

You are at the age of performing desirability, that grand parade of youth. Every interaction with boys is laced with the language of lust, the promise of a partnership. You and your roommates prime yourselves like broilers in November, pumped with feed and ready for December's harvest.

Outings are carefully planned. Wigs are straightened without mercy, bent to the iron will of hot combs. The room smells of singed animal hair, rosy setting spray, and metallic foundation. The floor is filled with discarded wipes stained brown from makeup applied repeatedly to get the perfect contour. Shoes are chosen with precision.

*Don't wear that shirt nau, you already posted it on Instagram.*

*That gown is too long, show some skin abeg.*

You rehearse poses for pictures to be taken with Nneka's iPhone, as there is an unspoken understanding that the other phones are inadequate to capture experiences. But always, without fail, your pictures turn out the ugliest.

On birthdays, valentines, after exams, the start of lent, national democracy day, the end of lent, Sallah, and Christmas, you watch them get enveloped in tenderness. Any holiday is an opportunity for dates and flowers. They come back smelling of sex, warm with a febrile female glow. Their skin is supple, accounts full, smiles wide. They tell you not to worry so much about getting a man. You lie that you don't care. Your sister calls to ask if you have a boyfriend, and you tell her you don't talk to men. You tell yourself you are too intellectually superior to perform romantic love. Too evolved, too sentient to give into chemicals surging through your brain.

But, someone trails your thoughts like a shadow. He is a new staff at a remote company you work part-time for. You hated meetings with a passion but it was bearable because your boss was lenient enough to let the meeting proceed with camera's turned off.

The first time you meet him, you are surprised to see a new participant at the bottom left of the screen. His name stands out, strange and forlorn. Yaefu. Yaefu. What did that even mean?

Cameras go on. The first thing you notice is the stream of light hitting his face at an angle, most likely from a window beside him. It illuminates his eyes to a tawny brown.

As a child, before you learned of the random allotment of genetics, before you learned of melanin, your eyes and gums were your first insecurity. You hated the stained yellow of your dad's cornea, and the pale red of your mother's. They had passed their gums to you. The upper ridges shaped like love were interspersed with black and pink, but mostly black. You brushed religiously, trying to get rid of the blackness that eventually took you a decade to embrace.

Yaefu has white eyes, white teeth, pink gums. No scrubbing required. You still associated it with a certain innocence. Like people who had soft skin, smooth palms, not one tiny scar from a knife-cut while cooking. Eyes that had never been stung by smoke while blowing out a kerosene stove.

When your boss introduces him with a joke, he laughs and you run your tongue over your teeth.

"Yaefu. Am I pronouncing it right?" Your boss asked.

"Honestly? That's the best attempt I've gotten in a while. You're very close." He chuckles.

"That's an interesting name. What does it mean?"

"A bold man." He responds and leans back in his seat.

"Yoruba? Igbo? I can't tell."

"Igbo, Egyptian, Fante. African, you could say."

The boss shook his head and smiled. "3 stages of interviews and we never thought to ask that."

Yaefu's books are stacked behind him on a furnished shelf. Some are horizontal, others vertical. Some have their spines facing inward. Others lean dangerously upon themselves like a stack of falling dominoes. There is a reed stick diffuser at edge of the shelf. You can not make out any titles.

An artwork looks out of place on the white walls. It is a painting of a skull with the top half ripped off. Flowers bloom from the eye sockets, gnarly but colorful. The skull bleeds wavy colors from the open cranium. It looks like the artist made a mistake but decided to leave it there at the last minute.

The meeting ends and you are consumed by a fever. You stumble through social networks like a poltergeist, combing through a handful of Yaefu's and finding none that looked like him. It wasn't a popular name.

It takes 3 days for him to text you. He has been assigned to a project and needs you to grant permission to a spreadsheet.

He asks how you are, and you become giddy. Your responses are measured carefully. You wonder if he can perceive the fetor of your desperation, so you play non-chalant sometimes. It does not help that you are chronically online, and he does not use social media outside those needed for work. When his message pops up, you are always acutely aware. Your fingers are ready to respond immediately, but your brain shames you into restraint.

