**ODOR OF A FISHPOND**

Soft musical notes fight through the torn edges of time-worn speakers. Singer’s voice rises above it, introducing hard times of life. Naomi, instead of singing along as usual, squeezes her eyes shut. She presses her knuckles against the eyeballs, and allows the music to sink in, slipping with cold memories — something dark and unsettling.

The worst sounds come from the hinges that *creeeaaak* as the door swings open, followed by *eeeek*, *eeeek*—like an old man stretching after a long nap. Each groan of the metal recalls a night of sweat and closeness. As the sounds come and go, she gently props herself up to welcome her guests.

“How we go survive?” Rose asks on entering with a group of girls. “There’s no mother, no father, and no work. So, who do you think is going to provide for you?”

Naomi stretches her hands to collect a ceramic cup containing hot liquid, uncertain how to respond. After a sip, she falls back onto the plastic seat.

“Government? Your mother, who divorced when you were small? Or your late father? Maybe you’re still thinking of returning to that charismatic grandmother of yours. See, babe, you’ll get used to this. No dey cry. This thing na small issue,” says Rose “This is Juliet…” she starts an introduction.

Naomi breathes in her words with a pull of breeze bathed with phlegm. Gradually, she lets out the air with some nasal bubbles. Her lips part slightly, yet she doesn’t release Pidgin words into the air. Her solemn nods carry a shared understanding that doesn’t need words.

She glances at the three young-looking girls as they continue to explain themselves. Their thighs glow beneath the tight miniskirts. She shifts her attention back to herself quickly and traces the dark lines inscribed on her left shoulder. They have increased in numbers. Some stretch along with her lower belly distending below the crop top. She sighs and hitches her wrapper. The stiff fabric material chafes against her skin. It has been a long time since she left the safety of a simple life. Rose used to call her a Nun.

First day at work, a young nun. Sixteen, barely. Her nails trimmed neat, no polish, no fake lashes. Her hair braided or wrapped tight under a headscarf. She’d stuck out in the bar’s murky glow, shoulders hunched and gaze on the floor, and fingers fidgeting with the hem of her long dress whenever eyes lingered too long.

Days later, Naomi swapped those gowns for the bar’s uniform after Marcus’s voice caught attention, pointing her head to toe and acknowledging that grandmothers can be very funny. Her grandmother ensured that her dresses were loose and below the ankles while making them. ‘*Children dey grow fast,’* extra material to the hem— ‘*so e go last,’* Naomi told her story*.* Everyone had laughed out. She looked so out of place.

It felt strange at first to expose so much skin, but she quickly learned that her appearance was just one part of the job. In those early days, she fell in love with Teni, a Nigerian musician and her song, *Hustle*. Each time the song plays, she draws strength from it. But now, all she does is listen and hope it heals her pain.

“Sorry, aunty Naomi,” says one of the girls. She ends her introduction with her head bowed.

“You go well aunty. sorry…” others join.

Later, Rose will hint them, customers who like their drinks cold, and customers who prefer conversation. They will also have to learn the bar’s unspoken rules—how to handle the looks and the words. And most importantly, to learn the act of coaxing a baby through the narrow canal—one wrong way, and everything could go awry.

Another sip and Naomi gently drops the cup on a nearby chair. Every corner of the room holds her secrets and faith. Soon enough, shadows shift away from the door as Rose departs with the girls, like a politician who has just left a crowd with an empty bag of promises. It closes.

Just as Naomi is about to feel relief, she hears the door creak open. Her fists grip the armrest, and her breath catches in her throat.

“Naomi, Oga say he dey come,” an unempathetic voice, Jerry’s. He just returned from making a complaint. He glances around the room sheepishly. “You and I sabi say na here I dey get money to feed my children and pay their school fees. This matter pass my power.”

He moves to stand in one corner with his dirty underwear hanging loosely around his waist. Slowly, he wobbles, shifting his weight from side to side on bare feet while his right palm brushes across his unclothed bushy chest. A typical Jerry the first day he would slip into the girls’ room. He would appear like a novice, and pleading to have his way.

