

The Yellow Mist

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FOTSKAH HAD NEVER met a woman like her—softly spoken and charming with her smile; she could lead an army with the confidence she carried herself with. Nerat was a beautiful woman, striking in her appearance and knowledgeable in her speech. She always had a scarf around her neck; yellow—you never saw her without a trace of the sunshine hue.

Nerat was nineteen when Fotskah moved into Bendel Estate, south of Warri. He was seventeen. Her house was at the fore of the street where they both lived. *The green tiled house*, they called it, where Nerat loved sitting on the balcony.

Fotskah was the third child of five. He had dark brown eyes and a kingly gait. His baritone made it harder for anyone to believe he was of that age. He had twin elder sisters and two girls after him; he was the only boy. His parents were both health workers and were never around during the day.

After his sisters Aria and Azania left for the university, Fotskah was supposed to be the next in command at home, but that would not happen. Since his parents had long hours at work, Aunt Kasiemobi lorded over him and his sisters. She had lived with them since Zerah, the girl after him, was five, and she had nursed Zara, the last born, from birth.

Fotskah had been thinking about the yellow lady on the balcony and needed to tell someone about her. He thought of Aunt Kasie. She was in the kitchen cleaning when he came to her.

"Aunt Kasie, I want to ask you something," said Fotskah. He never called her by her full name.

"What do you need, Fotty?" She asked. "Come, hope you have made mummy's bed? You forgot to do it yesterday."

"It's nothing too serious, though. And yes, I have made the bed." Fotskah said. "I want to ask you something a bit personal." He looked around to be sure no one was listening to their conversation.

"I'm all ears, Fotty."

"Have you noticed that yellow lady always on the balcony of the green tiled house at the junction?"

"Yellow lady keh? I don't think I know anyone like that o," Aunt Kasie answered.

"Maybe you've not noticed her; she's always on the balcony. She's beautiful. I think I like her."

Aunt Kasie laughed. She had never heard anything like that from him before. Fotskah's face didn't move. His jaws clutched in disapproval of her laughter.

She saw he wasn't smiling, and she took a pause to speak:

"Wait, okay. Okay. Let's be serious. What's this yellow lady's name? Let's start there," Aunt Kasie said.

"I don't know yet. We've never met."

Aunt Kasie's eyes widened with interest.

"Then why do you call her that?"

"She always wears a yellow scarf," Fotskah replied, "And for some reason, she never comes outside--"

"Or you've never seen her outside," Aunt Kasie cut in.

"We're saying the same thing, Aunt."

After he spoke, he thought about what she had said.

"...I don't know how I can reach her and maybe talk to her," Fotskah continued.

"Well, maybe next time when you see her, wave. She might wave back - that's how you start," Aunt Kasie said, "I have work to do, Fotty. Maybe we can continue this conversation later."

Fotskah never thought about that before. He would try it.

That evening, on his way back from buying fuel, he decided to try Aunt Kasie's method. As he dropped from the keke, he stood where he had the best view of her balcony. *She wasn't there*. He waited a few more minutes, but she didn't come out. He proceeded to leave. He had worn his favourite shirt to wave at her. He would have to wear it another day.

As he approached the gate of her house, he caught sight of a slender figure with alluring skin glistening from a distance. Yellow scarf, black beret—it had to be her. His stomach bubbled with excitement. That was the first time he saw her outside; she looked even more beautiful up close. She was alone, with a book in her hand, and it didn't look like she was waiting for anyone. She looked at him as he approached the gate. It was then or never for him. He walked straight to her.

"Hi, I'm Fotskah. Fotskah Abraham. My friends call me Fotty," he said. He extended a hand to shake her, but she didn't take it. She waved shyly at him, and he swiftly dropped his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Fort...ska," Nerat said. "I hope I pronounced it right?"

"Yes, you did," Fotskah replied, "Even better than I expected."

He stared right at her. She was beautiful.

"And yours? What's your name?" Fotskah asked.

"Nerat. Everyone calls me Nerat."

She let out a subtle laugh, and Fotskah laughed along. His laugh was raw and uncultured. She laughed more as she heard him.

After the roll of laughter, Nerat broke the air by pointing towards Fotskah's keg.

"Your gallon is leaking, look," said Nerat.

"Oh shit! I'll be back. Give me ten minutes."

Fotskah turned and began to hurry home, walking through pebbles and dodging potholes. He hadn't realized the keg was leaking. Aunt Kasie would complain. She always looked at the quantity. He gently opened the gate and circled around to the back. He was sure not to make too much noise. Aunt Kasie had ears like a bat.

