

The New Woman

My husband touches my forearm and I recoil. We're sitting up in bed watching Izzar So Sabon Salo. These days, Mai gida touches my skin and I think a millipede has crawled on me. I look at him, then at the arm. I hope he hasn't noticed. Because what kind of wife flinches from her mai gida's touch? Yet, I want desperately to wash the site, to scrub it thoroughly until every trace of him is gone.

On the TV, Aisha Najamu is hissing in bed and ignoring a phone call from a man called Malik. Mai gida's eyes are locked on Aisha. Sometimes I think he watches this show for her beauty. Maybe he fancies this one too. Maybe he dreams of bringing her home to warm his bed since I'm not enough. Because it hasn't escaped my notice how his eyes light up every time she comes on screen, how he almost sticks out his tongue like dogs do with their masters.

Mai gida turns to me.

—Why are you seated like that?

He means lopsided, with my top half drawn away from him. I murmur unintelligibly, sit upright so that once again, our shoulders are almost touching. He turns back to Aisha and I consider stuffing a pillow between us.

When we first met at university, Mai gida wouldn't stop talking about all his big plans for me—how he would set me up with a big boutique, how I was all he needed and what did he need a second wife for? Alas, Mai gida became an Ustaz and decided a boutique would corrupt me, expose me to immoralities.

—Yayi kyau sosai, he grunts in response to something Aisha does and I give him a dirty look which he doesn't see.

As if the boutique wasn't enough betrayal, three months ago, from out of nowhere, Mai gida opened this his big mouth and said he was marrying a new wife. The same mouth that promised me different back in Bayero. What's worse? He said it as one might if they spoke of acquiring new furniture. Because he's a man. And I'm a woman. And as a man who's also an Ustaz, his word is law, and I must go on giving him respect even if he's battered my trust, even if I now have to take turns sleeping next to my own husband.

But I'm no fool. If Mai gida has no remorse for his actions, I shall have none for mine.

I wait until Mai gida falls asleep. I pick up the TV remote, turn down the volume and listen for snoring. When I'm certain he's sound asleep, I turn it back up, get out of bed and tip-toe out of the bedroom. The noise from the TV masks the creak of the door and the mai gida I married is a deep sleeper. I steal

across the hallway to the kitchen, pull out a knife from the knife rack, and a plastic bag from a wall cabinet. Then I go over to his new mata's door and plant a quiet knock, knife-hand held behind my back.

There I wait, biding my time, until the little homewrecker opens up to let me in.

By morning, Mai gida wakes me up to remind me he's traveling. The lights are on even though it's only 5am. It takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the blinding brightness. Mai gida has this austere look on his face which he always has, maybe from having to deal with cantankerous older half-siblings who constantly reminded him of his place as lastborn and its implication regarding inheritance; something that, in the end, he never had need for.

—I'll be back in two weeks, he says. **You're** senior wife now. **Uwar gida.** Perform your duties.

I nod. Duties. You have no idea. I tell him goodbye and wait until he's gone before I go back to sleep.

Our sleeping arrangements are simple, something I'm still getting used to. There are four bedrooms. One is a guest room. The other three belong to each of us. Every night, two of these

are empty because Maimunat and me get a turn sleeping in Mai gida's room.

That afternoon, after I've eaten lunch and returned to Mai gida's bed, **there's** a small knock before a head peers in. The owner doesn't wait for **an** invitation. She waltzes in and joins me on the bed. She has the same knife I had last night. The same plastic bag. From this bag, she produces a halved sponge cake and we giggle like schoolgirls, reveling in the guilty pleasures of our shared rebellion.

Like me, Maimunat has a sweet tooth, but because Mai gida will not have fat wives, we're forbidden from indulging. This is why we sneak around like rats in our own home, eating food we didn't steal, and behaving like smugglers with contraband. I look at her now—the oval face, cleft **chin**, pointed nose—and I'm certain my late mother must be rolling in her grave to see me frolicking with the enemy.

Maimunat mustn't have seen my mind because she stuffs her mouth with more cake and laughs, blinking at me as she does this. There must be something funny **in** our defiance because I laugh back. Maybe the joke is in Mai gida's face when he finds out what we've been up to. Maybe there's weed in the **cake**.