Naomi stays calm. She knows those gestures well. It’s not curiosity, but anticipation. While he keeps on persuading her, heavy footsteps roll down the hallway. It’s like that of Naomi’s late father returning in the night with the smell of a cask’s interior.

Just as she had done then out of fear, she shrinks back. Now, there is no mother’s embrace to absorb her fear. The door opens, *Creeeaaak*— *Eeeek*, *eeeek,* thud. Marcus.

“What’s going on here, Naomi?” Marcus walks toward her. His expression is cold and unforgiving as her late father’s.

Jerry shifts uncomfortably, still avoiding Naomi’s watery eyes. “She never agree, sir. She say she no ready.”

Marcus narrows his eyes and turns to Naomi. “Is that true?”

“Yee… yes, yes sir.” She nods with hesitation. “I no fit do this now. I never heal well. Please understand me sir,” barely managing a resolute tone.

Marcus stands silently for a moment with a steady gaze. “I understand, Naomi,” he breaks the silence in a softer voice. “But you know you're providing a service to our society, don’t you? You think you’re just here for nothing? I keep telling you that what you do here matters a lot. You give many couples hope. You help relieve pressure in their homes.” She nods reluctantly, making sure their eyes don’t meet.

Marcus steps closer. He bends to place a firm hand on her shoulder. “If not you, who else could have given that lady who came here shouting that her bride price was in danger, hope? Do you understand she sees you as her savior, even as she paid for your services?”

“Yes sir, I sabi.”

“Why are you acting like you don’t know how important you are to our society?”

“I get tear last time and you sabi. We get plenty girls here wey fit do this work make I get time heal. Please sir, I need time.”

Marcus straightens up. Impatience spreads across his face. “Girls are booked already, and they have babies in their wombs. This is fear, Naomi. You’re not done facing it. You still have a lot to overcome because I know you can do this. You will be fine.” With a curt nod, he signals to Jerry to continue. He walks out to see some couples awaiting him.

Jerry waits, reluctant, watching Naomi tremble. After what feels like an eternity, he walks to the right side of the wooden door frame.

“Abeg, Jerry,” says Naomi. She walks to the bed that’s a few feet below her knees. She lowers herself to lie back. Her pants sag in anticipation of the usual ritual and her sobs are lost in the *Hustle*.

“Make you no cry like this again. E dey do somehow for my body.” Jerry turns towards her. He forgets his right hand on the switch that controls the electric bulb hanging in the center. “I worry pass you.” He continues. “ What if something bad happen to my babies you girls dey born? Na my blood be that! You think I don’t worry? I see them come and go, and each time, I wonder where them go end up. This person wey make oga quarrel you always come here carry babies, na still adopt him adopt all of them? You think I happy for this job? I go soon stop and una go beg make I come back. Make we finish this, e no go waist time. I no like to dey see you cry,” he returns his eyes on the switch. In his desperation, the white light turns red.

He moves to her. His size overwhelms the small space. No matter how hard she fights, she can’t break free from the firm grip on her waist. “We no go waste time…” he continues.

Heat of their bodies presses in close, damp palms smoothing across her thighs. Naomi’s body feels heavy with exhaustion. The weight of the last childbirth still hangs around her waist. She parts her leg with a concurrent fistful squeeze of the bedsheet in both hands. Slowly, she feels a thrust that demands a high pain threshold, again and again. She clenches her jaws as if she’s having a seizure

She finds it very unbearable. She projects within. Her body readies itself for a task, so her hand finds an object with sharp edges. She moves quickly, and Jerry gasps. He falls back in shock.

Carefully, she opens the door and makes her way through the only walkway leading to the bar. She staggers. Her bloodied hands brush against outdated political campaign banners pasted on the walls, with the aspirants smiling at the patrons in the center. Soon she appears in the open beer parlor with its unique long bar stretched along the left wall.

