

SCREAM BEYOND PAGES

Sonia was her name, simple name! Her world was small and quiet. Too quiet she sometimes wished something would disrupt it. She hated the world because she often felt she did not belong and may never. She had a job she didn't like very much but it paid her bills and allowed her not very much luxury but she could afford books. She loved books. Her evenings were spent reading books, completely lost in worlds authors had created. Worlds that did not exist but she felt she was a part of. She cried, laughed a loud snorting laugh and screamed when she read. There she felt she belonged. She wrote too, not often but she scribbled things she wished were novels or at least had a slight resemblance to the ones she read but she did not like them so, she did not write much. There were a lot of things she did not like, but she liked the café down town, from where she watched the city scream and the madness from afar. She loved that she could watch people go on with their lives; hawkers screaming with their goods, drivers losing control with the deafening sound of their horns, school children running home, workers bumping into each other, lives flashing through time quietly in the midst of loud noises, it was sweet torture she called it. So she often took a walk to the café, MARRICK'S, they called it. It belonged to an affluent old lady who lived a simple life with her family. Sonia felt some type of connection to her in her simplicity. If she had half the money Marrick had, she would live a happier life, she thought. So for her connection to Marrick and the view Marrick's gave her, she went often.

It was a long day at work. Sending emails and replying emails from customers having difficulty with the company's logistics app. She went for a quick shower, changed to a night dress and went into the kitchen to grab something to eat, the fridge was empty. The long list on the table reminded her she was supposed to go to the market. She had forgotten, again! She took out a noodle to make and put a pot on the cooker. She picked up her book and continued reading while waiting for the water to boil. She soon became lost in, BACK HOME. It was the debut novella of an unknown author. She bought it because it felt homey and was unusually little for a novel and weirdly big for a short story. That was the day she learnt the word

novella. She had been reading this little book for two days. She wasn't a slow reader but she savoured books she loved by refusing to read them or reading them very slowly so she did not have to let them go, or she read them quickly, so she could put herself out of the misery of holding on to the pages. With back home, she was particularly slow. She cried midway through part two and after she had a good cry, she closed the book and wondered why the water for her noodles wasn't boiling yet.

The cooker wasn't on.

"How could she forget to turn on the gas?"

She tried turning it on but it was in fact on. The problem was, there was no gas. Frustrated, she jumped into a jean overall, grabbed her tote bag and headed to the café.

She was well known at Marrick's so when she told the lady at the counter, "I'll have a piece of cake and a latté." and ended with a pleading whisper, "I haven't been paid but I'll drop the money once my salary comes in." The lady smiled a usual, "no problem".

Her piece of cake was finished and so was her latté, so, she was again buried in her book she didn't hear the guy asking if he could take a seat at her table. Dozie was a well built man. He had neatly groomed beards, not in the way that screamed Yoruba demon. His nails were neatly groomed and he looked particularly well put. Sonia could swear he had his life figured out. He looked too organized to not have anything about him figured out. He asked what book she was reading in a friendly tone and she showed him the book cover.

"Stupid question! The title was looking him in the eye, why did he ask? Did he not know how to read?"

He asked if it was an interesting read and she responded in a tone that suggested she wasn't interested in small talks.

"I wouldn't be reading it if it wasn't."

Then she thought, why did she do that? Why was she this person? She wished Dozie would say something to her. This time she would reply in a tone that suggested she was indeed interested... whatever it meant to be interested. He didn't say anything else. He went on typing speedily on his laptop. The noise was distracting and Sonia imagined him asking if the noise was distracting. He looked like the kind of guy who wouldn't want to be a bother. She imagined herself saying yes to him, making a joke out of it, suggesting he was a yahoo guy. Things moved swiftly from there. The both of them throwing pillows in bed, walking to the café every evening, holding hands, him kissing her goodbye to work from his apartment, she imagined he worked from home and his apartment was clean, everything had a place, looked aesthetically pleasing like the ones she only ever saw on Instagram reels, nothing like hers. She imagined coming home to him, kissing in the kitchen while they made dinner and reading her favourite books in his big vintage shirts. She stared into the world of the book she held but was lost in a new world with Dozie.

"I hope the noise wasn't so distracting?"

He was packing up now.

"You've been on the same page for over 10 minutes. I'm sorry if my loud typing distracted you."

She was right. He was the type of guy who cared. It was a good time to make a joke or say something to start a conversation. She shook her head.

"It's fine."

Dozie nodded, he got the memoir, she wasn't interested. He finished his coffee and stood. She watched him walk out, imagining what could have been.



The thing with meeting strangers is, you can be whoever you want to be. So when Sonia met Nick, it was easy to present herself to him as the person she wished she was. He had a vibe that made a good morning sound fun. He had waited 3 minutes before she arrived. The taxi from Bega to Nyaya usually did not take that long, but life seemed slow that morning. Sonia had been watching him from far away. She knew how to do this, watch from afar. When he saw her, he prayed she was going to Nyaya and the thought of sitting with her made him smile a brief sheepish smile.

"Someone is there," he said as she opened the front door. "Nobody dey there my sister, enter." Replied the half naked man she imagined to be the driver. What was it with drivers and hanging their pollos on their shoulder?

"But you been tell me say person dey there."

