

TITLE: QUARTER TO NAKED
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I'm always watching them.

Them, the people who live next door. They're a family of five, and their house is just a stone's throw away from my window. For a family of that size, they're unusually loud. I can see them, hear them, and after weeks of watching, I'm a part of their family. The sixth member. But they don't know that.

It started as a hobby. A fun way to pass time while I'm stuck in my room all day and night. My room has been my sanctuary for as long as I can remember. Until I met the family next door.

The first time I noticed them was about a month ago. They move into the house next door, hauling ragged bags inside the heavy rain, and my curiosity gets the best of me. What catches my attention is how they don't fit into this prim and proper estate. The *white picket fences, everyone minds their business* kind of neighbourhood, the kind described in American movies. Except this is Nigeria, and every house in this estate is heavily gated and guarded like a military base.

I sit by my window, peering through the curtains, watching their lives unfold. They are characters in my silent world, and I am the audience. At first, I was fine with just watching them from my bedroom window, which is adjacent to their house. I have a view of the right side of their compound from my room.

After a while, that isn't enough. I look forward to the interactions that are going on outside but rarely have a clue what happens inside the enclosed space that is their house. They have inside jokes that I'm not a part of, they play games I can't participate in. A week after they moved in, I found myself researching binoculars and ordering a pair online.

I become quickly enamoured with their son, M. He is a few years younger than me, but like me, M is an outcast in his family. He is quiet, rarely involved in their antics, other times, he is the subject of them.

The family plays this game I find fascinating. They hurl all different objects at M, at other times, the youngest brother, but mostly M. It's fun to watch. I always try to guess which object one of the siblings will select first. I smile now as I watch him pick up the nail; I am never wrong.

"Sade," my name echoes in my ears several times before I realize I am not alone. Mother has a knack for barging into rooms without knocking, and her classic response if you dare complain is, "In my house?". I don't bother anymore.

I turn to see her standing by the door, her stern eyes full of questions.

"What are you doing," She asks accusatorily. I know better than to answer the question. Without uttering a word, I rise from my crouched position and walk over to my bedside. My phone lies there, and I pick it up, fiddling with it to divert my attention from impending scolding. I type in my password and mindlessly scroll through my gallery.

"That phone is frying your brain," she chastises as she walks towards my bedside.

Mother reaches for the jug of water on the bedside table and fills the cup beside it with water. She grabs the pill bottle in the same tray and pops one onto her palm. She extends her palm towards me.

"Oya, take from my hand," I comply, her watchful eyes never leaving mine as she drops the single oval pill into my palm.

"Use it now while I'm watching, I know I can't take my eyes off you."

I place the pill in my mouth and then roll it beneath my tongue. I reach for the glass of water Mother stretches alongside the pills. As I take a careful sip, a wince escapes my throat.

Aside from the fact that these pills make me head-deep-in-the-toilet nauseous, I despise the drowsiness that follows, robbing me of days of clearheadedness.

Mother eyes the curtains drawn to the side suspiciously. She lets out a disapproving tsk before walking over to the far end of the room to close them.

She shoots me another sceptical look. Her hands crossed behind her back.

"Your Father called to say that he'll be back from his trip this week."

I keep my head buried in my phone. I am well aware of the intent behind her statement. Rather than informing me, she is issuing a warning. I nod slightly, letting her know that I understand her underlying message.

She casts a final glance across the room and leaves.

A smile curls on my lips. I head towards my bathroom, which is through an adjoining door in my room. I spit out the pill expertly concealed beneath my tongue into my palm. I learned this trick during my time in the boarding school, hiding pills is a classic manoeuvre every Nigerian boarder knows to avoid the unpleasant aftermath of swallowing deworming drugs every month.

I lift the heavy lid of the toilet flush. Floating inside is a little jar; I reach for it and bring it out. The pills inside the jar are all dry and stuck together. I drop the new pill inside. I instinctively count them. Almost 30. Once it is a perfect 30, I will decide what to do with them. For now, I am happy to be wide awake and happy. Returning the jar to its safe hiding spot, I exit the bathroom to resume watching. They had stopped playing our favorite game.

M is seated on the terrace in their compound when I peer out of my window. I pick up the binoculars, and I fiddle with it, wondering if there is something different about it. I am convinced someone has tampered with it when I was in the bathroom. I suspect one of the maids, the one who cleans my room. She is new and always stares at me weirdly like she is out to get me. I could swear she spat in my tea a few days ago, and after making a scene about it, I had to drop the issue. According to Mother, they had let too many maids go due to my baseless accusations. I'll need proof to get this one to stick.

I extract my eyes from the lenses for a moment and take a quick breath. The room seems to spin. I try to remember the last time I had a good rest.

I look at M. He is sitting quietly, his face turned upwards, mouthing something to himself. Then I realize he's humming a song, one of my favorites. For the first time, I notice the bruise on his lips. They are slightly busted, and a purplish bruise is brewing by the side of his eyes.

I abandon the device and move toward the bedside, I take a seat on the bed.

"I wonder what's up with his lip," I say, gesturing toward mine.

"What else do you think happened?" a voice in my head asks, the tone coated with sarcasm.

I wonder if the games M's siblings were playing with him were too extreme. It never occurred to me until that moment. They all seem to enjoy it, including M. He is always laughing and screeching when his brothers catapult things at him.

I resume watching, angling the binoculars toward the living room of my neighbors. No one is there now. The window adjacent to that of the living room is also empty. I take that as a sign to go to sleep.



