

## **SADIYA**

I did not plan to fall in love with my husband's son. We hope for the fluttering of butterflies in the pits of our stomachs, for our hearts to palpitate at the sight of you. A desire to grow with one until we cannot without the other. For those of us in an arranged union, we pray for a bond of tolerance and comfort in the mundane things of life.

Sitting beside Aminah, I try to hide the lump in my throat and the tears welling in my eyes as I watch Najib twirl his new bride. Aminah, the wife before me smiles and cheers for the newlyweds, her tinkling bracelets adding to the festive atmosphere. Despite my overwhelming emotions, I muster the strength to remain in the hall, resisting the urge to run away.

I got married three months after I graduated from university. I wore a white dress at each ceremony. The proposition did not surprise me. I had friends who had been married immediately after secondary school and during university. It was expected.

The anticipation of your impending marriage hung heavily in the air, casting a mix of excitement and apprehension over your thoughts. As the eldest daughter in your family, you knew that the choice of your husband would set a significant precedent for your younger sisters. Their futures would be influenced by the outcome of your marriage, and you felt the weight of that responsibility.

Your father, though lacking political affiliations and influence, was a man of considerable wealth. It was a well-known fact that in certain circles, important contracts and alliances were often sealed over the warmth of a family meal rather than in the sterile confines of a corporate office. Such gatherings allowed for a

more personal and trust-based approach to negotiations. This was especially true when dealing with influential political families. The whispers from your mother and your grapevine of aunties had hinted at arrangements being made with a highly influential political family. As the night before your prospective husband's visit approached, sleep became an elusive and distant friend. The statement, "he is a good man; he treats all his wives well," echoed in your mind.

Wives; plural.

Marrying the man will mean a life of relative comfort and security. Matters of the heart discarded.

Mama was happy. This was for the betterment of our family.

According to Mama, He saw your picture and he was smitten by you, she says with my face cradled in her hands and her thumbs tracing my eyebrows. You have to carve this.

I tossed and tumbled in my bed while Maryam slept like a log. She was thrilled about my impending marriage and could not understand my anxiety. I wish Farida was around. She was the fighter among the three of us. We had spoken earlier and she could not understand. You wish Farida was around. Among the three of you, she was the fiery one. Her disbelief and anger at the prospect of an arranged marriage was palpable. What did your mother mean this was good for the family?

Had the family stopped being good since she left for the UK? She asked trying to make sense of the situation. Farida had always been the protector even though she was the younger one. Her passion and anger were endearing and comforting and you tried to do the same by reassuring her that the marriage was not against your will.

"No one is forcing me; I will meet him tomorrow before I agree to it".

Farida responded with a dry, bitter laugh. Both of you knew that the deal was already sealed, and the meeting with your prospective husband was more of a formality than an actual negotiation.

Alhaji Mustapha's role in my life took me by surprise. I had expected him to be part of the arrangements for my marriage, but I assumed it would be on behalf of one of his younger relatives. However, as I entered my father's living room, escorted by my mother, I couldn't have imagined that the man huddled in conversation with my father would be a potential match for me. Baba called me forward, introducing me as Sadiya, his eldest daughter. My nerves prevented me from meeting Alhaji's gaze, and his intense scrutiny seemed to trace the contours of your attire from the tip of your head to your sandaled feet.

The rest of the guests were led to another room, leaving Alhaji and me in a tense silence. Eventually, he cleared his throat and invited me to sit. I looked into the eyes of the man who would soon be my husband, a man older than my father. My heart raced as I grappled with the reality unfolding before me. Alhaji Mustapha dominated the conversation, and I responded mechanically during that initial meeting. He departed with a promise to return.

In the days that followed, Alhaji visited me on Thursdays and Sundays, always bearing gifts ranging from jewelry and perfumes to hamper packs and bags. His generosity was undeniable, and it was evident that his family's wealth would endure for generations. The cost of his courtship should have made a significant dent in another man's finances.

As our courtship progressed, Alhaji Mustapha revealed himself as a well-educated and articulate man. While our conversations mostly revolved around wedding plans, he shared stories of his travels and business ventures. I had studied business administration, and he appreciated my interest in the field. Alhaji turned out to be quite different from my expectations, and our journey together began in an unexpected but intriguing manner.

He also spoke about his family. The lineage he descended from and the family I would be joining soon. He had two wives. The first wife had four children. The second had three "but he had eight children" I chipped. I had a first wife, she had died during childbirth.

Yours.

The first time I saw you was at my wedding a day filled with anticipation at the occasion that marked a new chapter of my life. I couldn't help but laugh at Farida's sour face she had gone on a tirade expressing her disapproval unable to reconcile the age difference. A 35-year gap, he is twice your age with 12 extra years. She cried and had a heated kerfuffle with my mother for letting this happen I had taken solace in the fact that despite the age gap. He was a reasonable match compared to what could have been.

You had flown into the country for your father's wedding and our fates intertwined as a result. As my wedding day unfolded, I managed to enjoy the festivities and celebrations. I was a tall woman and I stood taller in my heels, matching Alhaji's height. As you congratulated your Father and me, your gaze briefly met mine, registering a momentary shock before you retreated to your table, where cousins

and friends surrounded you. They ogled the girls dancing on the floor, while parents discreetly discussed how to connect them with their daughters.

I'd like to say that I hardly noticed you, as my attention was firmly fixed on the man beside me, or perhaps on the dignitaries lounging on divans nearby. Men who patted my husband on the back, congratulating him on his new bride. It was also the day I met my elder co-wives. Their warmth and reception varied. Maman Ramatu, the first wife, pulled me close and complimented my beauty, a cherub of a woman in her fifties. Aunty Aminah, while not as warm as Maman Ramatu, was not exactly cold.

