

THE NOISE MAKER.

The first time you ever thought of yourself as mad was when everyone else thought you were. Your legs were bound in chains as you tried to convince a bunch of nurses and heavy security that you were not mad. That your husband is the mad one. He set you up. He's the one who needs to be checked.

How did you get here?

The earliest assessment of your personality was that you were a noisemaker. Your mom said it. Your teachers said it, as you always topped the list of class noise makers. Your siblings said it when you wouldn't let them sleep with your storytelling each night. Oladimeji said it when you were screaming your lungs out as he rammed into you, begging you to be quiet cause of the neighbors. But you knew it excited him when you screamed. Your lecturers said it when you wouldn't pay rapt attention in class. Always explaining to others who didn't understand instead of waiting till the end of the class. The truth is you didn't know when or how to shut up. When you were happy, you shouted. When you were sad, you still shouted. When you cried, your cries were loud. How could people sob silently? You always wondered.

The only time people could catch you quiet would be when you're dying. And even at the verge of death, you doubt if you'd be able to keep quiet.

Now why did you marry a quiet man?

No, why did you marry whom people assumed to be a quiet man?

It was because at the point it was the only reasonable thing to do. Or so you thought.

Growing up with your mom had been hell. She was a nagging mother, not a nagging wife for she had no husband to nag at.

Her husband had left when he couldn't take any more of the nagging. Sometimes you forgot what he looked like so you would watch videos he made with his old camera. There was one particular video that stuck to your memory. In it, you tied a cape around your neck and tried to fly. And your father laughed and simply said "I believe in you." Although you have reasons to believe he actually said "I'll be leaving you." Cause it was not long after that he left for good.

One time you told Iya Moriah that her breasts were as flat as slippers and you don't know the kind of juju she's using to cage that her rich husband. Stupid old fool. Now, those were not your words but your mom's. And because you didn't know how to keep quiet, you repeated it word for word. You could never forget that type of beating your mother gave you. Iya moria had promised to lend her money before you went and opened that big stupid mouth of yours.

Other times, the words came out subconsciously and without warning, even to you. Your mother had a fight with one of your neighbors Matilda, insults flying left and right. Your mother called her an *Ashewo* and mama Uchendu came to calm your mom down. You didn't know when you said "you're an *Ashewo* too. Everybody in this house is an *Ashewo*."

Without asking, they knew. They knew you must have heard it from your mom. And mama Uchendu said to Matilda, "kill her if you want." That's when you realized the gravity of what you've just done.

That night your mom didn't use cane or belt on you, she held you by the neck with one hand and slapped you with the other.

"When will you learn to keep your mouth shut? *Ehn?*"

Slap.

"You this demon possessed child."

Slap.

"I'll kill you before you kill me."

Slap.

"When your father left, I thought he was gone for good."

Slap.

"I just realized he left his foolishness and stupidity in you. Now get out before I bury you with my own hands!"

She gave you one final slap and flung you to the side.

After that day, she was careful about what she said around you.

Your university days were equally tough. While some liked you for your boldness, it often got you in trouble. Especially with lecturers.

So when you met Durojaiye during your youth service, you grabbed your copy. He wasn't all you wanted in a man. But he was just what you needed. You didn't want to return to your mom's house, with your annoying siblings that have refused to do anything meaningful with their lives. Besides you already bragged that there was no way you'd graduate and still live with them. You didn't even want to imagine going back to that house.

Durojaiye never complained that you talked too much. If anything, he seemed to enjoy it. He wasn't the finest man in the world but he was okay. And to top it all, he was rich and very generous. So you ignored his bald head, his loud smelly farts regardless of what he's eaten, his subtle secretiveness, his cheating on you, his stupid sexual kinks. You ignored it all and married him.

You had the full support of your mom. Who would say no to that kind of money?

Okay, so besides the kinks, Durojaiye seems like a pretty nice man, what went wrong?

He started acting... weird? After the first few months.

There were things he no longer enjoyed and one of them was interruptions. Imagine how chaotic that was, a wife who loved to talk and a husband who hated interruptions.

Another was walking together. Now, Durojaiye had cars, so you didn't mean walking long distance. It was those short distance walk from an event or church to the car. He always walked in front of you. The days of holding your waist as you walked together were over. He walked so fast, as if he didn't want you guys to be seen together. You tailed behind, trying to catch up like you were stalking him.

Then he tried to stop you from leaving the house. A whole you? Did he not know you were the social secretary of your faculty back in school? You were a social butterfly and there was no taming you. It was bad enough that he didn't want to talk to you but stopping you from talking to other people was where you drew the line.

One weekend you were all dressed for Bolanle's birthday party, when he came down the stairs, all dressed too and said you were not going anywhere. You laughed, hissed, picked up your car key and made to leave when he stepped in front of you. You fumed. You resisted the urge to shout. You ran across the hall and pushed the front doors open but you're immediately swept off your feet and not in a romantic way. You went flying forward, landing so hard that the air is being knocked out of you, smashing your jaw on the cold tile. The impact, of course was disastrous. You were in a pool of your own blood. And because you didn't know how to cry silently. You screamed as the pain hit you in waves. That was the first time your husband started telling people you had a mental disorder.

