

THE ORPHANAGE HOME.

There were bright eye-blinding Christmas lights on that tree far away, all of them shining brightly. Signifying hope to Jacq and his sister Mary. They always watched the lights and have been counting to know how many days they got till it was Christmas. Both of them tangled in one big blanket, waiting for their hostel mistress to come with a snarl and taunt them with words when they ask why they don't have any lights this year's Christmas. She always responded with "One of you idiots put these lights away last year in a place no one knows now every one of you in this home gets to spend Christmas in the dark" She said while cackling in a way that showed she was either mentally disturbed or possessed.

I, MRS. SARAH, ELIZABETH

Seven days to Christmas, I have four days left to shop. Shopping days often feel overwhelming when I do not get to spend Christmas with my family. Till the big day and even till the new year, I always felt overwhelmed with stress and anxiety and an endless list of things to be done. The ceaseless sound of the radio, playing an endless stream of old Christmas songs I had no idea existed made my nerves raw, and my old matron's mindless humming didn't help either. "Can't you cut that noise off?"

Sarah, the old matron, looked up from her job, which was to put in the records at the same time she knitted something that looked like a baby's cap and stockings. She said it was for her grandchildren, they would come visiting this Christmas and she intended to give it to them. She is really joyous. Well, I understand I used to be joyous too, but this year's Christmas has me in low moods.

"Mary, did you know, happens to be my favorite song," she said mildly. "And as for the Christmas lights, you did not put any Christmas lights in at your house—Grinch's wife, have you finally been married to the Christmas Joy killer?."

I muttered some words to myself that if said out loud would earn me long hours of talks about the Christmas spirit, Christmas joy, and other things I don't wish to hear at this point.

That's when my phone rang, I forgot to put the "temporarily unavailable" tag on my online business page for Christmas cupcakes and gifts. So calls kept coming in and I kept receiving the orders, it didn't help that I did not do any of those with a joyous heart, but extra money hurt no one right? After all, January was said to be 65 days and one can't depend on the salary from being a nurse alone right after all with the first daughter tag came with a lot of responsibilities. So I took those calls and I am sure this one too is a business call as the caller was not identified and it came from my other cellphone where the number in it was what was on my business page. "Let it go to voicemail," I said.

But Sarah said "Pick it up, Christmas is a busy season—everybody would love and want cupcakes and gifts for their loved ones this holiday.

So she decided to pick it up, listened for a moment, then handed the receiver to me. “It’s someone named Elizabeth,” she said.

Elizabeth is one of the youngest of my delivery girls, she usually works part-time and is a very sturdy girl. But now her voice was shaking.

“Hello Miss Mo,” she said breathlessly, “You have to come. Come quickly. I’m at this orphanage home at High-Level Square, Makurdi. With your permission, I came here to clean the hall room and There’s a dead woman here, Miss Mo. I don’t know what to do. The whole place is empty. Not a single one of them is here, Miss Mo.”

I sighed, told her to call the police, and hung up. Sarah looked at me hopefully. I know she was itching for us to go there and find out what happened, but we are not detectives and neither are we the police. I told her taking the cleaning job was a mistake, she insisted that I do it or send someone and unfortunately Elizabeth was there and said she would do it for some little Christmas change now look at the outcome. When I receive a hunch about something in my body I always know there is not going to be a good end to it.

She looked at me again and now we just had to go together.

The police were there before we arrived, glad Elizabeth called them. They beat us to the orphanage home at high-level Square, impressive I must say. Maybe it’s because it’s Christmas season they would not want the town to be in a panic mode. Maybe it’s the orphans, the children, they’ve all gone missing. A uniformed police officer stood in front of the heavy metal doors, which were open to the hallway. Just inside, in the reception area, I could see Elizabeth, ashen-faced, being interrogated by a tall, slender detective. The cut of his green jacket looked familiar. The uniformed police officer stationed at the door to their office suite did his best to turn me away. “Crime scene miss,” he said, trying to make his funny-looking face look stern.

“I represent the girl who found the body,” I told him. Which was true, I did represent Elizabeth, as far as setting her up with this cleaning gig.

