

Bubble Gum Girls

Short story

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When you drive, slow down at Vulcaniser bus stop, or you might hit my big sister, or one of my cousins from my mother's side, or one of the little girls who sell us bubble gum. If you're the police, jump out of your car and catch who you can grab. But don't touch the little girls — all they do here is sell us bubble gum. They have to, if they hope to impress Madam Stella and get a promotion when they're my age, if they hope to do what I do. They must be ready, and watchful, and observant of the way we dress and walk and smile at cars.

When you drive close to the bus stop, blast your horns and we would scamper away.

We prefer things quiet. We come out in the dead of night, when lights are out, and rats are out, and dogs and cats flee into houses for fear of being poached, and the streets are an open field for thugs and vigilantes to play hide-and-seek. The thugs outnumber the vigilantes by a million to one, robbing anyone who dares to waltz around with cash. In the morning, we'll find dead bodies in someone's gutter. People shouldn't walk around at night without protection.

We choose the Vulcaniser bus stop, because it is the only junction that has a street light in this part of the mainland. Even though the light is epileptic, and so dim it looks like a moon, it is enough to accentuate the curves on our bodies as we approach your car, chewing gum seductively without blowing the bubbles. There is a time for blowing bubbles. If you are interested in us, don't blast your horn. Slow down, and we will come to you.

Your hungry eyes scan us, and we pose for you in our skimpy dresses, like dolls in a glass encasement. You have to pick one of us. It is why you have come. If you don't pick now, more girls will crowd your kabu-kabu car, and then it'll be harder for you to choose.

We are ants nibbling on granules of sugar. There isn't enough sugar to go round, so we take what we can get.

Your car reeks of poverty: the headlights are cracked open, one side-mirror is missing, and your boot is opening and closing as your car staggers towards us. But we will manage you. You're the first man with a car to visit us tonight.

I approach your car with a cat walk. But my strides are so short and hurried, it's more like a dog walk. I try not to

take longer strides to prevent blood from leaking down my thighs. I shouldn't be out here tonight. It is that time of the month for me, when I should be in bed curling and wincing to the pains of menstrual cramps. But here I am, out to make money, a tight belt squeezing my waist, a futile attempt to keep the blood in my uterus, just for tonight. I need the money. I can't wait five days before I get to work again. I have to pay seventy-five thousand naira to Madam Stella before sunlight. She has sworn to send thugs to my mother's house tomorrow, if I don't pay her the money I owe for the bubble gums I've been buying on credit. The thugs will slit my mother's throat and grab my little sister, and Madam Stella will force my little sister to sell bubble gums. I also started as a bubble gum seller — it is not a pleasant path.

The bubble gums grant us protection, and Madam Stella says it is her responsibility to protect us. But the gums do not come cheap. This is what I have to do to raise money, so I can move my family to the Island someday, away from this wretched mainland. I know a guy who knows someone, who knows someone, who works for someone, who is married to someone who can help smuggle my family to the Island. I just have to raise enough money to pay each of

them. My older sister spent her better years struggling to raise the money but failed. I can't fail as well. But first, tonight, I must clear my debt to Madam Stella or there'll be no family to smuggle.

I need you to pick me.

I stare at you, smiling, that smile I do so well, the one where it looks like I want to cut you up and eat you for dinner, the one that makes you imagine wild sexual fantasies. Your eyes are on me now. Only me.

“Closer,” you tell me.

The other girls groan in frustration. They clear a path for me to reach your car. My big sister touches my arm. “Do you have gum?” she asks me. I check with my tongue, to ensure the gum in my mouth still has enough firmness to blow bubbles. I nod, and she wishes me best of luck, though I hear a hint of jealousy in her voice. She had her twenty-fourth birthday two Saturdays ago. Next year, she'll be twenty-five, and then Madam Stella will excommunicate her from Vulcaniser bus stop. Men prefer younger girls like me who can ride faster and bend this way and that way.

I lean over your window and feel the heat oozing from your car. And then I see your face.

Ah, I recognise you.

