

Number Noora

The first time I see Noora, we are all sitting at the back of Mama Bee's moving pick-up truck and huddled up in twos and threes. As the chilly night's breeze whips through our hair and settles in our bones, all I can think of is that Number 26 had been right; I should have worn the crepe black dress. It would have held out stronger against the cold. The tarpaulin sheet that served as a cover for the back of the truck had been cut off and stolen on our last trip out of state, and now all we have is a large piece of fabric that looks like someone's giant grandmother's wrapper draped over where the tarpaulin used to be and tacked together to keep it in place. All it did was cover us from whatever eyes wondered what was in the back of the truck; we were defenseless against the December harmattan. I keep rubbing my palms together for friction to keep warm; most of the girls are doing the same. There are also a few that hold themselves for body warmth. I surmise they are new. The one in the middle whose arms seem to gather them all into her is whispering something to them that makes them giggle; soft laughs that make the rest of us look over at them queerly, wondering what they find so funny or interesting. When I hear another burst of their low laughter, I look at the girl again. She is strange, this one with her crazy eyebrows and animated face that won't stop talking. She catches me watching her this time and cocks her head to the side with a weird look that could also be a smile. I look away.

We have been on the road and out of the city for about an hour when we come across our first checkpoint. This is routine and nothing special; no one is particularly interested in the conversation that will ensue between Tinrinrin, the driver, and the policemen. One of them will talk with Tinrinrin in low tones about where he is headed at such an ungodly hour. The other will come to the back, loosen the tacks holding our cover in place, and stare for a slow minute before he asks who we are and why we are herded in the back of the truck. We will stare back and never respond. Tinrinrin will alight from the truck. He and the policeman he speaks to will laugh. They will slap each other on the back. The laughing policeman will pull the staring policeman away to speak to him. Sometimes they will have the conversation right there with Tinrinrin interjecting and chuckling, Naira notes will exchange hands. They will all be happy with the bargain. Soon, the policemen will step away from the truck and watch Tinrinrin fasten the tacks back. They will swap a few stupid jokes about how he should fasten it well so his goats don't fall out.

He'll retort with, these are expensive goats o, better livestock, followed by a cackle that strangely ends with a drawn-out hiss.

Then he is back in the truck, and we are on our way again.

It doesn't always happen this way. Tinrinrin has been traveling and transporting girls back and forth on these routes for years. Sometimes, he doesn't have to stop. All he usually does is slow down and pass the money from his window seat. We only have to stop and go through this whole process when the men on duty at the checkpoint are new and are trying to be difficult, even though their predecessors have let them into the whole gig.

We are in the city now. The streetlights are on, and they filter through the cover cloth. Some of the rays of light don't fully pass through some patches and they look like mammoth fireflies. I am staring at the girl, and she is staring back at me. When the truck comes to a halt in front of a building, we all ready ourselves to troop down when the tarp is raised. I watch the girl unwrap herself. I knew, from the way her body was angled when she was sitting and had the other girls leaning into her, that she was tall, but I wasn't ready for how all arms and legs she was. There is a way she gathers all her length and moves with it that reminds me of trees in a windstorm.

I hope the toilets here are real toilets, not pits, someone whispers. A voice that clearly is Number 16 replies, don't worry, I cover your yansh in the blood of Jesus.

I chuckle before I can stop myself and shake my head. The first voice must be Number 20. There was an incident at the base where we were kept for a few weeks earlier this year, Number 20 had been bitten by a rat while she was squatting and taking a shit in the pits and it was one of those occasions where our already messed up reality took a turn for the macabre. The girls who heard her screams and ran to her said they found her rolling on the pit latrine's filthy floor with her underwear around her ankles and her body covered in grime and piss.

We all stand in a line now, our backs on the wall, faces looking everywhere but at each other. Tinrinrin does a quick look-over and headcount and goes into the building. This place looks bigger than the last base; it reminds me of the first one I was taken to.

When I was twelve, a cement trailer crashed into my parents' car on their way to the beach. The doctors said they died instantly. I've often wondered how the doctors knew or if they only said things like that to make it easier for families left behind. It's the same as when they say, don't worry, they didn't suffer. I was home with Auntie when it happened. She got the call, and after coming out of the kitchen where she had locked herself in to scream, cry, and make frantic phone calls, she told me. Auntie wasn't really my aunt but she was an older female relative so she was auntie to me. She was

with us that weekend because she was new to town and needed a job and Mom was going to ask her friends at the party if the places where they got their hair done had openings for hairdressers. She stayed with me in our apartment after the funeral. By the time the lease expired, she had already found a job and could afford to rent her place. When she left, she took me with her.

I settled quickly into a life where my head lay only a few inches away from Aunt's feet when I went to sleep. The new apartment we moved into was just a room in a two-story building of 11 other identical rooms with a communal kitchen and bathroom on each floor.

At least these people are neat, Aunt often said in our first week in the building. I know you are Ajebutter but the place I squatted in with my friend before I came to you people's house, neighbors used to fight every day because of unflushed toilets or people leaving spoiled food in the kitchen. We can manage here.

Aunt would later have big ideas. On a night out, she discovered that the haunt she often frequented with a lover was not only a dance bar, but was also a front for an illegal loan shark business. Soon, she arranged with the bar's madam for a small loan to start up her hairdressing saloon. The collateral? Me. She was to pay back the money in two months or she would send me over to work at the bar for five months without pay. As soon as she received the cash, Aunt's ideas got even bigger. She wanted the saloon at the center of the township market; she wanted full wall mirrors on every angle and the latest hairdryers, curling irons, hair products, the whole nine yards. So, of course, she went back for more money and bargained for more months of servitude of my life away. Less than a month after she opened for business, a fire broke out in the market in the middle of the night and razed down her saloon amongst others.

