

Nine years earlier...

His eyes crinkled and his grin grew wider as our eyes collided. What a beautiful smile, I thought to myself. I could not tell if he was smiling because I was making the awkward peace sign as my friend was taking pictures of me with her BlackBerry Bold 5 or because he was simply trying to flirt.

I looked away swiftly so as not to anger my friend further, she was already agitated and weary from twisting and bending in a bid to capture me at my perfect angle. I was not about to be ungrateful, so I smiled warmly at her and pouted some more jutting my hips out and angled my head to the right.

“Ghen Ghen, Naomi Campbell wished she could,” The young man with the beautiful smile said as he walked past us. I blushed.

“Ah Ah, if you be Oyinbo, you for don turn red, see as you dey blush,” My friend said jokingly. I smiled and rushed towards her

“Let me see, let me see” I grabbed the phone from her and started swiping right.

“Easyyyy” she said before letting the phone go

“Omo Muna, forget, you sabi snap picture, just look at this masterpiece” I said then turned the phone towards her, she smiled

“Well, if you weren't beautiful, I wouldn't have been able to capture the masterpiece” Muna replied

“Awwwww...you and your sweet words that you love to share with all and sundry,” I said, pulling her in for a side hug

“Whiner....You too learn to take fine pictures of me too, you hear” she said while returning the hug

“Dont worry, I'll try”

“Yimu, this is what? The one-millionth time I have heard that” Muna raised an eyebrow in query

“Ah Ah na” I pout my lips in jest

“See bah, I've accepted that photography is not your calling”

“Okay I agree, but it's yours when will you enroll for your photography classes” I said, throwing her a side glance, she smiled and pulled me into the restaurant we had been standing in front of for the past hour taking pictures.

Muna and I have been friends since secondary school. The similarities in the pronunciation of our names were what drew us together. Nina and Muna. We became instant buddies after a teacher called her name in class and I answered. Our friendship was a match made in heaven, I used to tell everyone who cared to listen that she was my soulmate. No other person understood me like her and vice Versa. We could be in a

room filled with people and communicate with only our eyes. That was how strong our bond was.

Presently, as we walked into the restaurant arm-in-arm, I playfully leaned my head on her shoulder as we made our way to the counter to place our order.

The young man from earlier walks up to us, this time he shares his smile with both Muna and I.

“Hey Naomi Campbell and Annie Leibovitz” He called and stood in front of us with that beautiful smile of his, again.

“Annie what? Ta lon Je be?” Muna asked, with a raised eyebrow

“She is a famous photographer”

“You see,” I said, turning to her excitedly, she smiles and looks away

“See what?” Mr. Beautiful smile asks, his eyes filled with curiosity

“Nothing,” Muna said, obviously trying to change the topic but I stayed on it with my ten toes deep. I needed someone to talk some sense into her, even if it was this stranger with a beautiful smile. Muna nudges me but I ignore her and continue.

“I’ve been telling her to take photography classes since 1900 but madam here, just responds with a smile, if you can help talk some sense into her, I’d appreciate it”

Mr. Beautiful stranger smiles at us and asks if we would like to sit down to discuss further. We agree and then walk to a table facing the waterfront. We both sit across from him.

A waiter walks towards us with a large menu in hand.

“Ehen, before we proceed, I am Echezona and you?”

“I am Nina, she is Muna”

“Nice to meet you ladies”

“Same here” we both answer.

“So, firstly, Muna do you like photography?” He put his elbows on the table and gazes intently into her eyes.

“I don't know” she replied softly, Echezona threw a quick glance my way.

“So what would you rather do, if given the chance?”

“I honestly don't know, I mean I have a job that pays well and I enjoy taking pictures, she only says I take good pictures because I take very good pictures of her and I have told her a billion times, it's only because she is beautiful”

Eche leans back and smiles as we rapport.

“Aww my sweet, so are you mama, so are you” Muna said

“Thanks sis, but I wasn't the one who was called Miss Fab, in school”

“Oya stop, don't shift focus, We were talking about you, it's not only because you take good pictures of me Muna, oya show him your gallery”

Just then our waiter arrives with our drinks and places them accordingly.

“Show him your gallery” I repeat

She reluctantly brings out her phone, opens it and then scrolls to a folder. She hands the phone to him and distracts herself by sipping. I stand up and rush over to sit beside him, he smiles warmly at me and I smile back.

Minutes later, he looks up and hands her phone over to her.

“These are really good Muna, You have an eye for great pictures”

“Thank you” she muttered, lowering her gaze. I stand up and go sit beside her, a big smile on my face.

“I told you,” I say loudly and excitedly.

“And you Nina, what do you do?”

“She works as flight attendant and hopes to be a pilot someday”

“Oh wow, big! That's impressive”

“Thank you” I looked away swiftly, his gaze had become more intense and I felt the hairs at my nape stand up. Thankfully the waiter brought our food out and placed it on the table. We all started devouring our meals and laughing over mundane things.

That was the beginning of our love story. Months later, Eche and I started a relationship and a year later, he asked me to be his wife. In that year, Muna finally gave in and took photography classes. Eche and I got married with all our loved ones present, Muna was my maid of honour.