I spent my early days of marriage at Maman Ramatu's house our husband traveled a lot or spent long hours at work. We lived in an enormous compound with four identical duplexes, mine newly erected and sparsely furnished as I took my time it was the first time I had that much of a space to decorate.

Space was foreign to me. I attended day primary and secondary schools. I also commuted from my home to the University. We lived in a large home but two sisters, two brothers, and at least three caretakers in the home left one with little alone time so I drew comfort in the familiarity of Maman Ramatu's home.

Ramatu, her eldest was already married, yet she treated you as her own, as if she had carried you in her womb for nine months. Your siblings adored you as well, calling you Yaya Najib.

Initially, I grappled with what to call you. I was your stepmother, but you were older than me. Calling you "Yaya" didn't feel quite right. So, in the beginning, I kept my distance and only spoke to you when we were in each other's presence.

The first conversation we had was about school. You mentioned that you had just finished your master's degree in Dubai and asked if I had any plans to do mine. I was

newly married and my focus was on starting a family but I simply told you I was not ready.

Our conversations increased as you began leaving work early, prompting my curiosity about your job, which seemed to let you off at an unusually early hour, even earlier than primary school students. When I questioned this, you laughed and inquired about how I spent my days aside from tailing Maman Ramatu. I admitted to watching sitcoms but confessed to growing tired of re-watching my favourites. To my surprise, you shared the same favourites as me.

When you asked me what else I liked apart from watching TV, I revealed my love for reading, explaining how I immersed myself in various genres, becoming a deity who observed the characters' every decision without any power to change their fates. The following day, you surprised me with ten books, eight of which I had already read. As we headed back to the store, which also served as a café, we found ourselves alone for the first time. In that moment, when our fingers brushed against each other, it was as if an electric current surged through our bodies, sparking a connection we couldn't ignore."

## **NAJIB**

The first time I laid eyes on Sadiya was at the wedding. For a while, it seemed like everyone in my family was eager for me to be the next one to tie the knot so it came as a shock when Baba told me he was getting married again. Ramatu has been for two years and Mama kept pestering me about when I'd settle down. Then, four months ago, Baba called, mentioning a girl from a well-off family as a potential match for me and made no mention of it after I thought I had been left off the hook. I chuckled

at the thought of my old man getting hitched again, but when I finally saw you, I realized you were a spitting image of her.

I've only ever known and loved one mother. My biological mother, whom I barely had a chance to know, passed away right after giving birth to me. I've seen photographs and met her family a few times, but there were no stories or shared memories. I've seen her smile but never heard her laugh. My father was tight-lipped about her, and all Maman Ramatu knew was that when she married, she inherited a six-month-old baby and a void in my father's heart that she could never fill.

You are her Carbon copy. I wonder how that is even possible. It also answers the question of why my Father married you. Your nose occupies your face the way hers did, a graceful bridge between your eyes and your lips are plump and expressive and quiver when you feign seriousness and you have thick eyebrows which you mentioned you have to carve bi-weekly because if left to their whims it will form into a uni-brow. Your skin is a rich canvas kissed by the sun's loving embrace with deep-set eyes that betray your every emotion and thought.

You never ask questions about my mother, you have learned like the rest of us and even if you did no one had any answers.

Everyone in the family has taken a liking to you, including Aminah, who's usually reserved. My father is particularly enamored, and Mama seems to have replaced Ramatu with you. But no one has taken to you as I have, although I thought my feelings were well-hidden. You asked why I come home from work early, and the truth is, it's because of you. It's the one time when the house is relatively quiet,

with everyone else either at work, school or occupied with something else. I often find you engrossed in a book or on your phone, even though I wonder why you watch movies on such a small screen. You prefer it that way, and I've even gotten you anti-blue glasses to help with your recurrent headaches. You have a habit of misplacing them, but I don't mind because it gives me an excuse to buy things for you and have a reason to talk to you.

I realized I was in trouble during our visit to the bookshop. Your excitement for books was contagious, and even though I wasn't an avid reader, I couldn't help but be drawn to you as you moved gracefully among the shelves in your sage green abaya, with your veil billowing around you. Every time you brushed past me, I yearned for more of those moments.

Our Relationship blossomed, and we grew into our situation without realizing it. Every stolen moment and action that would have cost us our lives. We delighted in our bodies; throwing caution to the wind.

### **MAMAN RAMATU**

Najib and Sadiya, young and headstrong, posed a potential threat to our family's stability. Their clandestine relationship, while often masked by outings with younger siblings as a cover, was evident to those who paid attention. I recalled my youth and marriage, wishing for the same love I saw in Najib's eyes for Sadiya. Our husband cherished what Sadiya reminded him of, while our son yearned for the unattainable.

I hadn't noticed the brewing turmoil until Ramatu lifted the veil from my eyes. Their love, if allowed, would tear our family apart. I wished Mustapha had married Sadiya

to Najib, saving us from this predicament. My role had always been to maintain peace and heal wounds and yet this evaded me.

It was late when I confronted Najib, Sadiya's pregnancy was evident before her confession, and I dreaded asking about the father.

I approached my son with a potential bride from a reputable family, reminiscent of Sadiya. He hesitated, claiming he wasn't ready, but I reassured him, knowing the complexity of our situation this was for the better. Months had passed before he agreed to get married. I sit beside Sadiya, her tearful gaze fixed on yours during the wedding and a silent reminder of what might have been.

.