The officer refused to budge and this infuriated me. I was arguing loudly when the detective talking to Elizabeth finally turned around to see who was making all that noise. He looked annoyed, and then resigned, but who cares, please. Allow me to pass, that’s just it.

“Let her in, Kator,” he said. “Otherwise she’ll stand there yelling and screaming all night.” Ter Christopher, the detective in the dinner jacket, was an old, close friend from my old days with the navy. I flashed him a grateful smile and stepped into the place where he was talking to Elizabeth. She stood up and hugged me. She was shaking, and I could tell she had been crying for a long time. I pulled up a leather chair holding her and sat down to hear what happened.

“I told you I was going to do some cleaning—remember? For extra Christmas change?”

I listened patiently to her and I said “It’s fine. Just tell me what happened.”

“Someone wanted to throw a family-like cozy Christmas party for the children at the orphanage here as he said that they complained of not having any Christmas lights. The woman in charge was not receptive to the idea. He said on a call with me that he needed it cleaned, that was when I asked you if I should go ahead with it. You said though it's out of what we do I can come to see it if it is what I can do, I should do it. So I came here today to see the place, `` Elizabeth said. “Everything was dirty and scattered, it looked so unkempt. There was trash everywhere. Toilet papers, plates, and cups, stale food, torn papers, scissors- mess everywhere. I was working my way towards the hall, where the supposed party was to be held. To see how big it is and if I would be needing extra hands, I reached there and the door was closed. I pushed the door open, and as I entered the hall I saw...”

She swallowed hard. Tears sprang up in her eyes. “ She was lying there, I thought she fell and was unconscious. I was going to wake her up and maybe call the ambulance if she doesn't budge, you know. I shook her and was about to raise her head when I saw blood on my hands, blood was at the back of her head. that's when I knew...you know.”

"There were no gunshots or stab wounds on her body,” Ter Christopher put in here. “there were little signs of a struggle. The M.E. 's in there with her body now. The real problem we have now is the whereabouts of the children.”

“Oh, God,” Elizabeth whispered. “It was awful. I have never seen a dead body before. I didn't know what to do ...am I now a criminal?.”

Just then, a door from the reception area opened, and a petite woman, with short curly afro hair dressed in flowing green cotton flannel trousers and a perfectly buttoned white lab coat, came into the room. She was removing the pair of rubber gloves from her hands, she tossed them into the trashcan in the office space after she was done. “Christopher?” she said, ignoring Elizabeth and me. I knew Chiamaka Johnson when she was still a student studying to become an assistant medical examiner. She knew me, too. In our terms. "She sabi me well well.”

“Death from traumatic brain injury,” she said. “ sense foul play, or there could be no could play as there was no outward struggle but her left ankle is twisted, as a result of a push or a shove of sorts.” Elizabeth gasped. “What do you mean?”

“That's it?” Christopher asked, pleased. “ I suspect there was no foul play but they could be foul play, we need to find those children and from the records, there were 7 of them left in that orphanage with that woman. The rest seemed to have grown and left the younger ones according to the records. The youngest should be 7 years old. When we see them we can determine what happened and the person who called you needs to be contacted. Submit the number.”

Chiamaka Johnson had removed her lab coat in a way for me to see her sequined top which held her gorgeous breasts. Why do I sense some underlying female competition coming from her? It's like at every chance we meet she tries to show me she is better than me. I do not even argue as

that is not even a fact or a thing I would bother myself with any time. "For this, I left my date. Unbelievable," she said, ever vain.

"You can wrap this all up so we can take Elizabeth home, she doesn't need to stay here right?" Sarah asked. I even forgot she was there for a minute and I turned to look at her. I was about to respond to her before Chiamaka said "I'll have the paperwork done for you by Monday. Stating the cause of death and other medical terms you won't understand." Both her and Christopher were dressed for a party, knowing it's the end of the year and parties would be happening left and right, it just took me a while to even notice that they were dressed for a party. "Nice outfits," I said.

Chiamaka Johnson was gone before I even completed my short statement. It seems like she's got a problem I do not know about with me.