I wake up to the light straining through the curtains. The first thing my brain registers is the noise. The screeching, throwing, almost manically laughing and screaming.

It takes me a minute to realize it is coming from the house next door. I reach for my binoculars beneath my pillows and draw the curtains aside. I take my usual position by the window side, I am familiar with which positions are comfortable and which ones are not. Today I settle for the uncomfortable one. It takes a while for my eyes to get used to what they are seeing. M and his brothers are playing but Something is different this time; M isn't laughing. He isn't doing anything at all but his brothers are laughing at the top of their lungs.

I rush out of my room, not bothering to close the door behind me. I descend the stairs as quickly as my feet can carry me. Two at a time. It briefly crosses my mind that I am barefooted, but I don't care.

The steps seem to get longer and longer. The unnecessary stairs that constitute the architecture of this house have always bothered me. Why build a house with stairs like that of the Burj Khalifa?

Three at a time. That should be faster. I land on the final step and would have heaved a sigh of relief if I wasn't preoccupied with my destination.

I collide with my mother as I get to the bottom of the stairs. She is holding a huge china plate and heading towards the dining table. I watch as the contents of the pot spill all over the floor. The unmistakable orange hues of egusi soup and chunky proteins cover the floor, a slimy masterpiece, like the work of a starving artist.

I take in Mother's alarmed expression for a millisecond and then the anxious stare that replaces it. I speed past the dining room into the living room where Father is seated, eyes affixed to the television. I didn't realize he was back from his trip.

I hear Mother call after me, each call punctuated with heavy breathing.

"Daddy Sade, catch that girl, don't let her go, oh." She screams.

I bolt out of the living room door and speed toward the gate where Kanu, the gateman, is seated. The gate he mans with his life is left wide open. He stands up as I approach.

"Aunty Sade, where are you going like that?" Kanu says, beckoning to me. I avoid his lame attempt to grab me and dash out of the gate.

I rush toward the gate adjacent to ours. A tall, wrought-iron structure, it is secured by a heavy padlock. The screams get louder as I approach. I take a deep breath and then bang the gate with all my might.

"Let him out," I scream at the top of my lungs. The screams from behind the gate grow even louder as if to taunt me. I bang on the gate more fiercely, curling my hands into a harder fist.

"Sade," I hear a voice call behind me. I turn back slowly. Mother is standing behind me, fighting back tears. Father follows closely behind.

The usual indifferent look Father has had as far as I can remember is plastered on his face, but it has morphed into something different. He looks perplexed, and a little bit of disgust maybe. He stands akimbo, his glasses have come off, and he is biting the tip of it.

"Sade *Oko mi*, let's go inside," Mother murmured, hands reaching out to me.

"But... but he's screaming at the top of his voice, can't you hear him? We have to save him."

M is in there. He's getting beat up into a pulp by his siblings. He could die, and I could lose my best friend. Maybe I should have spoken up earlier; I should've mentioned something to Mother, perhaps they could have prevented this situation, they could have gotten him out.

I see Mother's face immediately fall and tears well up in her eyes. She moves closer to me and envelops my lower body with the Ankara scarf she had untied from her head. Awareness and embarrassment course through me. I notice I am wearing nothing more than the tank top I had thrown on before going to bed last night and my most tattered pair of black underwear. It reminded me of an expression Mother used to describe a lady in her church choir who she came across at a supermarket and claimed was immodestly dressed. I wondered if the same thought that I was *Quarter to naked* was also going through her head.

"No one has lived in that house for months. Remember? The Nnamdis relocated almost six months ago. You remember them, right? You were such good friends with their daughter." She says.

Father and Kanu are looking at me like I grew two heads. Kanu stands far away from us, by our house gate, his head shaking slightly from side to side. As the scene unfolds before him, he clings to the gate, his dark skin almost blending in.

Father is an arm's length away from me, all the while speechless before he finally says.

"Let's get her in. The neighbors are watching,".

I look around. It is a relatively quiet estate but small group of barely familiar faces were beginning to gather.

He stretches an accusing finger at Mother. "I told you to lock her inside. Now, see, she's embarrassing me in public."

"Daddy Sade, is that what you'll say?" Mother muttered. She kisses her teeth, like she does to express her disapproval of any behavior.

"Sade, look at your mother now; let's go inside, *Oko mi*."

She wraps the Ankara that was threatening to slip off around me properly and makes a swift knot as she nudges me toward our compound. I tread the granite floor carefully, determined not to inflict more pain on the already swollen bruises on my leg. As Mother leads me into the gate, I wonder where I would be taken next.

Another pastor? or perhaps one of those sophisticated traditional herbalists who advertised their crafts on social media. The last one claimed I had a spiritual husband and had scammed my parents out of a couple of thousands. They had tendered numerous forms of appeasement to my spirit husband or rather, the herbalist who had me take multiple baths with all sorts of concoctions and herbal soaps rumoured to wash away curses. I wonder what else my spirit husband wants. On second thought, I was more scared of going back to the boarding house. I shiver at the thought.

Instead of leading me to my room, Mother seats me down in the living room. She calls out the maids, instructing one to run a bath in my room and another to bring her a bucket and a towel.

I bury my head inside the couch I'm curled up in, willing my sanity to find an escape. I hear Dad yell as he walks into the compound and approaches the living room, "Kanu, Lock that gate", his voice is drowned by M's screams.