You do not know much, but you know he is brilliant from how he texts. He punctuates every sentence and discusses art and red wine. You read his Masters thesis, and you swoon at his astuteness, his attention to detail.

You learn that he hates corn, rain, the way a cold bottle of drink sweats, the texture of chia seeds. In 2 weeks, he asks for your pictures, and you spend an agonizing 12 hours, ruminating over it and wondering which to send. You ask your roommates for their favourite pictures of you. They ask what for, and you say nothing. You hug him to your chest like a secret. You send him your pictures eventually, fearful that he would not be impressed. But he calls you pretty, and you think about it for weeks.

Soon, you both start to talk every day. The night before your MLS404 exam, a 6-unit load course, you do not read. Instead, you stay up all night working on his new End of Day report. He sends you two videos of himself which you watch till it sears into your memory. In the first, he is filming in front of a bathroom mirror. A Cuban necklace rests languidly on his neck. He looks like the world owes him obedience; haughty confidence trails his smile. His afro stands defiantly,

defying gravity, begging you to reach through the phone and weave them into cornrows. You tell him about this longing, but he ignores your message for days. You make a bitter resolve never to text him again.

On a Saturday morning, Nneka snatches your phone and looks you up and down. You had been reading through the old messages with him and you panic at the thought of her seeing them. You leap from the bed and try to tussle it out of hands.

"What's your own nau?" Irritation creeps into your voice.

"Kam, you are acting weird. I can't give you this phone until you tell me what's going on with you." She whispers. Eseosa and Joyce were still asleep.

Already your palm has begun to itch. The familiar weight of your phone is gone. It feels like an appendage has been ripped off and the pain is spreading through your body in waves.

"Give me my phone."

Nneka is the closest to you. 4 girls in one room, but there had never been trouble like people guessed. You knew it was because Nneka held the room together. It was her openness and vulnerability, her willingness to get everyone to talk. On rainy nights, she alternated creeping into everyone's beds except Joyce's, who was known to kick everything out of her path. Joyce claimed it was sleepiness, but Eseosa maintained it was her insidious wickedness rising to the surface, just like when they had a drunken night out and Joyce called her fat.

The 'fat' incident was the only time tension had brewed in the room. Everyone could be dressing for school and Eseosa would take dramatic turns in front of the mirror, grabbing her buttocks in her hands and announcing, "For people who don't know, they call this THICK, not fat."

Joyce would hiss and mumble loud enough for everyone to hear, "It's not like it can shake."

It was Nneka who set aside a Sunday evening for all parties to reconcile. Nneka, who made everyone hug and put up roosters for 'decompressing' and checking in on ourselves every week.

You look at Nneka's doe eyes. Her delicate wrists, her forehead squinted in concern. A pink headband is placed on top her cornrows that has begun to roughen. The parting lines are filled with hair instead of the glistening scalp that was there 2 weeks ago. You know this because you make everyone's hair in the room.

Suddenly, a thought creeps into your mind. You wonder if Yaefu would like someone like Nneka instead. You shudder and bury the thought instead. But it doesn't stay down. It transforms into a rage which you use to demand your phone back.

Nneka steps closer towards you. You can smell the must of her morning breath.

"I've been up since 3:00am. You know it's unlike me. I've been looking at you pressing your phone since that time. We have a test on Monday, and you're not jacking? Kamsiyochukwu Nchedo, what is going on with you?"

"Nothing!" You hiss and grab the phone out of her hands. She flinches. Your aggression shocks you, but there is no going back.

The next time Yaefu texts you, he tells you he wants you. He has been thinking of you all day, all the things he'd like to do to you in the shower. It catches you off guard, but you are grateful he texted. He says he has been busy. Life has been tough. You chastise yourself for thinking he had been selfish. So you respond that you want him too.

Again, you brim with hope, a primal longing, and you do not sleep that night. He leaves you on read again for a week. Slowly, you convince yourself that you understand. What you both had was a volatile thing, a slow burn. Talk every day, and it would crumble. What mattered was that he had chosen you.

