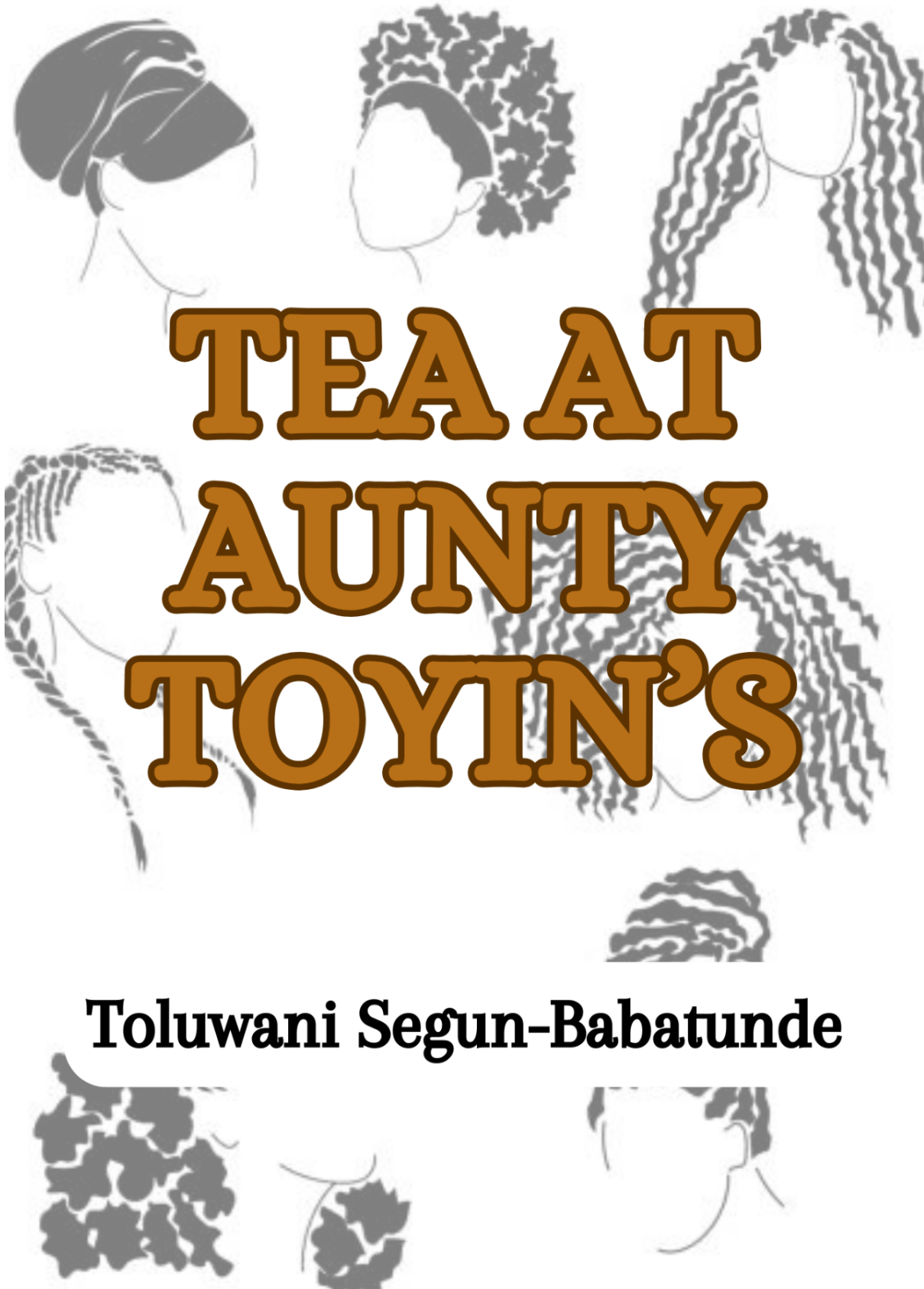




TEA AT AUNTY TOYIN'S

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“Today is going to be a good day,” I tell myself as I walk into my shop. It’s more than a shop to me, it’s my empire.

I notice Funke, my niece cleaning the salon mirror as some early morning gospel songs play in the background.