Behind the bar counter, Jerry is not in his apron wiping down glasses with a stained cloth.

Naomi isn’t checking up to see him raise a finger and point a short notice, ‘Pay Before Service’, ‘No Refund of Money after Payment!’ as he used to do. She knows where he is — somewhere hot, rolling his eyeballs upwards. That’s why he puts the music on repeat.

She looks to the right. It is as usual — tables and chairs with beer adverts printed on them, and families sharing a feast under the steady hum of conversation.

And in another corner, the same Marcus with some unhappy couples, probably discussing how much it costs to fish from the *pond*.

But Naomi has stains on her hands and clothes. When people see her, they will ask what happened. They will follow her to her room, and when they find Jerry’s body floating in hot urine, she will have to be renamed, a name she never imagined answering to as a young girl. They will beat, and place a tire around her neck. Some people call it Justice in the Jungle, while others simply say Jungle justice. So, the thought of escaping unnoticed pulls at her from behind.

The Imagination dissolves within her, unwillingly as she returns into her room to meet Jerry. He is still sweating above her weakened body. Now, quickly, she feels the thrusts that demand a low pain threshold, again and again. Her lower jaw drops as if she is gradually recovering from a seizure.

Dizziness brings in her sunset. Two flaps of skin roll down the two globs above her nose, colors bleeding into one another. Sounds fade into muffled tones. She can feel a little and she no longer struggles to escape Jerry’s grip and painful adventures.

Indeed, time has passed. The moon has begun its ascent. Night air, warmed by Jerry’s presence. But a chill seeps into his body, sending goosebumps as he pulls out slowly. He stands frozen, watching the pool of red liquid spread across the bed.

“Naomi… You hear me? Naomi…” He taps her shoulder. What he receives fades in seconds. He looks around awkwardly as if it were the first time he noticed a stack of discarded toys, some rumpled, stained tissues scattered around the edges, and packs of unused baby nappies placed in a small bowl. His eyes land on the blue curtains. They appear darker, with shadows glowing through the folds. Everything feels wrong. In an attempt to strike tricks out, he stands and switches the light back to white. The shadows disappear, yet darkness shines brighter in the light.

“Haba! Naomi, Jesus! Wetin be this…” He begins to nag after confirming the liquid spreading. He falls to his knees, not minding the jagged concrete poking through the torn patches of the carpet. He grabs her neck and lifts her head above her legs. Then he whispers, not just to Naomi but to himself, ‘Time don reach to stop, find a way, anyhow, Jerry.’

Naomi’s eyes slowly open. They look weak and unfocused. The relentless waves of her troubled sea seem to wash ashore a trace of strength from Jerry’s voice into her. She grabs him tightly as if embracing the return of her parents. It is the kind of hug a mother receives from her child or the kind a man gives to his wife at the altar.

“Na today be the last day we go work here.”

“Make I call the chemist wey always come treat una. I go pay with my money, Naomi.”

“Na promise be this, abeg make you forgive me.” Jerry’s voice breaks.

Naomi’s long-standing pain outsmarts the growing relief on her face. She knows she must risk trusting the man who carries both her tormentor and her potential savior.

She looks around the room. Her eyes dart to the door, then back to Jerry. Something inside her. But just as quickly, it fades. She takes a shallow breath, hoping Jerry might respond, but he remains with her. Her eyes lock onto the door again, as if its creaks herald the voices of John the Baptist in her wilderness, and its opening offers a route out of Egypt into her promised land

The fluid continues to drift out while he struggles to support her in a sitting position. He uses part of the bedsheet to add pressure below. He picks up his phone and dials the chemist's number while his promises continue. ‘Never will I work here again. Never will you work here again. Never this, never that.’ The kinds of things a man says in times of need and trouble, even when he knows that children are to resume school after vacation ends, expecting food and snacks in their lunch bags.

*…Sometimes, I gats change my mind,*

*Sometimes, I gats dey behind,*

*Sometimes, I will have to say no…* Teni’s voice continues in the background.