We're still laughing when Maimunat draws closer. She removes something from the corner of my mouth. A crumb. Then she trails a finger down my left arm, over the intricate

design of my floral-patterned henna tattoo. I look at the finger, the black nail polish, gliding along on my skin, and my breath catches in my throat.

—Astaghfirullah! Maimunat, what are you doing?

Maimunat shrugs, giggles, then continues.

—Maimunat!

My tone is firmer now. She stops.

—We can't do that.

She cocks a questioning eyebrow.

—Not here. Not in Mai gida's bed.

Maimunat sniggers, each rolling sound asking 'what does it matter?'

Lately, I have begun to think she sniggers too much. But maybe I should expect that of someone who's four years younger than me. When I speak again, I go against every fibre of my being with the words that leave my mouth.

—We cannot disrespect Mai gida like that.

Yet, Mai gida doesn't deserve my respect. But maybe it isn't Mai gida I'm worried about. Maybe it's my faith. Or the big blue Quran staring at me, judging me, from the nightstand. The tesbih on the wall above the TV. The calendar with the face of Sheikh Mansur Sokoto.

Whatever it is, we sneak out once again, both of us pulsing with desire, and adrenaline, until we're entangled between

Maimunat's soft white sheets, mouths exploring, fingers trailing, as we shove aside our virtues and bask in the throes of forbidden passion.

—Look at these, I say to Maimunat two days later.

My heart is pounding. My temperature is burning. I have just hurried over from my room.

With one hand, Maimunat takes the pictures from me; the manila envelope too. With the other, she continues rocking the baby's crib. Ah! The baby. The baby is why Mai gida mentioned Maimunat in the first place. Because she'd had it for two months and Mai gida didn't want to go on hiding them when it was within his Islamic rights to bring them home, to practise polygamy.

Maimunat stares at the photos, one after the other.

—There's more in the envelope, I say.

Very quickly, Maimunat rifles through the envelope, her eyes mirroring my own horror.

—What is this?

—It looks like blackmail.

—He took pictures of the ba—

She doesn't complete her statement. She dashes over instead to the dresser, picks up the baby cam and smashes it on the ground.

Yesterday, Mai gida's driver, Usman, had almost walked in on us. We heard a knock, and before we'd completely disengaged, the door swung open. Even though it was her room, Maimunat had ducked under the covers. There was a look in Usman's eyes; something that resembled suspicion or accusation. Earlier, I'd sent him to the mall with a list. For some reason, Usman had thought it best to come to Maimunat's bedroom and inform me of his return. Now we know why.

Maimunat stomps barefoot on the broken baby cam now and, briefly, I wonder how it doesn't cut her.

—**That stupid** thing, she says, pointing, almost out of breath. It's always lying there on the living room sofa.

I nod.

—What do we do?

—What does he want?

I pass her a folded piece of paper with a handwritten message.

—One million? she screams when she's done reading. He must be joking.

—We'll have to pay, I say as calmly as I can. This cannot get out. The shame. Mai gida will have our heads. We may even be lynched.

Maimunat takes a moment to reflect.

—No, we don't.

—What do you mean?

—You don't feed a stray dog. It'll keep coming back for more.

I see her point.

—But, Maimunat, it's not like we have any other options. He's threatening to expose us.

Maimunat shrugs, draws a line across her neck with her thumb.

—We can have him killed.

She says this casually. Like it's nothing. Like it's something she's done before, a quick fix you use in everyday problem-solving. Maybe she thinks murder is like bleach that you employ indiscriminately to take out stains.

—Haba Maimunat. That's not an option.

She scoffs.

—It will be if he doesn't quit this nonsense.

Something about the way she says it makes me **shudder**. Maybe it's the deadpan expression on her face, or the icy timbre of her voice, but I can tell she's not joking.

A week later, we're gathered in the living room, eating delicious massa and drinking freezing-point fura when we hear screaming. The sound appears to come from Maimunat's bedroom. We're a small group of ten chattering women because Maimunat organized a hasty get together to treat us to her special brand of massa, prepared using her self-generated recipe. We stare at ourselves, then hurry down the hallway to the commotion. There we find Maimunat gripping Usman's trousers by the waist, her abaya ripped in front, from the neck down to her belly button, her bra out for the world to see.