Christopher stood up, looked at me in a way that made me uneasy, and smiled. "The police annual party is Tonight at the Police headquarters. They're auctioning a lot of things and it promises to be fun. If it is of no concern to you I would have invited you, but knowing you, you would turn me down even before I completed my request. I will get going then and communicate with you on Monday."

He took Elizabeth's phone number and address and promised to call if he had any more questions.

"Let's get going, then," Sarah said. Thankful for her presence this evening. Sarah drove us home to her house and made a cup of tea for each of us, she always had sweet cookies available. At this point, I indulged, because we had a lot to figure out. For example, where are the children?

SARAH AND I

"I think we should go back to that orphanage tomorrow and see what's happened there. Elizabeth is free to stay here till she feels safe to go back home. We can finish our rounds on time and proceed to that orphanage home. What do you think?" Sarah said?

"Yes, I agree with you," I said.

ORPHANAGE CHILDREN.

JP was seventeen years old. He was wearing an old tattered red overcoat, an old faded black baseball hat, and a brown shirt with faded and patched trousers, and he was feeling fine. He led the rest of the 7 children towards the light. Like some Savior of sorts, they looked up to him. Jacq and his sister Mary, most especially. Joyous children. They were happy and looked at it all as an adventure. He took the smallest of them and backed her. The lights, he said there they would be happy and find food, clothes, and everything they needed. He was the oldest remaining

in the orphanage. He had an attachment to the children there and unlike others, he refused to leave when he had the chance to. JP was like their daddy being the eldest. They were excited when he told them about going to see the lights. Funny enough no one asked what happened the noisy sicked Mrs Gideon

He walked with the children, they sang carol songs at stops and had money given to them for their performance. He took turns in carrying the small ones. They rested a bit sometimes and sometimes they continued down the street. He was trying to do everything possible and fast so they reached the lights in time. Briskness, he had decided, was the one common characteristic of all successful leaders and he wanted to be one tomorrow, he wanted this little gang with him. The big shots up he saw at offices, giving orders were always brisk all the time. They were amazing. He wanted to be like them. He wanted to have all the good things in life and most importantly he wanted to protect this family he came to know.

There were no shops on this wide street which they walked on. They kept walking and could see a line of tall houses on each side, they looked identical. They all had brown roofs, pillars, pretty-looking windows, and four or five steps going up to their front doors, and it was obvious that this was a rich but old neighbourhood. Because he could see the paints peeling from the woodwork on their doors and windows, and some white parts were cracked. Though some grasses were overgrown, obviously from neglect.

They walked ahead looking at the houses just a little while they would reach the lights.

I AND MRS. SARAH

As soon as it was morning, I and Sarah went to the hall once there were sure the police were no longer crowded at the entrance of the orphanage. The detective Christopher was gone. We went into the Orphanage room. It was, as Elizabeth had said it would be, messy, scattered as if children didn't once live here. We proceeded to the rooms upstairs. Empty plates were strewn around. They looked dirty like they have been that way for a long time. Groundnut peels were on the table. All that was left of the rice in the pot was the burnt part underneath; it looked like the orphanage had no help and the children had to make do with themselves.

The floor was greasy and quite dusty as remnants of food were on it. There was a half-full bowl of rotten potatoes sitting on a stool at a point, some stale-looking bread, and fermented kunu. It was weird. We proceeded to the children's rooms to have a look and saw a magnificent drawing of a Christmas tree with lights on the wall.

"Oh, my this is the lights that come from St. Theresa's Catholic church. They always have a magnificent Christmas tree every Christmas." Said Mrs Sarah.

"That's nice, it seems they all have been locked in here for too long and decided to create one on the wall for themselves," I said.

"Sooner or later they would crave the original feeling in person." Said Sarah.

"Oh no, what if they went there, there is a possibility of that, in short I know that is where they are going to," I said

"Well let's look at what happened, first of all, some more and know what happened a little if we find nothing, we go to the lights." Said Sarah.

We looked around some more, saw broken glasses, and saw that the state of the orphanage was inhabitable. The toilets were nothing to talk about. Looked like a place where deadly viruses came to party, chill, and hire. It was heartbreaking to see the state in which the children had to live in and what the silly caregiver was doing all this while. Where was the money the church gave for the upkeep of these children going? Why didn't anyone complain?