“*Ekaaro aunty*,” she greets. I nod in acknowledgement and walk into the back office for some quiet time. This involves a quick prayer and a run through the day’s appointments.

As I scroll through the bookings, I’m filled with joy seeing the schedule and I remember the early days of the salon. It was established over eight years ago by my sugar daddy as compensation for the abortion I had endured. Then, I did not make so much as his wife and her friends had sworn to make business tough for me.

I’m grateful for where I am now, that’s why I call it my empire. I’ve taken the time to sustain this place over the years, building relationships with my clients and giving them the best.

Bringing me back to reality, Funke knocks on the door and her head pops in.

“Aunty, Mrs. Fowler is here.”

“Thank you, Funke. I’m coming.”

I check the time to see it’s half past 8 A.M. Mrs. Fowler always books at the earliest hours so she doesn’t get to deal with the crowd that builds up later in the day. She just hates gossip.

Dandruff Treatment.

Henna Hair Gloss.

I get my tools and make my way to the salon. “Good morning, madam. Good to see you again!”

She raises her head from her iPad and smiles at me, “Toyin Tomato! Good morning, dear. Hope all is well?”

“Yes, ma. We thank God.”

“*Adupe o!*” Such a cheerful woman.

We catch up for a bit, then I get into her hair treatment. A beauty over 50, but she refuses to admit it. At the sight of the littlest grey strand, she’s booking her next colouring appointment.

While I’m working on her hair, Funke finishes the cleaning, and other staff members walk in to work. Funke doubles as my niece and personal assistant, so she resumes earlier than others.

They resume and while Mrs. Fowler is the only client in the salon at the moment, they ensure to get busy with one thing or the other - prepping braiding hair attachment, rearranging nail polish bottles, filling shampoo bottles, and gossiping. What’s a salon without gossip?

From my stand, I hear a bit of what they are saying as they talk in hushed tones. I finish up with Mrs. Fowler and she walks to Funke’s desk to make payment.

One client done, many to go.

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The salon gets busy fast. The scent of hair products wafts through the air the AC keeps the room cool. I have afrobeats playing in the background and I'm sewing a weave on my client's head when I hear a loud shriek at my right side.

"Eiiishhh!"

I roll my eyes. It's Flourish, a pregnant stylist faking contractions to get out of work.

I have been pregnant before and do not mean to be insensitive, but sometimes she does too much. Funke and Chioma gather beside her, leading her to the back room while I continue with the sew-in.

My client laughs and claps her hands in awe. "Aunty Toyin, every time I come here, that girl is always pregnant. How old is she?"

"She is 24 and is carrying her third child."

My client looks at me through the mirror, while I try to place her head in the right position.

"Third? At 24? *O ga o!*"

Efe, my top braider joins the discussion. "Aunty, that's not all oh. No be the same man get am."

That's Efe, my own *Warri pikin* giving the tea in pidgin.

My client looks up again and gasps, "It's a lie!"

Efe continues, "She come meet me for advice that time. I tell her say make she dey close her legs or use condom. She no gree, say the thing no sweet."

The client is still looking at us through the mirror in shock, while I've paused on her head for now. "Wow! Are they well taken care of?"

"Ehn, them dey stay with her mama. She no mind."

"Thank God for that." She puts her head in the right position, my sign to continue.

Funke returns shaking her head.

"How is Flourish?" I ask.

"She's fine, *jare*. Is she the first person to get pregnant?" she hisses and returns to her desk.

In an hour, the sew-in is completed and I return to the back office for a little break. Flourish is in the kitchenette eating six wraps of swallow and *efo riro* with nine lives. I chuckle.

Pregnancy does that to you.

"Flourish, well done o! Minister of enjoyment!" I hail her.

She smiles back, "Aunty, I'm eating for two na. Come and join us."

I shake my head no and continue to my office. I sit and scroll through the remaining appointments for the day.

Washing and blow drying.

Hair colouring.

Microtwists.

Weaving.

Dandruff treatment.

I sigh. Who schedules microtwists for the afternoon? I'm contemplating calling the client to cancel when I hear some commotion in the salon.