—Call the police, she sniffles. Rape. He tried to rape me.

When Mai gida returns the next day, there's plenty of video footage. In one of them, shot on the iPhone of Maimunat's cousin, Nafisa, Usman is staring into the camera and yelling in Hausa that he's innocent. *Dan-iska*, a woman's voice shouts in the background, *what thief ever admits their crime?* But I know that Usman isn't guilty. Not of this crime at least. Just like I know that the get together was never about the massa or the freezing-point fura.

—What did you do? I ask Maimunat when Mai gida leaves for the police station at noon to promise Usman fire and brimstone.

—I saved us.

—But how do you know he won't talk?

—Let him talk. No one ever believes a man.

—This is too risky, Maimunat. Even if they don't believe him, that kind of talk will raise eyebrows.

—The eyebrows will go down when they see nothing.

I look in her eyes. When Maimunat and I first saw each other two months ago, we'd known. She'd awakened something in me. Something from my past. An urge I'd learned to repress; because good Muslim girls didn't do things like that. Now, there's only coldness. There's nothing in those eyes that beckons to me. I **feel myself beginning** to loathe her like I did when Mai gida first mentioned the new woman.

Mai gida calls for us that evening after he returns. For the first time, he invites both of us into his bedroom at the same time. Because walls have ears. Because there's a live-in maid. Because there's a gateman who ushers in Muslim faithfuls at every hour.

—**What's** this I'm hearing?

Mai gida's eyes are like acid. They burn. Maybe because I'm the senior wife. I avoid the acid, stare instead at the black prayer bump claiming the centre of his forehead.

He clears his throat.

—Why is Usman saying he was set up? That you, Maimunat, invited him into your room to get his money, then turned around and started screaming for help.

Maimunat's face is a rictus of shock. Even I am almost convinced by her performance.

—Haba, Mai gida! Are you saying I tore my gown myself?

—That's not what I'm saying. But I want to know how Usman ended up in your bedroom. Also, what money is he talking about?

—Money? There's no money, Mai gida. I left the living room to go freshen up after cooking and there he was.

—You mean to say that of all days, he chose the one day when we had guests?

Mai gida looks at me as if expecting my input. I stay mute.

—Are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me?

We shake our heads.

Before we leave, Mai gida says:

—You know what amazes me? Before I traveled, Usman mentioned something about his son in hospital who needs one million naira for an **operation**. I've now confirmed this to be true. **Now**, my question is if you say he's lying, why **do** the figures the **match**?

For three days now, Mai gida has been running back and forth between the house, mosque and police station. He says Usman isn't getting out of this. He'll personally see to it that they lock him up and throw away the keys. I don't know how to feel about this—relieved, because our blackmailer will not get the chance to ruin us; or sorry, because Usman was just a father bent on saving his son.

When I think about Usman, how I treated him in the past, all that comes to mind is indifference. And even though she's been here only two months, when I think of Maimunat's and Mai gida's treatment of him, I see that they've been nasty, condescending. It makes perfect sense why Usman would go to that extent. Perhaps blackmail might've been unthinkable had we treated him better.

Ever since the confrontation, Mai gida continues to wear a poker face. My husband has never been an open book but this is different. I cannot tell if his silence is acceptance, if it's trust, or if it's all part of some sinister ploy. And even though I now avoid Maimunat, once or twice I've caught Mai gida watching us from a corner of his eyes, as if he hopes to learn something, as if by studying our chemistry, our body language, he might find the first piece in Usman's puzzle.

I drive into the compound now, the big black **gates groaning**, sliding shut behind me. A hospital receipt for one million naira sits on my dashboard. I will have to hide it soon. But in the meantime, I hope this is atonement enough, recompense enough; I hope this is quid pro quo for the true price of discretion.

Soon I'll step out of this car, go into that house, and continue to wonder if it's infidelity to sleep with one's co-wife, and if maybe there's a small, very tiny, part of Mai gida that **just might welcome** the idea of a threesome with the brides.