After filling the generator, Fotskah blazed out of the compound to meet Nerat waiting for him, but when he got there, she was gone. He looked around and to the balcony, but she wasn't there. He dragged his feet and went back inside the compound. He slammed the front door without remorse as he entered the parlour.

"Who was that?" Aunt Kasie shouted from the kitchen, "If you don't break the door, you won't rest abi?"

Zara was weaving her doll's hair in the parlour, and she didn't relent in voicing out the culprit.

"Aunt Kasie, it was Fotty. Don't mind him."

Fotskah boiled with rage; he walked towards her, stomping his foot with his hand extended to hit her.

"Touch her. I'm watching you," Aunt Kasie said. She was leaning on the kitchen doorframe with a spoon in her hand.

"Aunt Kasie, warn this girl," Fotskah said, "If she continues this way, we will have a problem in this house."

"Fotty, the kitchen, now!" Aunt Kasie walked away. She was the authority; as much as she was friendly, no one ever disrespected her. Fotskah gave Zara a disdainful look, ushered by pouted lips and a finger snap. He followed Aunt Kasie's path into the kitchen and closed the door gently behind him.

"I saw you ran out earlier after you fueled the gen. You didn't even call me to come to see what you bought. What's the problem?" Aunt Kasie asked.

"I bought it complete...two five."

"I never said you didn't. My question is, why did you run out like that? You must say something before leaving this place."

She backed Fotskah and gently stirred the kpanfiya on fire with the spoon. After a few minutes, when he didn't say anything, she turned to see if he was still there.

"Fotty? Talk to your aunt. What's the problem?" She sounded calmer.

"...I met the yellow lady on my way from buying fuel. She was outside. Her name is Nerat."

"Nerat...That's a nice name. Ehen. And?"

"As I was introducing myself, the gallon started leaking. I asked Nerat to wait so I could quickly turn the fuel. By the time I got back, she was no longer there."

"That's why you want to eat your sister's head? Fotty!" She clapped her hands and laughed.

"Fotty, you're a funny man. Maybe her parents called her inside. I'm sure she had her reasons for not waiting. Better throw that anger away and come back to your senses. You'll see her outside again."

Fotskah didn't say a word.

That night, he stayed wide awake. He relished the thought of finally meeting the yellow lady.

"Nerat... Ne...rat," he called her name into the dark of the night as he rolled from the warm side to the colder side of the bed.

It was Saturday afternoon, and Fotskah hoped to see her again. As he went out, he sighted a yellow scarf on a moving body in front of Nerat's gate. His stomach swarmed with butterflies. He didn't want to rush; he slowly walked to her gate. As he got closer, he noticed a red-coloured book in her hand. Although he was not a reader, he loved that she was.

"Hey Nerat, what are you reading?" Fotskah said.

"Hi, Fotty. Oh, this, it's just an old book. It's not from this world," she said as she closed it.

"I can bet. When I got back yesterday, you were not here."

"You said ten minutes. I waited for twelve, then I went inside...I couldn't just stand here like that. I knew you'd come out by this time. It's why I came out," said Nerat.

"Oh, I'm sorry about that. And how were you sure I would come out? Are you tracking my movements now or what?" Fotskah asked.

"I see everything from up there," she pointed to the balcony. "Can we walk?"

"Sure," Fotskah said.

As they walked down the street, he told her about himself and his siblings. He told her about Aunt Kasie's mastery of everything and how she's lived with them for a decade. Nerat listened through it.

They finally reached the end of the street.

"And what about you?" Fotskah asked.

"Well, there's not so much about me. I don't live here. I only come here to see my parents once in a while, to know how they're doing and whatnot."

"Oh, where do you live then?"

"Somewhere else," she said, "A bit far from here. Of all the times I've visited my parents, this is the first time I've met someone outside my house. I normally spend my time on the balcony."

"That's good," Fotskah replied. "So, you read a lot?"

"You could say so. There's something about the feel of a good book... it uplifts my spirit. Anytime I read a book, I live a new life. Reading many books means living multiple lives, equating to having a reservoir of experience. Experience brings mastery, and that's what I'm all about—mastering life."

"Wow!" Fotskah snapped his fingers. "Word, word, word. Where's that from?"

"A book?" Nerat asked as she laughed out loud, exposing her gap tooth. Her laugh was soft, tender, and soothing. She was brilliant, Fotskah could tell.