Rushing out, I find Funke communicating with an impatient client. "Madam, I understand, but I told you we don't take kids that are younger than six years."

The woman is shouting. “Don’t tell me that nonsense! This is where all my friends take their daughters. What makes her so different? Is it because she is a special child?”

Everyone glances at the young girl and Funke stutters. “I’m sorry ma, I didn’t know. But that’s not why. It’s our policy and—”

I jump in. “Funke, don’t worry. I will handle it.” I turn to the woman with a polite smile on my face, “Good day ma, my name is Toyin and this is my salon.”

The woman turns to be calm and responds with a smile on her face. “Toyin!” she shakes my hand. “Nice to meet you. My friends have told me all about this place. See eh, it’s my baby’s birthday tomorrow and I want her to look like a princess.”

I nod, “I’ll try my best ma.”

I take the girl to the children’s corner, a colourful room where we have the television playing children’s shows and a little playpen filled with toys. The girl bursts with excitement at the sight of the toys.

I look at her mother. “What’s her name?”

“Chiagozie.” She smiles.

An apprentice goes to fetch her snacks and a plush toy to calm her down as I begin work on her hair. Her mother sits with us and communicates with her to be of good behaviour, asking if she likes the hair.

While I’m working, Dotun, a male stylist walks in with a child and her mother. “Aunty T, she said she wants you to do her hair.”

I turn to find one of my top clients, Mrs. Franklyn and her daughter. I smile, “Mrs. Franklyn, good afternoon ma. I hope you don’t mind waiting.”

“Aunty Toyin, we don’t have much time o. Alicia has piano lessons by 6 and—” Her voice trails off as she catches sight of Chiagozie. The silence speaks volumes.

With a polite smile, she says, “You know what? Let’s just reschedule.” She takes her daughter’s hand and walks out.

Dotun follows her. “What about your deposit ma?”

He is always about the money. Shaking my head, I notice Chiagozie’s mother in tears. “That’s the sort of stigma we go through wherever we go. She’s just a child.” She removes her glasses and cleans her face. “Everywhere we go, people stare, avoid, or judge. It’s like they see her condition before they see my daughter. It never gets easier.”

I don’t know how to comfort her, so I smile. She understands.

After the appointment, Chiagozie hugs me and her mother thanks me. “Now, I know why all my friends sing your praises. Thank you, Aunty Toyin.” She turns to Funke, “Sorry for the commotion earlier. I only wanted the best for my girl.”

Funke smiles, “It’s fine, ma. Come back soon.”

When they leave, Funke and I discuss the remaining appointments. Just then, two friends walk in asking for Aunty Doyin. Dressed in skimpy and revealing clothing, they look suspicious.

With a frown, I ask, “Do you mean aunty Toyin?”

“Sorry! Aunty Toyin.”

“That’s me. Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but someone recommended this place to us. Please, can you squeeze us in?”

I look to Funke who is scrolling through her laptop, looking for an available slot.

“Your 2 o’clock just cancelled.”

“Which one is that?”

“The microtwists.”

I sigh in relief and whisper “Thank God.”

Funke takes down their details and they follow me for their desired service.

Efe is finishing up Ghana weaving on a client, dipping the tips in hot water, while Nneka, an apprentice closely watches Karis as she gives a pedicure. Flourish and Chioma, another apprentice are taking down braids, while Dotun works on a colouring job. Adekunle Gold’s “Party no dey stop” is playing in the background and they are all singing along, feeling the vibe.

When I walk in with the girls behind me, all eyes are on us. It’s definitely the clothing. In the salon, you get to interact with all kinds of clients - the rich, the sassy, the humble, the shy, the bold. These girls belong to the bold category. With their mini skirts and fishnet tights, I’m sure everyone is wondering where they came from.

They sit and we begin work. One of the girls, light skinned and dressed in fish nets – I learn her name is Ese – begins the conversation with her friend. “Omo! The gist Onome just gave me is hot!”

The other one, darker, dressed in a short dress, named TK continues with her phone and asks, “What is it?”

“Tayo and Ify just came back from their holiday. You would expect Ify to be well rested and relaxed, but no oh! She’s weak, her body is filled with bruises”

TK laughs and looks at her friend, “Wahala for who get romantic *bobo*! All that glitters is not gold. I knew that one had a problem from the beginning.”