Before you meet physically, you devise a means to lie to your roommates. Yaefu had paid for your flight ticket to Lagos, but you couldn't just up and leave. It felt stupid, feeling beholden to them when you were a grown adult. But your sister delighted in speaking to them every weekend when she called. They loved her too, what once felt like a communal kindred had become a trap.

They would not have minded you leaving to see a man, and you knew this. But what you dreaded was the outburst of excitement. You could picture them telling you what clothes to wear, lending

you their wigs, maybe offering birth control. Your roommates would want to enlave you in the warm embrace of their femininity. But Yaefu was not safety. They would protest at the idea of him being in another city. They would think you too naive. You were smart, but not smart enough to 'handle' men. Yes, Eseosa would be the one to say something like that.

First, you tell your sister you desperately needed to travel. Your work with the company was over and your boss would like to host a physical hangout with the team. Yes, your flight was paid for. Yes, there was a hotel accomodation with a room to yourself. You were safe. Yes. Once your sister was convinced, lying to your roommates was a walk in the park.

Nneka still spoke to you even after your outburst. Even the threat of animosity could not touch her tenderness. The night before you leave, she begs you to feel her breasts for lumps. They had started clinical postings in the oncology unit, and she was red eyed and mortified when she came into the room that day.

"You should have seen them, Kam. Those poor women. Their skin was completely eaten away. The decay, the rot? One woman was wheeled away for a mastectomy and I couldn't stop crying. The consultant told me to get out. It was awful, Kam. It was awful.

"Just look at my right breast. It has that orange peel look doesn't it?"

You sighed. "Those are just little pores."

"But the nipples?"

"It's the same as the other side. You're cold and I can't feel any lump. You're okay. There's nothing wrong with your breasts."

"Oh, thank God." She hugs you and your hands lay limp at your side. "I can't believe you're going away for days. What about your class attendance?"

"I told our HOD."

"Okay." She sniffled. "I think you're very lucky to have things happen in your life outside of school. The rest of us don't. Only a man would make me travel from Enugu to Lagos just like that. That's a little pathetic, isn't it?"

You don't respond.

"Kam, you're talking to a man."

The firmness in her voice takes you aback.

"No, I'm not."

"Kamsi, it's not a terrible thing to like someone. " She sighs. "See, I have eyes. You're always smiling into the phone or texting fast like you're angry. I wasn't going to bring this up but I really need to know."

"Okay, I like someone but it's not that serious."

Her eyes light up. "Why isn't it serious?"

"We don't always talk and he seems scary."

She says nothing, and it urges you to fill the silence.

"He has mentioned that he's kinky. You know this dom-sub thing? He gets into it. Not in the sexual way, like in the real world way."

She recoils and folds her arms. Worry is etched on her face. "Do you vibe with that kind of thing?"

"Jeez, Nneka. God forbid!" Your voice is high pitched and forced. Overdramatized.

She smiles at you but it is vacant and cautious.

When you see Yaefu you are overwhelmed by the feeling that God has taken leave. He is breathtakingly handsome, but there are no butterflies, only a sinking feeling, a gradual rumble at the base of a ship headed for doom. But there is the promise of excitement. His smile catches you

off guard. He gives you your first clubbing experience, your first orgasm, your first lingerie. When you return to Enugu, he disappears for weeks. Soon, the flights become consistent. The lies multiply, and there is less and less of you. Your roommates say the tech money is changing you, but it is only him.

Sometimes you hate him, but he calls you a good girl, and you fold. He calls you his charm, and you become pliant in his arms. His cunt, his slut, his servile little bitch. You are at once enraged and enthralled. There is a casual vileness with which those words escape his teeth. You stay, even when it unnerves you.

He starts to tell you what to wear, what to think, how to be. Your body revolts, but you convince it to submit. Making decisions was hard anyway. When he asks if you want this, it is perfunctory and devoid of tenderness. But you say yes. Yes to this corruption, yes to the fingers trailing your bruised lips. Yes to the gag in your mouth, the whip on your back, the forceful penetration, the welts, the healing scars reopening. Yes to hurt, yes to pain, yes to him. Yes. Yes. Yes.