NOT QUITE SISTERS

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Kemi

I watch my mother's fingers as she holds the ugwu leaves in place and fumbles to slice through them with a blunt knife. I've never known her to struggle with anything before. She has always been in charge of everything and everyone around her, but looking at her right now, she isn't the woman I once knew. The woman slicing ugwu before me does not look like my mother. She is frail, her mouth set in a thin line, the corners of which are adorned with wrinkles, which appear like semi-permanent frown lines when her lips are not moving.

I notice stray strands of hair peeking out from underneath her scarf, the only thing keeping the bird's nest of hair hidden. Her skin is at least three tones darker than it used to be and seems to have lost its shine. I look at her face while she sets the knife down. She glances my way, and in that moment, the only semblance of the woman I knew to be my mother was her eyes, but even those have lost their sparkle. The eyes that looked at me now were just two blank orbs, void of much life or emotion.

My mother was gone. All that was left of her was this woman, who was even more broken on the inside than she appeared.

Kofoworola

I can tell by how Kemi looks at me that she is worried. She is staring intently at the ugwu on the chopping board; her mouth is set in a thin line as she twirls the hem of her dress like she always

does when something weighs heavy on her mind. My chair makes an irritatingly loud sound, scraping the tiles as I move away from the countertop. I point the knife in Kemi's direction and get up, indicating that I want her to continue slicing the ugwu. She frowns as I exit the kitchen. These days, Kemi and I barely talk. We practically live like two people who did not have the privilege of picking their roommates. On really good days, we add "I hope you slept well" to our very low, unenthusiastic "Good morning." Kemi and I were never like this. We used to talk all the time, sharing jokes and secrets, spending quality time together, and transcend the purely biological bond of mother and daughter. We were best friends, but I barely recognise who we've become now. Everything was normal until I met Deji.

I'm not one to take certain things like dates and stuff to heart. Being overly sentimental like that has never really appealed to me, but the day I met Deji was different. I remember everything that happened, almost like I was watching it happen to someone else. It was around 2 p.m. on a Friday, and I rushed into the bank, shivering as a blast of cold air from the air conditioning hit me in the face. I was already super cold and almost wet from the heavy rain that seemed to be holding the people of Ibadan to ransom. I took my place on the deposit line, behind an old woman who smelled familiarly of Tura soap. A wave of nostalgia hit me as I remembered that my grandmother, "Iya Tee", as we fondly called her, had used the dark blue Tura bar soap during her baths until her very last day on earth. The old woman turned to look at me, and I gave her a big smile, one I would've given Iya Tee. She looked me over and gave me a small smile and a nod before turning back to face the counter. The deposit line was quite long, and I was getting frustrated.

First, the rain got me, and now I had to stand for God knows how long. It was finally my turn, and I couldn't shake off the feeling that someone was watching me while I filled out the

deposit slip. I round up my transaction and exit the bank. I'm about to descend the last step when a deep voice rumbles, "Hello!" I don't think I have ever turned to look at someone as fast as I did that day. There, standing tall, wearing black 'senator native' and fancy matching penny loafers, stood the most beautiful man I had ever laid eyes on.

No man has ever had me in awe of them like that, ever. This beautiful creature descended the steps until he was standing right in front of me. With a chocolatey, well-manicured hand stretched before me, he said, "My name is Deji. What's yours?" "Kofoworola", I said, shaking his hand and any residue of shock left from seeing and hearing him speak.

"Well, Kofo, did you drive?" Normally, I would be quick to correct people if they tried to shorten my name, especially when I was meeting them for the first time, but something about the way he said "Kofo", made me want to lean into him. "If yes, let me see you off to your car, and if no, then I would like to drop you off", he added. "I don't have a car", I mumble, staring him in the face for the first time. I notice he has nicely shaped eyebrows, with a little scar that starts slightly above his left brow and ends just beneath it, giving him the appearance of an intentional carving in his eyebrow. He offers me a toothy smile and walks ahead of me. I followed behind a little slowly, wondering why I was about to let a complete stranger drive me.

We made small talk while we walked to his car. His car smelled of him, musky with a hint of sweat and the leafy air freshener that hung from the rearview mirror. I gave him my address as we drove out of the bank car park. By the time we pulled up beside the old mango tree in front of my house, I had been laughing my head off at Deji's jokes. I learned that he was 29 and the only child of his mother; he had three other siblings from his father. He was closest to his

father's last child, Bisi; she was the only girl. I also learned that he was an engineer and worked for the popular Julius Berger. His favourite colour was sage green, and his favourite food was any rice dish, as he could eat rice for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and even as a snack. In the fifteen minutes it took to get to my house, it felt like I had known Deji lifetimes ago, and in all those lifetimes, he had been the same, and he had been my lover. "I would like to come around tomorrow evening, say around 4 p.m., would you be home by then?" He asked while staring at my face but not quite reaching my eye. "I'm not so sure, you just have to come around and find out", I said. It felt nice to see the look on his face when I was done talking, one of confusion.

I felt his eyes on my back and perhaps my bum too, which sat nice and plump in my fitted ankara skirt. I smiled as I walked through the gate and into my parents' compound. I made to close the pedestrian gate and watched him drive away slowly as if he did not want to leave. Which was exactly how I felt. For the rest of the day, I was in a very good mood, singing to myself, not minding the still hard-to-believe number of chores my mother expected me, her 22-year-old graduate daughter, to do.