The final straw came in the second year of your marriage. It was one thing to lose a child. It was another to lose someone else's. You had just lost Bolanle's child, Layi. It was not your first time babysitting him. Bolanle was one of your closest friends. She worked inter state a lot. She was the PRO of her company. Her husband too was hardly ever around. But as soon as they heard the news of their missing child, they came banging your door and threatening to bring the whole house down.

Bolanle held you by the neck, the same way your mother did that night. She called you a witch, called you barren, a kidnapper, a mad woman and a demon. If not for her husband, Bolanle would have killed you there and then. Not that she could survive two minutes in a fight with you. But now was not the time for that.

The next morning, the police were knocking on your door. Bolanle wasn't joking when she said this was only the beginning.

They searched your house and found Layi's glasses in your cargo pants pocket and everyone knew fully well that he could not see well without the glasses. He never took it off. How do you explain to them that you wanted to try out makeup on him? That you guys have makeup sessions every time you babysit him? Were you trying to turn their son gay?

That was when Durojaiye, with all his influence, locked you in one of the rooms while he sorted out the police. In the darkness, you groped, scratched, reached out, to find nothing but emptiness. You cried, pulled your hair, scratched the floor, prayed but Layi was yet to be found.

The next morning, he drove you to a psychiatric hospital. It was the only way he could prevent you from getting arrested and he was doing you a favor. That was what he said.

During the drive there, you couldn't tell if the shaking was from your hands, the car engine or the bad road. Soon, the road evens and you roll up your window. The breeze is a little too much.

On getting there, Durojaiye told you to stay in the car. Did he think you didn't see him turn on child's lock before stepping out of the car? That was where you began laughing. Even if you wanted to run, where would you run to? A child was still missing and it was your fault and over your dead body would you return to your mother's house.

You don't know what Durojaiye told them that made the nurses have fear in their eyes when they saw you. Unlike the last time you were here. They were more... welcoming?

You turned to your husband and asked, "what did you tell them?"

His eyes gave him away, he had never been a good liar. You immediately attacked him. Scratching, slapping, kicking, punching until the nurses were able to pry you away.

"I told you she's insane. There's something wrong with her. You have to help me." He said to one of the nurses.

On the first day, you talked, screamed, shouted non stop for it was all you knew how to do. You tried to explain to them that there was nothing wrong with you. Absolutely nothing. You asked them what he told them but they would never say. They kept telling you to calm down. "Don't tell me to calm down! Tell me what he said!" It went on for hours before night came and you slept.

On the second day, you were already in a change of clothes. You had your bath very early and brushed your teeth. You exercised. You did everything to prove that you were normal but they were not buying it. If anything, that seemed pretty used to it. You had maintained your cool for six hours. Then that nurse went ahead to ruin it by calling you *patient*. You lost it, "I'm not your bloody patient. There's nothing wrong with me!" You had gathered the attention of everyone. Then you took a deep breath and in a calm voice, you said, "I'm the most patient patient I know. And I can prove it. I'll prove it." You went to your bed chanting "I'll prove it" and didn't get up till the next day.

On the third day, you tried to participate in normal activities with other patients. Maybe if they saw that you did better than the others, they'd finally listen to you and let you out of here. You saw a man playing ludo with himself and you took an empty chair and went to sit close to him. Without saying anything to each other, you both started playing. And he was winning. And you didn't like it but you were impressed. How could a mad man beat you at a game as simple as ludo? When he won, he did the craziest thing. He swallowed the dice. Two of them. And went into a fit. He was choking, coughing, wheezing. You screamed for a nurse but instead, you get pulled, by your hair, out of the chair. By a very fat angry woman. She threw you across the hall and ran after you. She sat on you and had you in a choke hold. You couldn't breathe, you saw your life flash in front of you. Was this what Layi felt wherever he was? You were lucky the nurses were just in time to save you from meeting your ancestors. There goes your chance to prove your sanity. How could you have known that the chair was hers and she never lets anyone touch it? They bundled you to your room and locked you in. You cried, scratched the floor, your shrieks projected off the ceiling, echoing through the room. When one of the nurses brought you food. You were angry, you grabbed the plastic fork and started stabbing her and managed to get it into her eye. Her scream was loud enough to bring down the whole building.

Just when you were certain of your doom, they'd never let you out after that stunt you pulled, Durojaiye called and asked to speak with you. He said Layi had been found. He said he didn't want to go over the details on the phone and he was coming next weekend.

You believed he was coming to pick you up. So you behaved yourself, you talked to only yourself and didn't bother anybody.

When he came, he hugged you as your hand hung limply by your side. You asked him how Layi was doing. And Bolanle too. He said he was okay and they'd taken him abroad. To get over the trauma. They'd left Nigeria for good.

You laughed. It started out with a chuckle, a rumble, then full blown uncontrollable laughter. He called the nurses to check on you. You wanted to stop laughing knowing that these things further proved your madness but you couldn't. You reached for him, grabbing his collar and sniffing him like a dog. You wanted to be sure. It took three nurses to get you off him. Before they could, you held his collar, pulled your head back and forward. Fast and hard. Breaking his nose. There was blood on your hair and forehead, on his clothes and the floor. But now you were certain, there was no mistaking it, it was Bolanle's perfume.