These were the thoughts that were on my mind as I moved from room to room at the orphanage. I and Mrs Sarah went to the office of the caregiver to check the files to find anything else. Her office itself was stuffy and oozed like a lot of rotten onions were buried behind the shelf. Mrs Sarah opened the lower cabinet to have a look inside of it. She saw records of money sent to the orphanage, it seemed like they were not doing bad for themselves. The money was enough to take care of the children. Why then did the caregiver not do as she was directed? Where did she direct the funds to? What was her name even, she had to put a name to the face as she forgot if it was mentioned at the police station that night.

We had to look around to see if we could find anything else, it looked like she didn't think she would be found out and so everything was left careless in this office. We checked and saw a name on a letter. The letter was addressed to the name "Udoo" the letter read. I guess that must have been her name "Udoo". Nice to know.

Udoo

Send the money, now or another child goes missing in two weeks. This time, it will be so loud as all your doings go show. People go see how you de do.

You get only 48 hours, you know me. Try me fess you go see.

"Now it's obvious something shady was going on here." Said Mrs Sarah.

"I think we need to find the children, they'll help us better with the truth," I said.

MISS MO

When I got home to David mark bypass, the lights of the Christmas tree glowed through the front window. I had to put it last night "Can't wait to see what the power bill will be next month, judging by how they are constantly giving us light this festive period." I grouched. I unplugged the Christmas lights on the tree, put the juice Mrs Sarah gave me on the kitchen table, then took myself off to bed, visions of the orphanage remaining fresh in my head. Thinking about the

orphans and hoping to God they are at the church where the lights come from. My head was aching. I'd forgotten to eat dinner again.

When I went into the kitchen the next morning, Elizabeth was waiting for me. I hoped to God this would be a day with at least one positive news.

"Miss Mo, Mrs Sarah says I should let you know to prepare by evening as you both would be going to St. Theresa Church. She sent me here to take some baking things as we are baking for a feast, she's making muffins, juice, and frying meats, she's also making zobo, kunu, and chinchin." Elizabeth said.

"That's nice but It is 2 days till Christmas, oh she wants us to take all those with us as we go to the church? In search of the children, or she plans to bring them home when she finds them." I asked.

"She said you should prepare to come by 4 pm, she asked me to tell you to get the blankets too, lots of them," Elizabeth said.

That's a lot, seems like she has confirmed where the children are, can't wait to hear what all happened. I thought to myself.

"Beth, the number who called you to tell you about cleaning that hall, has the number called back?" I asked Elizabeth,

"No, it hasn't and it's been switched off since then, detective Christopher also called to ask me if I could reach the line, I said no too because it's been switched off since then but I guess now that we would find the orphans we will know what happened. " She said.

"Yeah, I guess so. Let me prepare then." I said

MRS. SARAH

I had to quickly check the church to be sure. Children are missing, the police seem uninterested as they are orphans, maybe and not some politician's kid or rich man's children.

This cold, the possibility of those children walking to that church from the Orphanage made no sense but I had to check every route to see if I would find a group making their way to the church.

I took a bike as it is very easy to navigate all the corners the children could take. The bike man was quite understanding of my plight when I explained to him that we are not going anywhere exactly but we would be going round all routes that lead to the church from the High-level Orphanage.

We started that evening, me and the bike man while Mo went to the hospital. She was not aware of what I set out to do. The bike man took me around every nook and cranny of every route leading to the Church. We lost hope of seeing any one of them. As it was getting late.

The bike man made a turn at a secluded area when I saw children all bundled up sleeping in something that looked like an empty store. I asked the bike man to stop.

"Madam them no the go that kind place like that oh, they fit be thieves." He said

"Drop me, here first wait for a while I'll be right back," I said.

I went to the store and saw that one of them was awake, he held a big stick in his hands and he looked vicious. He looked at me as I approached where the others slept.

"What do you want? You may be old but I won't hesitate to hit you if you mean harm to me or the rest of us." He said.