Our friendship grew stronger and my marriage blossomed as well as the years flew by. I birthed two children and made Muna the godmother to my daughter. During the pregnancy with my son, my second child, whom I named Munachimso, an ode to my sister, I suffered from preeclampsia and had to be admitted for four months. The ordeal took a huge toll on my body and mind. I was grateful to have my family and friend by my side.

Muna had flown in from Egypt after rounding up a photography summit she attended. She took good care of me when Eche had to clock in at work. Months later, I had a safe delivery and was finally discharged from the hospital.

A week later, Muna told me how she found love whilst on that summit and that she was pregnant. Months later, he proposed to her and soon after we had a wedding to plan.

I was breastfeeding one morning when my phone buzzed, it was Muna, She called and asked if I was free to join her for bridal fittings. I said yes.

I wrapped my baby and took him along with a nanny, hours later, we arrived at the designer's. Muna, heavily pregnant wobbles over to us and envelops me in a tight hug and then makes cooing sounds at my son. We soon started trying out clothes. I didn't like any of them. My stomach looked round and obvious in them. I didn't have to say too much, Muna glanced my way and knew what I was feeling. She hurried over and hugged me.

“You are beautiful” she whispered into my ears

“You are beautiful too” I muttered in return

A month later, Muna birthed a son, she named him chidozie, I was his godmother. She and her family moved closer to ours and our bond grew stronger and better.

Two years later, Muna and her husband both had a big project that would take them out of the country for three days, it was a life-changing project. They left us in charge of their son, which we gladly accepted.

On the third day, after the routine call from Muna and her husband, they were headed to the airport so they did a quick video call to let us know. We laughed and joked over the phone and they promised they would get us all gifts.

Three hours later, while asleep, my phone buzzed. A strange number was calling. I pick it up grudgingly

“Hello...” I said with a gruff voice. The next few words had me sitting upright. Instantly, I feel a sluice of headache at the top of my right eye. My heart started beating fast and I start muttering nonsense. The weird sounds emanating from my lips wake Eche up. My body goes numb.

Weeks later, we laid my best friend and sister to rest beside her husband. A drunk driver had rammed into the Uber they were in whilst on their way to the airport, according to the medical reports submitted to us, it was thirty minutes after the call. My heart was broken.

As we drove back home, I let my head roll back on the car seat and let the grief wash over me. I was distraught, her family was distraught. Muna was the only child. Her parents were aged. I could not imagine my life without her in it. Why? Oh death where is thy sting? If I felt this much pain what would the people who bore her feel? The thoughts ravaged me, It was too much to handle. I made a promise to take care of them and her son till my last breath.

We were still in that grieving mood when news of her parents reached me. They had died on their way back from a church vigil. A tanker had fallen on their car and they died on the spot. Chidozie was at home with a neighbor.

Ten years later.

I walked past the hallway, and my eyes met my reflection staring at me in the gigantic mirror hung on the wall. I paused and consulted it, looking at my face and body for the first time in years, since my...I shake the thought off and look on.

I looked in awe at the face whose image carried my reflection

Thoughts began to run through my head, where did my perky bust, slim waist, ample hips and abs go? and why was Miss Fab (as I was fondly called in school) not staring back.

Unfamiliar, was this woman staring back with a forlorn expression. Expression riddled with deep sorrow. Ever since I lost my best friend, I lost a huge part of myself.

I scrunch up my nose and stare at my face that was still pretty but wrinkled with time and grief.

I looked down at my skin, it was so flaky, I wondered if it was the same I shea buttered hours ago.

Still dazed, I try a pout, that weird/new image mimicked every move. When did this become me?

Did I let myself go? When did my arms get so flabby? I stood akimbo and flailed them, they flapped lightly and I gesticulated as if to fly and made a swooshing sound.

“Superman ain't got nothing on me” I muttered under my breath. Speaking of flying, that was how my dream of being a pilot died? My goodness. I crouch and pull on my face in fear.

When did I forget myself?

Blowing raspberries, I stand again and stared hard at the mirror.

How do I lose weight in eight hours? Intermittent fasting? Or should I just go do surgery? The thoughts assailed me.

Or should I go back to flight school?

I turned to my side to assess more of the damage, my 7-year-old daughter ran in, stood beside me and tugged at the hem of my skirt "Mummy, can I have some zobo with my donut?" Then "Please?" As an afterthought.

She is batting her long lashes at me and I stare at her. Looking for me in her, I see my nose but nothing else.

I stared at her pretty face some more and then wondered if she was aware of my flaws and insecurities.

I turn to face the mirror again, so she couldn't tell my awe at the woman in the mirror claiming she and I are one?

Is she I? Am I her? Where did all the years go?

I used to be the belle of the ball, now I'm just a ball.

I let my hands fall to my side and then blow raspberries in exasperation. My daughter, thinking it was a game, followed suit, I look at her again but this time, through the mirror and then notice the wide grin on her face, a grin reminiscent of her father's, my mind travelled back to that first date at the restaurant with Muna. I felt my heart grow warm and lighter, and everything was right again, I sigh and then smile softly at her.

Pulling my gaze away from the mirror, I reply in a high-pitched tone, that makes me cringe inwardly when it hits my ears.

"Yes baby, you can have some, give Muna and Chidozie too"

"I love you mummy" she whispered before skipping off

1. "I love you baby"