“Chai! See pictures.” Ese screams at her phone and passes it to TK.

Efe catches a glance above TK and as usual, gets involved in the conversation. “Omoo! Wetin she do the man?”

TK sighs, “Na money o. She dey find money.”

From his station, Dotun shouts, “Efe, abeg pass the phone. Let me see.”

Soon, the phone is passed around the whole salon and everyone is involved in the conversation, both clients and stylists.

“He just took her somewhere she won’t complain,” Nneka says, packing up the pedicure tools. “If someone took me on an island for holiday, why would I complain? He can turn me to his punching bag. Let me collect money.”

Chioma nods in agreement. “Abi na? She fit collect the money and run.”

TK and Ese burst out laughing. “It’s not easy oh. They have boys.”

TK turns in her chair to face the whole salon. “Let me shock you people. This Tayo is a big politician.”

The salon dives into an uproar, exclamations echo round.

Funke walks in to ask about another appointment.

“Funke, we are closed. Lock the door and come and hear this gist.” I urge her, my eyes sparkling with mischief. These are the light moments in the salon I enjoy; when everyone puts class aside to listen and chime into the happenings around us. When she returns, she passes red cups and chin-chin around, then pours juice for everybody.

“There’s no gist without refreshment,” she winks at us.

“Small chops nko? It’s for baby,” Flourish says while rubbing her protruding tummy.

Everyone rolls their eyes and focuses on the girls with the tea.

TK continues, her teeth grinding on the chinchin loudly. “This is how all these politicians behave. Wife and *pikin* go dey America or UK, them go carry small girls—”

“And boys sefl!” Ese but in.

“Is there any faithful man out there?” Karis asks.

We all burst out laughing.

“Men are scum!” Nneka shouts with her cup raised high.

Everyone agrees by raising their cups high. Even Dotun shakes his head in agreement.

“That’s how they all are. Cheats, beaters, scum and they will be smiling in public, forming innocent.”

“Chai!” Efe shakes her head. She sprays mousse on TK’s hair.

“Ahh, you’re fast o!” TK turns her chair back to face the mirror. “The hair is fine.”

She examines herself in the mirror, smiling and brings out her phone to take pictures.

At this point, it seems they will not be sharing more details and everyone goes about their business.

Funke returns to her desk, Efe packs her tools and goes to Funke’s desk to discuss more.

Karis and Nneka wash the pedicure tools, Flourish is in the back room sleeping while Chioma and Dotun clean up.

When I finish up with Ese’s hair, a gorgeous perm set, I escort her and TK to Funke’s desk at the entrance, as a good host. The time to pay comes and they smile sheepishly.

TK scratches the back of her neck. “Auntie Toyin, please we don’t have the money now.”

Funke looks at me for my reaction, but I say nothing. It takes a while for their words to process, so she chimes in on my behalf.

“I’m sorry, we don’t do hair on credit.”

“The person that sent us said he will come and pay that he is her friend.”

Funke laughs with disdain. “*Iru awon people wo leleyi?*”

I walk to the exit and lock the doors. “No one is leaving this place till I get my money. I don’t know who sent you or—”

“Chief Gbadamosi.” Ese bursts out.

At the mention of that name, I freeze. The girls notice this and smirk.

I unlock the door and open it for them to exit. On their way out, Ese mouths, “He’s coming” and giggles her way out.

Funke notices my shift in demeanour and looks at me concerned.

“Don’t worry about me, dear.” A glance at the clock shows it’s past 5 P.M. “Go home. I’ll clean up and lock shop.”

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It's 7 P.M and I'm done with the check-ins. I'm putting things in order when I hear the door open and shut. I hear footsteps and my mind is instantly alert. Briefly looking for a weapon, I pick my hairspray. That should be good enough to blind the intruder.

Before I turn around, I perceive the familiar scent of cinnamon and bergamot. I keep the spray can close for good measure, then face him.

He is seated at one of the stations, brushing his beard. He pauses to look at me, then smiles.

He spins his chair with amusement and says, "Toyin Tomato! You have not changed the lock after all these years?"