"I mean no harm, we have been looking for the children going to see the Christmas lights from the orphanage. A murder happened, the caregiver of the orphanage is dead." I said.

"Is Mrs Gideon dead?" He laughed happily.

"So what do you want to do with us? Arrest us? Or find who killed her amongst us? " he asked cheekily

"If that is what you seek to do you best leave, none of us had a hand in her death. She had it coming to her long ago, she's a murderer herself so she got what she deserved after all." He said.

"I am not here to convict anyone, I just want to help, if you don't want my help at least the smaller ones would appreciate the warmth, food, and care. So what do you say chief?" I asked.

"We are going to be at the church tomorrow, we want to see the lights and from there we decide what happens, for now, all we want now is to see the lights." He said.

"Fair enough. I'll be there early waiting for you all."

"Please do not bring the police with you." He said.

And for a minute he looked vulnerable, but only for a minute. His face was back being stoic and vicious.

I went back to the bike man and asked him to take me back home. The ride back to my place was quiet and I appreciated the fact that the bike man didn't try to ask me silly questions as we rode back home. I paid him his fee and went inside. Unable to sleep all through. I started baking to help take my mind off tomorrow and what happens.

THE ORPHANS, SARAH, ELIZABETH, MISS MO.

I brought the things Mrs Sarah requested along with me and we went to her house. Beth and I, as I called her as Elizabeth, was lengthier to pronounce. So Beth and I met Mrs Sarah at her place. We got into her sienna car and proceeded to the church, she blasted Catholic Christmas hymns from her radio and sang along with them with a loud voice.

"Ter Christopher has concluded with the results from a second autopsy conducted by another medical examiner that the cause of Mrs Gideon's death was accidental. The twisted ankle was a result of a fall and from the wound on her head and state of her body, it shows she was awake for some time before she died. She died because medical attention was not given to her on time." I said to Sarah. She listened. I could tell she had other thoughts on her mind as that showed on her face. She is not one to hide her true intentions; her face was open like a book for you to read. She said nothing and just continued driving.

"You think otherwise I can see. Are you not going to say anything?" I asked.

"When we reach the church and see the children I would explain better to you, you are correct, I think otherwise but it's good he concluded like that. Are we going to show them what we found about the note? And bills deviated to God knows where?" She said,

"Let's meet with the children first. We will soon be there anyway and you will stop acting like some secret agent hoarding top information." I said.

JP AND THE CHILDREN

JP lead the children to the church, how excited they were. Tired but happy. Mary was sick and weak. JP and Jacq, Mary's brother, were worried for her and it didn't help that they had nothing to do. The church was empty at the time they arrived. All the masses for the morning had been conducted already and even the priests were nowhere around the parish. Only the magnificent Christmas tree. They hurriedly stood beneath the huge, Christmas tree happy to witness it.

The lights were not shining yet as it was daytime. Many of them were hungry too, but they were aware that JP barely ate, and now that no one was in church. It was hard to find help.

JP prayed to God that the woman he saw last night wouldn't disappoint him. He needed Mary to be well, he needed food for all of them. He also needed the warmth and food she promised. God help them all. They needed that now more than ever.

The harmattan breeze was harsher today. Their thick and dirty clothes did little to protect them against the harsh harmattan winds. So they embraced themselves, sitting under the Christmas tree as the church was locked. The gatemen just stood looking at them with watchful eyes, he said nothing only looked.

They sat there for a while. He continued praying. Mary's brother was already crying because the harmattan breeze dried the tears that had fallen from his eyes on his face. What could happen now? He couldn't sleep now. His eyes were sleepy. He was tired but he worried for them. He remembered how they begged for food on the way. How they drank water from public boreholes. It was seen as an adventure and so their journey's stress wasn't felt much. Now that they are at their destination it seemed all the exhaustion all came on them at once.

MRS.SARAH, MO, and ELIZABETH

Mrs Sarah drove into the already opened church gate and went straight to the beautiful, huge Christmas tree. Beneath it laid some children.

"Are they the ones? How did you know they would be here?" I asked

"I went in search of them the day we came back from searching the orphanage. I took a bike and we followed all the routes that lead to the church. I saw the big one holding the child, he was awake, watching over them all. He told me they would be here today. He stubbornly refused help that night and God help me I couldn't sleep. I started baking till dawn and this morning I called Elizabeth to help me and come get you so we can help these children."