This wasn't new. Most Taxi or bus drivers didn't like driving with men in front. They preferred feminine company so they lied about someone being in the front seat until the cab was full.

"He told me someone was there."

She looked at the driver screaming, "fine girl sedon" Then, she looked at Nick, something about the man annoyed Nick, he looked at the man with disgust, "liar!" He pretend he didn't notice when Sonia joined him in the back seat but Sonia was not the girl to play silent games with, she was nicknamed, Ghost at work because except she had to, she never spoke to anyone but she didn't find it offensive cause she liked Omari Latif Hardwick.

"Hi, good morning!" He smiled.

"Good morning." She smiled back.

What was it with this guy? Why was it easy to make her smile? He was a simple guy. Good looking, yes, but he was simple.

She searched her bag for her book then she remembered she forgot to put it in her bag before leaving. What was she to do with the awkward silence?

"It looks like today is a public holiday."

"What?" She wasn't sure if he was talking to her.

Nick smiled. He smiled a lot. She could see why he did, he was good looking but his smile made him irresistible. It was the time of smile that made girls drool and got guys hating. She wondered how easy it must be for him to fool the ladies in his life. All he had to do was smile and they would forget they were upset. Nick looked at his watch, "normally, people would be struggling for buses by now." She would have ignored him but Nick had a vibe. He either really had a vibe or she made the excuse for him because she found his voice soothing. His voice, that was it! Why it was so easy for him to make her smile. She wanted to be sure he had a soothing voice so she asked him what he did for a living, not because she liked him or his voice; she only wanted to confirm his voice was his.

"Well, it depends. Sometimes I'm an engineer, other times a doctor either ways I'm always saving lives. But in reality I'm a banker. Sonia laughed so loud she felt embarrassed. She felt the judging eyes of the two other passengers who just joined them. Maybe it was too much fiction but she imagined one of the passengers pulling her hair for laughing at her boyfriend's jokes. Nick liked that she found him funny. Whatever this was, that was happening, she liked it.

"That's the first time someone is finding that funny" he looked pleased.

"You list out all the things you wish you were before you say what you actually do, how can anyone not find it funny?"

"Same thing I thought." He watched as the laughter died down and asked her, "what do you do?"

Not many people asked Sonia what she did. Well, she didn't talk to many people to start with.

"Sometimes I'm a nurse, other times I'm an author."

She intentionally evaded her job as a customer care for a logistics company. What is the point of playing make-believe if you aren't making things up?

"So, Author! That's interesting. Anything I've read? I'm a fairly good reader."

She wanted to tell him about the numerous books sitting in her book shelf that never got published but her mouth spoke before she allowed it to.

"Back Home."

"I like the title. What's the book about?"

She decided she'd be honest with him and tell him she didn't write back home. They'll laugh over it and she'll tell him a title to something she did write. That was the right thing to do...

"Well... In *Back Home: A Diary of Old Wounds and New Beginnings*," readers travel a short journey with heart warming honesty and painful relief into a fictional world that speaks to the human experience. Whether you have been away by choice or a necessity, whether you have a tight-knit family or one that has grown apart over the years, the book will touch your heart and leave you with a renewed sense of longing for home."

He was impressed!

She was impressed! Those words were on the back cover of the book. She read them each time she was about to read the novella. She thought they were beautifully crafted but what she did not know was that she had memorized them. She hoped the author would be as proud as Nick was. While she might have told a lie, she felt the author should take pride in writing such beautiful lines that she read so often they lived rent free in her head.

"I would love to read that."

She would suggest places he could get one from but because she knew something he did not; the true author, she laughed.

He asked for her number so he could order an autographed copy. She pretended he was joking and laughed some more; she didn't want to go on with the lie. She wished he would ask for her number a second time. This time, just her number. She would give him a reply immediately, but he didn't ask again. They carried on, talking about how Abuja traffic was becoming something like Lagos traffic. Then, Nick said, "if I had your number I would call you so we finish this conversation since I'll be getting off soon."

There was something in his tone that suggested he wanted to have her number but was sure she was going to say no. She understood what he meant but she was not the girl to throw hints at, good punch lines hardly got the job done let alone a weak one. She filtered his words leaving, I'll get down soon. That's what she responded to.

"Where will you get down?"

"The next junction."

Nick didn't say much after that. He felt embarrassed for trying so, to save what dignity he had left, he smiled more than he spoke.

For a moment Sonia imagined calling out her number, or typing it into his phone but she did nothing. The closer they got, the fewer words they said, refusing to imagine the things that would never be. Then she remembered Doyin from Back Home went home for Christmas with Uncle Theo. It was September. December was 2 months away. It was too early to imagine but there was a chance she would live a happy simple life like Marrick. Maybe even own a cafe or a bookstore or a local library to rent out books she loved, maybe her books would eventually get published and someone somewhere would one day claim to be the author of her title. It was unlikely, the chances were slim but that was the closest she had come to the life she always imagined, Nick fits perfectly. They would have beautiful kids.

Their daughters would have his smile and their sons his voice. They would live happily in a quiet neighbourhood. She didn't hear him ask the driver to stop but she felt the car when the driver hit brake. Nick got down and waved a smile. She waved back and pushed her head through the window. The cool breeze blew her hair backwards and it felt like in the movies as she screamed her number at him. Now she'll wait for his call.