It took Madam and her men a few days, but they came. I sat at my aunt's feet and watched her head hang down as she sobbed quietly. I waited for her to start begging so I could join in. So, when the first man reached down and lifted me off the ground, I was too stunned to speak. As they took me away, Madam told Aunt that the debt would be paid one way or the other and that she could come get me back when her money was ready. I screamed and begged to be let go, and all my aunt did was sink into her couch, hang her head down, and weep.

My first night at the base, I slept on the floor next to a huge pile of mattresses. It was a large bare room with what looked like a dozen buckets on the far end of the room and a heap of clothes on the other. I soon got exhausted from crying and pacing and slept off. I woke up to a not-so-gentle tug on my shoulder and sat up to see Madam staring down at me.

Carry bucket and go baff for backyard, you dey work this night.

Then she left.

And that was it.

For the first week, all I did was clean, and serve drinks at the bar while the men leered at me and groped my ass with Mama Bee—which is what Madam insisted I call her—telling them to leave me alone. At first, I was relieved; I thought it meant that, unlike the other girls, I wouldn't be on the menu. I soon realized what was going on on the fifth night, after being followed around and groped by a particularly unpleasant customer who had already been given a girl.

If you want this one, you go wait small make she ripe well. You'll pay big money o. This one is fargin, purely fargin, she never spoil, Mama Bee said when he asked why he couldn't have me instead.

I was being marinated. The more the men heard about how I wasn't ready, the beadier their eyes got as they followed me around the bar. A few days to the end of the first month since I had been taken, Mama Bee and a man I recognized as a regular came into a room I was cleaning. They both stood by the door, whispered, and exchanged nods while I fidgeted with the mop in my hands. Then she left and locked the door behind her.

After that, the men came and went.

Mama Bee decided we were not to have names; she gave us numbers according to when we came in and then altered them as we 'rose through the ranks', this presumably kept us all in our places. She changed cities and moved us all with her every three months. New girls came in frequently.

At first, I didn't resent Aunty. She couldn't have seen things going the way they did; all she wanted was to make life a little easier for us both. I was certain that she was doing all she could to pay the loans and get me back. Each time Mama Bee called for me, I would feel a little flutter in my chest, hoping the time had finally come for me to leave. More than once, while serving drinks at the bar, I would see a face, or gait that I was sure was hers.

One busy Friday night with the bar so full, that Mama Bee had to rent chairs to entertain the customers outside and the DJ was playing a raunchy song about a pastor's wife and blowjobs; I saw a woman walk into the bar in a red maxi dress. I knew that dress. I recognized the lace details on the

sleeves and hem, how it fell softly around the hips, and the cute buttons that were placed just above the high thigh slit. I remember how long Aunty and I debated if her braids should stay up or down and the laughter when we had to call a neighbor to help pull the dress in while I zipped her up. The red of the dress had made her fanta yellow skin pop and the flowing length of it made it look like she was gliding through the air when she walked.

The music in the bar that night was so loud, I felt it pulsing in my head. Then I felt it slowly fade away. A pin could have dropped and I would have heard it. I stood still and stared with my mouth dry, ignored the orders of the men I was attending to, dropped my tray on their table, and walked towards her like I was in a trance. I was a few paces away from her when I realized that of course, it wasn't her. Aunty was much taller and fairer, and she wouldn't be seen dead in the gaudy turban the woman had on. It must have been the weight of the hope that crashed before me or perhaps the way the woman looked at me; not unkindly but curiously, wondering why I stood before her blinking tears but also with a rage that made me shake; I sunk to my feet and began to weep. The customers reported me to Mama Bee and she made me wash the toilets for a week.

I stopped seeing Aunty after that.

I never knew if Aunty did come back, and after we moved from the city I had been taken from, there was no way to know. Sometimes, I would ask Mama Bee if the debt was paid, and when she thought I could leave; she'd smirk and say, not even close.

I stopped asking. Then I stopped waiting.

Mama Bee watches us all, now, as we are lined up in front of her. She gestures to some of the new girls and asks them to step aside, then she assigns them numbers. Tirinrin re-emerges from the building and calls her name, but she makes a sharp sound to ask him to be quiet. I feel in my bones that it has something to do with the strange tall girl. I stop staring at my feet like everyone else and sneak a look at her to find that she is standing with her arms folded under her breasts. She is also staring at Mama Bee.

Mama Bee looks at Tirinrin and nods her head. Tirinrin walks down to the source of the mild commotion that is beginning to spread, he slaps her hard in the face and she flinches softly. Everyone is looking up now, there is nothing normal about what is happening and some of us are worried but also a little excited that she might retaliate; maybe slap him back or scratch his face, anything. But all she does is readjust her headscarf and raise her head to keep staring at Tirinrin.

Mama Bee gets up from the pile of cement blocks that she has been sitting on by the wall. Our eyes follow her as she adjusts the wrapper tied on her blouse and she gives Tirinrin a dirty look, then she tells us to move into the building. We all start to file in when she calls out again,

Number 52! Comot that dirty thing for ya head!

The girl stops and turns around

My name is Noora and my veil stays on.