"Wow, Mrs Sarah never knew you had it in you, " I said as I was short of words. "Let's go," I said.

I watched mama Sarah go and tap the big boy and I watched the speed he used to grab her hands, wow I thought. Such grip. He looked at her for a while and then his eyes teared up. He was crying now. That was funny because he seemed like a wounded tiger a moment back. He slowly woke up the others, they looked weak. Also dirty and tired. Mama Sarah beckoned for me and I moved towards them.

"Hello, little warriors of the light, how are you, I am nurse Mo. We have everything to eat and drink and you could all come home with us first or choose to eat and then tell us the story." I said. As I was talking to them. Mama Sarah went to the gatemen and asked them to open the children's hall for us. They obliged her. I guess she told them the story and maybe promised we won't stay for a long time. It was nice.

The hall was opened and Elizabeth went ahead to bring the baked cakes, jollof rice mama Sarah made, and zobo to the hall.

"Is today Christmas?" One of them asked.

"Maybe" the other answered.

"It's Christmas Eve, Mary and I kept count of it using the Christmas lights." Said Jacq.

"It doesn't matter, come inside and eat, then tell us your story. We have questions and you will have to answer them and we will decide how we can help from there." I said

"You're JP, right? Alright JP, the leader of the gang, eat up, and then we talk." I said

Mama Sarah was happily dishing out food to them. It was beautiful. For a moment I forgot all about my worries and just watched them hungrily eat. Some of them thought JP brought mama Sarah to them and thanked him while thanking mama Sarah.

JP

"Mrs Gideon sold some of us to some people I didn't know when I found out she was angry and was chasing me to the hall where she fell. How she fell I don't know. But I saw that she was still alive. I should have called someone but I didn't. I wanted her to die. So I ran back and asked the rest to wear thick clothing. We were going to see the lights and that was how we left." He said to Mama Sarah.

"How about the person who called to throw a party? Was she planning any party?" I asked.

"We don't know about any party, she never mentioned. Only said we would be sent to another orphanage after this Christmas. That's all she said" JP said.

"Why the Christmas lights?" I asked.

"We barely had lights in the orphanage, we rarely saw lights and the Christmas lights looked so amazing from afar. It is our hope and dream to see it up close, Mary is sick, we need her to be treated and we need a place to stay. I can survive on the streets but they can't." JP said.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"17," he said.

"We need to tell the detective this," I said to mama Sarah.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Let them eat and rest first." She said,

Mary was taken to the hospital, was given treatment for her fever and cold. The rest, mama Sarah, took them home with her. Christmas was about to be loud for her, with her children and grandchildren coming over. It is going to be a full house. Her joy was contagious and I also found myself in Christmas spirits on Christmas Eve.

Jacq and Mary stayed with me. I liked them better. They were cautious, calm, and respectful. I also got to know they were fraternal twins. JP helped mama Sarah so much. He was ready to do anything she asked him to. I guess she sort of saw him as a son that needed a mother like her.

Detective Christopher was given the information we gathered at the orphanage and from JP and he promised to update us. Though knowing the police, I was not counting on it.

FINALLY THE CHRISTMAS LIGHTS.

Standing with glee under the Christmas lights in Saint. Theresa's Catholic Church, Makurdi. A dream come true for the orphans from the high-level orphanage home.

The Christmas tree as tall as a building, shined brightly with various decorations ranging from glittering cherubs, dove wings, Santa's hat, shiny lights was a beauty to behold always. With the children, it was an experience of a lifetime. They were super excited to see the lights. They saw the manger where Baby Jesus lay. They saw the wise men who came bearing gifts. The statue of Joseph and Mary. After that, they went to mass. All of them filled two pews in the church like one big happy family.

Christmas won't have met this time in low moods. The children's hope for the lights brought them good things. Their hope and Joy for the Christmas lights also brought me hope and Joy.

Mrs Sarah, Santa's mother in law outdid herself this time. Merry Christmas to Us.