.

My blood freezes. What is he saying? Me, a murderer? My man grows weak on his legs and suddenly leans on me. I am confused. What is happening? It is like a dream, an ugly dream. I can't believe my eyes, but I can see the cop has something in his hand. It is dripping with something... Blood. **It is a HUMAN HEAD.**

My head swells, contracts, and swells again. My vision dims, images swirl before me. My breathing comes in deep gasps. My legs weaken. I am slipping.... Slipping..... slipping.....

It is morning. My head aches dully. Where am I? I am not at home. This is not No. 16 Olabinjo Street. This can't be Angela's room. It is large, not the tight little nest I know. The walls are clean and bright, not grubby. I see many beds and other people lying on them. And the smell... I am in a hospital. Oh, yes, I am in a hospital.

I see people. I see three nurses in uniforms. So I am really in a hospital. I see eyes staring at me. Why are they looking at me?

I see something else: a policeman sitting near the foot

of my bed. His eyes are mean and bloodshot. He is watching me. His stare is deep and penetrating. He reminds me of a cat stalking mice.

The nurses look at me and whisper among themselves. But I can hear them, their words sound like crashing thunder in my ears.

'She is one of them' says the first nurse.

'The ritual killers? Na wa -o. And she is such a pretty girl' the second one says.

'Was she caught with the human head?' asks the third.

'Well, not really. But it was in their car'.

'Her boyfriend's car'

'They say the man is rich'.

'Blood money. He kills other people and uses their heads to make money'.

'That's what they do, these rich men.'

'And their women make them do it.'

'Especially fine girls like this one.'

'Tufiakwa! God save us....'

In a flash, the scale fall off my eyes. I remember last night. My man Bayo, the human head, and the snarling police officer. I want to shout at these nurses. I want to tell them it isn't true. But my voice fails me. My strength fails me. I try to move my feet. **BUT THEY ARE CHAINED!**

The policeman grimaces. His eyes are slits burning holes into me. I want to talk to him. No, shout at him. And again my voice fails me. My strength wilts further. What can I do? Just one night and I'm in chains. One step to my baptism and now this. What can I do? I try to think about Angela. But it is not her face that I see. I see the face of my sister's fatherless child. I see my sister's eyes. They swell with pain. Her face twists, blackens with bitterness. Life trembles with mockery.

Above the crash of thunder, I hear my sister's little child crying...**GR**



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