Ah, you recognise me too.

You're Uncle Festus, my chemistry teacher from SS2, the only teacher in school who used to flog girls on their buttocks. I enter your car and just sit down quiet as you drive me away. The car continues its stagger, crawling past potholes and bumps on the road, which does nothing to calm my bloody uterus.

You have a generator, thank God. Soon as we arrive at your house, you go to your veranda to start the generator, while I fetch my phone charger from my backpack. It is the same backpack I used in secondary school, I wonder if you remember. I hope not. It is best if the night continues with the pretence that we are strangers.

I never liked you in school though, so this pretence is good for me. You were mean. The principal warned you countless times to stop beating us girls on our buttocks, but you refused. You preferred it when we leaned over on your teacher's table, when you raised your cane to the ceiling and whipped us. You loved how we rubbed our buttocks to soothe the sting each time the cane descended on us. It

pleased you when we begged for mercy. It gave you a perverse joy. It gave you dominance.

The light comes on. Your room is surprisingly neat, but small like an office. I find the nearest socket and quickly plug my phone to charge – who knows when next I'll see electricity? You enter the living room, stretching your arms, exhausted from dragging your generator.

“Do you want food?” you ask me.

“I'm not hungry.” My stomach hurts, like a tightening in my guts. I shouldn't be here for much longer. “Let's do what we came here to do.”

You nod and lead me to sit on the bed. “Kamsi, right? Your name.”

You want to have this conversation now? You should have done this in the car, get the small talk out of the way. I don't have all night.

“How old are you?” You push on.

“I'm old enough.”

“For an ashawo?”

“For an adult.”

“I see.” You smile, satisfied. Was that some kind of interview to assure yourself that I'm not a minor? I'm

seventeen, you fool! If you cared to pay attention, you'd remember that I just graduated from secondary school last year. During the graduation ceremony, you presented my award for best in Chemistry, English, Mathematics, and French, and while everyone applauded me as I received my awards, you told me that you were proud of me.

Now, you're touching my thighs. It has started, so I double-check that the bubble gum is still in my mouth, tucked somewhere behind my gum. I start to chew, not too hard, just enough that it's wet and tender.

You lean towards me and kiss my ear, bite, kiss my neck, bite, and your lips inch closer to mine.

I shake my head. "No lips." My lips are reserved for my future husband, the one God has kept for me. Do what you want with my body but leave my lips out of it.

"What?"

"Nothing with lips."

"Do you want your money in full?" You try to kiss my lips again, but I purse them tightly. You curse under your breath.

"Subtract the money for lips and pay me the rest," I tell you.

Those words anger you.

You grab my neck and pin me to the bed, so suddenly that I almost swallow my bubble gum. You press kisses on my lips, choking me, and I bite hard. You pull away and touch blood on your lips. You snap. And slap me twice on the face, then resume the kisses. It's the perfect time to blow my bubble gum, but your hand around my neck is blocking my windpipe. And I can barely breathe. I shake my body like a worm, like I'm convulsing on the bed, and you quickly release me.

“Okay, okay, stop that,” you warn me, a finger pointed. “Let’s just start, okay? Take your clothes off.”

I should walk away now. But then I remember all the money I need, so instead I undress for you. I do it slowly to put on a show.

You undress as well, sheate rubber on your thing, then you climb atop me. I lay back, waiting, holding my breath to calm my uterus, struggling to hold the blood inside. I feel you slide in, thrusting. Soon after, you stop and pull out.

“What the fuck is that?” you yell, disgusted. I look down to see what you mean. There’s blood on your

member, on the bed sheet, on my thighs. “You’re on your period?”

“No, no, that is not from me.”

“What do you mean it’s not from you! There’s literally blood coming from... Get out of my bed, get out of my house.”

I get off your bed, and more blood flow down my thighs. Fine, I’ll go. “What about my money?”

“What money? Did we do anything? If you don’t leave this place now.”

“Ah, Uncle Festus. We did o, we did something. You must pay me.”