I busied myself with completing the chores, allowing my mind to wander freely to Deji while I waited a bit impatiently to tell my sister, Kunbi, all about him. Kunbi got back a few hours later from her JAMB lessons, looking slightly disheveled and tired. I totally disregarded the latter and proceeded to fill her in on all the details about the beautiful man I met at the bank. She did not take the news as well as I had hoped she would, perhaps it was because she was tired, but something about the way she said, "Why would you follow a random stranger, whether he is fine or not? Don't you know you could get kidnapped?", just didn't sound like her usual

reply to matters concerning men. I brushed it off as her being tired from the JAMB lessons and went about my business.

The next day, at about 3:57 p.m., Deji pulled up in front of the gate and parked beside the mango tree. Kunbi had been the one to spot him, as she was reading a book on the veranda. She shouted, “Kofo, you have a visitor o”, to me. I left the clothes I was washing in the backyard, followed her voice, and raced to the front of the house. Slowing my pace as I got to the door, I walked onto the veranda as though I had not just run at Olympic record speed to see him.

“Good evening, dear”, he greeted me, his eyes never leaving my face. “Good evening, Deji. How was your drive here? Would you like to sit?”, I said as I used a rag, which was actually an old t-shirt, to clean a worn plastic chair and offered it to him. Deji sat down, his body turned towards me as I sat down beside him. I noticed that Kunbi did not go inside. I shrugged this off and gave my full attention to Deji.

We talked about everything, laughing, sitting in comfortable silence, and smiling at each other. He complimented me, saying I was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. I have heard that line countless times, but the way he said it sounded like it came from a place of genuine admiration. It made my heart beat faster. Before that moment, I had always considered myself a fine girl. I had a nice oval face with defined cheekbones I got from my father, and my lips sat perfectly on my face in a nice full pout. I had really good skin, chocolatey and smooth, something I know Kunbi envied sometimes, as she had acne-prone skin. By the time Deji left, I felt very beautiful and grateful too, that mother or father had not come home to find him there.

My relationship with Deji blossomed from that day on. He got to meet my parents, who were completely smitten by them, even more so than me, and accepted him with wide, open arms. With that, he got to take me out, and we spent a lot more time driving around the town in his car. Sometimes we went out with Kunbi, and it felt good to see them get along so well. I met his mother after three months. She was very kind, and I could see the acceptance written all over her face whenever she said, “My daughter! Welcome!” I met his father and favourite sibling, Bisi, in our sixth month of being together. I remember it so well because the day we visited his father was the first time we kissed.

We had left his father’s house and made our way to his car, which was parked on the road opposite his father’s house. We settled into the car when he turned and said “We should get married soon”, I looked at him with a wide grin on my face, showing off the little gap in between my two front teeth, and nodded. He leaned forward and planted his lips on mine. It was very brief, his lips felt soft against mine. He pulled away, his eyes closed for a bit before opening. He smiled, and I smiled too. A month later, we were married. It wasn’t a lavish wedding. I never cared for those, neither was it completely small, but it was the wedding of my dreams.

Kunbi

My mind drifts to Kofo. I wonder what she has been up to. I get up from the bed and turn to the sleeping figure wrapped in my blue and white striped duvet. I make my way over to the nightstand and examine myself in the mirror. My features have appeared more prominent since I cut my hair. I used to love my natural hair, it was full, long, and dark. My mother said I took after our grandmother with my hair. Kofo always complained about me taking all the good hair genes. Unfortunately for her, she ended up with short, thin, and scanty hair, which resulted in her

wearing wigs all the time. My eyes look tired, and my skin is a little too dry, with several bumps and dark spots. I haven't bothered much with skincare in recent times. My mind has been too occupied with more pressing matters than making sure my face remains pretty and pimple-free.

I gave up on self-care long ago. For the second time that morning, my mind drifts to my sister, Kofo, and I miss her terribly at that moment. She would've never allowed me to get to this point, where I look like a shadow of my former self. Strong arms wrap around me from behind, caressing my five-month-old protruding bump. "Kunbi, you've been staring at that mirror for a long time now, kini o sele", a deep voice says into my neck. I turn around to face him. He looked calm, his eyes still heavy with sleep, yet he was still as handsome as the first time I laid eyes on him, the evening he came to our house to visit Kofo. "Nothing is wrong, my dear", I say, untangling myself from his grip and making my way out of our room. I lowered myself onto the white loveseat in the sitting room. I think about how I got here, living in this lovely house and expecting my first child with my husband, Jide.

The first time I met Jide alone was on a Friday. My parents had been out, and so had my sister. I was the only person home when Jide walked through the gate. I saw him through the living room window and opened the door before he could knock. He walked into the living room and sat down on a couch.

We talked a little before Kofo joined us. I felt a spark between us, one that seemed mutual, that was when I realised that I wanted him for myself. Over time, as the months progressed, he would, on some occasions, come to the house when he knew Kofo would not be

around, under the guise of checking up on my parents. Meanwhile, he was really there to spend time with me.

The day Kofo came home, practically walking on clouds and smiling so hard, I knew that my biggest fear had come to life. She was going to marry Jide. My own, Jide and I would not be able to do anything about it, or so I thought.