"Maybe I need to start reading these books, too." They both laughed.

The end of the street was an open field. Fotskah spotted a bench resting on a tree at the side of the grassy field and pointed towards it.

"Let's take a seat," Fotskah said. They approached the bench; he turned it over and wiped it with a red patterned handkerchief he removed from his pocket. He cleaned her side with intention. Nerat smiled at his efforts.

"Ah, a gentleman," she said.

"You could say that again," Fotskah replied. They both laughed, and she sat down carefully.

She wore a blue silk skirt with an extended slit to her thighs. Her blouse was white, and she had a yellow scarf circling her neck. She smelled like honey and milk, and her skin radiated light cocoa. She was beautiful to behold. She sat, crossed her legs, and placed her book on the side close to her.

"So, Fotty, tell me something you've never thought about?"

"That's a very unusual question," Fotskah replied, "I've never been asked that. I don't think the thought of something I've never thought about can just... wait. I'm confused." Nerat laughed as Fotskah kissed his head with the cheek of his palm.

"Let me think of something," Fotskah said. There was complete silence. Nerat looked at him, and he at the ground. He had never been asked that. In trying to think about it, he confused himself even more. A thought finally crossed his mind.

"What really happens to people when they die?" Fotskah asked. "I've never given it that much thought. I guess it counts."

"Hmm... that's a nice thought. Death can be scary to the ears, but it speaks just one word to me: Peace," Nerat said.

Fotskah twined his brows and looked straight at her.

"Yes, peace," Nerat said, "When I think of death, I don't think of an end. It's the beginning of another. Death means nothing to me, and nothing sounds pretty peaceful."

"Tell me you read that in a book," Fotskah said.

Nerat laughed.

"Not really. It's just something on my mind. I love to reflect on subjects like that."

"Have you ever lost someone?" Fotskah asked, "A friend or a family member?"

"Nah. Nobody close, not really. But I've lost myself before, and that should count, too."

"How do you mean?"

"Life can be quite a maze. We're born with nothing, and at every stage, the world expects something from us. And those expectations can drive us to the farthest narrow. I say I've lost myself before because I've tried to wear someone else's shredded skin, and one thing about wearing dead skin on your body is that it kills the one it covers. Nothing hurts more than feeling dead while you're alive. Just a little tea," Nerat answered.

Fotskah listened in awe. He knew she had more to say, and wanted to keep the conversation alive.

"But I guess you still have many more years to live," Fotskah said.

Nerat scoffed.

"How old are you, Fotty?" she asked.

"I'm eighteen. March 22nd. You?"

"That's nice. I'm twenty now. November 1st..."

There was silence after she spoke. She was older, and that made Fotskah uncomfortable. She noticed.

"...But you see, age remains a fickle thing," Nerat continued, "It's a parameter the world uses to measure expectations. And we're in the age of great expectations."

"You can say that again," Fotskah added. She was crafty with her words and they gave him confidence.

Nerat was an old soul. She sounded like she had lived and seen everything before. Fotskah liked her for her deep understanding.

Soon, the clouds covered the pseudo-sunlight, and the sound of thunder travelled through the sky. It would rain soon. Fotskah, looking up, told Nerat it would be wise if they left before it poured. She agreed. They got up from the bench, and he returned it to the position they met it. As they left, Nerat spoke again about life.

"One day, I hope to wake up to no expectations. To dream and live, to try and fail, all without fear of what people might say. You know, Fotty, I always wanted to be a dancer. I had so much passion for it, and I felt that was who I was born to be."

"So, what happened?" Fotskah asked.

"Age came with a stiff waist," Nerat replied.

Fotskah laughed.

"I'm serious. That was when I realized it took more than dreams to live, even though life can only be lived if it has first been dreamed. Touché," she said.

As she spoke, they approached the front of Fotskah's house, and he insisted on walking her to hers before returning.

"Don't worry about it. This rain will drop any minute now. I'll walk myself home," Nerat said.

"You sure about that?" Fotskah asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. It's nothing."

"I had an amazing time with you today," Fotskah said.

"I'm flushed, Fotty. Take care of yourself."

Fotskah stood still as she left. Walking away, she folded her drooping silk skirt to escape the water. Fotskah looked sternly. Nerat felt his eyes on her, and she turned to him.

"You stare too much for a gentleman," Nerat said as she walked home.

After a long time, she finally felt alive. Fotskah really didn't understand all she said. She wished he did. She hoped one day, one would hear her. She had a good time with him but knew she could not see him again...