You lose temper and grab my arms, pushing me out of your house, not minding that I’m still naked or that my phone is still charging in your room. You kick my legs so I lose balance, and you grab my neck and shove me, struggling to force me out of your door. When I try to fight, you slap my head. I grab your member and squeeze, to hurt you, but it seems to excite you instead. You laugh and punch my face so hard, my bubble gum falls out of my mouth. I need that gum. I bend to pick the gum, but maybe you think I’m bending to show you my buttocks like in secondary school.

You grab my waist, get on your knees, and set my body in position.

“If you don’t want to leave, then I will do it from the back.” Now, you’re touching your thing, to make yourself hard again.

I’ve had enough of this. I grab my gum from the ground, throw it in my mouth, and chew so desperately. I blow the gum into a nice bubble, and I keep blowing until it grows as large as a fist and bursts with a snap. And then I hear the explosion in your chest – the sound of your heart bursting. You drop dead. Soon, your blood starts to boil, and I see steam oozing from your skin. Your flesh is cooking, and it soon smells like spoiled meat. Your eyes melt into their sockets, your lips and nose deflates and flattens on your face, gapes expand in your cheeks, making you appear zombified, and I can see your jaw bones eroding. Your flesh dissolves into your bones. Before morning, every trace of you will disappear. It’s the second time I’ve had to use this on a man. I did not mean to kill you, but I can’t leave this place without the money, not after you saw me naked and kissed me even when I told you not to, not when I need the money to save my family.

I search your pocket for the money you were going to pay me. I find nothing. I check your drawers, and your shoes, and the pockets in other clothes you own, and I ransack everywhere. Still nothing. If there's no money, then how did you intend to pay me? Bank transfer? No cash? Ah, I should have seen this coming. Of course, men on the mainland now roam about cashless, everything is digital these days, to avoid being robbed. Too many thieves on the streets. If you don't have cash, then I can't get money from you. I stamp your skeletal toes, frustrated. What a waste! I spit my bubble gum on your melting skeleton – it lands in-between your ribs.

My face is bruised from the blows you inflicted on me. If Madam Stella sees my bruises or learns that I'm on my period, she won't let me work anymore tonight. But I have to work. I grab my things from your place, clothe myself, and run to my mother's house.

When my mother sees me, she embraces me and breaks into tears, rubbing her face on mine, and her tears wet my cheeks. She doesn't break the hug even as she cries, as she begs me to eat, as she begs me to stay, as she prays for me.

She cleans my face, serves me a meal of beans and plantain, and prepares hot water for me to bathe. I'm tempted to stay, to never leave. I'd keep the sun away if I could and have this night with my mother and little sister forever. But the sun will come up, and it'll bring Madam Stella's thugs, and they'll kick down my mother's door. They'll offer no explanation before they kill her, so my mother will never learn whose fault it is.

After I have eaten and bathed and grabbed a pack of pad from my room, I tell my mother that I have to go. She breaks into tears again and tells me that God will provide, that I don't have to keep living this life, that she'll take care of me. But she doesn't understand, and I can't explain to her. I can't let her know that when she gave me up to Madam Stella when I was only ten years old, so that Madam Stella can give me a job as a bubble gum seller, she – my mother – set me on this path. After all, Madam Stella said all the right words and promised to protect me, so that my mother had nothing to worry about. After all, Madam Stella promised my mother that I'd be making money, and she'd send me to school. But of course, Madam Stella never informed her that I'd have to keep working after I leave

secondary school, until I clear off the school debt, that I'd be standing at Vulcaniser bus stop the second my body becomes desirable by lustful men.

I gather my things and leave my mother's house. Sigh. Now I have to go buy more bubble gums on credit, just so I can protect myself and continue working tonight, to pay for the previous bubble gums I took on credit. It's a maddening cycle. But I will raise that money tonight.

The night is still young, and I'm sure I will find more men who want me. And sure, none of them will sleep with me while I'm on my period, so I might have to make more hearts explode. I will blow as much bubbles as it takes until I find a man who has plenty cash. For now, I will return to Vulcaniser bus stop and try again.