

irenitemi's house was the kind of house that let you feel everything: thin lilac-painted walls for hearing loud arguments, cracked work surfaces for remembering the children's father's financial state, and a rusty iron gate that let in friends and family members whose joy was expressed best through their hands.

ibi please open the gate, irenitemi said from the balcony's dusted floors as she shook her inhaler. irenitemi always let out her scream from the narrow balcony, imagining herself as queen of her kingdom, this sanctuary, *their* house.

on hearing irenitemi's instruction, ibi sprung from his tomato-covered mattress, stained with yesterday's stew. as he slid his feet into his slippers, careful not to slip, he heard the range rover's howl. the big cars let out distinct loud sounds, and their owners only pressed their horns once. *real* rich people don't make noise, ibi thought.

seconds after he removed the warm padlock, a black range rover entered her kingdom, this sanctuary, *their* house. ibi could feel the cool, lavender-scented breeze as joke opened the large door of her car, revealing her legs adorned with gold jewellery. dressed in a violet boubou and scarf, joke's face glistened in the hot lagos sun.

gba! joke said, throwing a damask bag full of mangoes to ibi. ibi held the bag firmly to prevent any mangoes from falling out like last time.

a month before, ibi had lost his balance and dropped three mangoes. joke had passed him the large, black bag of juicy mangoes, when irenitemi's husband shouted, ibi kia kia, open this gate, the truck is waiting for me outside, and leave it wide open until i drive out. joke, who never came to her best friend's house empty-handed, just stood as irenitemi's husband drove his car out of her friend's house for the final time. ibi had waved to say goodbye to the man that always paid his salary late when joke's plastic bag tore and each mango rolled onto the dusty ground. he was relieved that she did not publicly embarrass him like his secondary school teacher who, after seeing his mock waec results, asked him to stand up, close his eyes, and kneel down during break time. as his hands shook in the air, all he had wanted to do was burst the large pimple near her purple-lined lips and ask why his lack of understanding of a subject he once loved was punished, and not addressed with love and care. he could not handle another frown of disappointment followed by a murmur of you will fail your common entrance exam if you are not careful, so he clung to the bag even though it was heavier today. a man, no matter how small, should be able to carry such weight with ease.

when ibi rushed to collect joke's other bags, joke said, don't worry, the bags are few, and gave ibi 200 naira. it was the handshakes of money from his oga's friend that allowed him to call his family. since irenitemi's husband began driving that brand-new, ugly car, a car too big for the small man, irenitemi's apologies on her husband's behalf for his late salary payments became more frequent. ibi would lie and say, it's okay madam, economy is tight, so that he had peace, but he would later regret not saying he would leave to work for the richer neighbour, who (according to the estate guards) needed a new security man. as mtn alerts covered his phone's lock screen of marcus rashford with reminders to pay back the naira he owed, he would hiss then mumble, kai, own goal o! he knew he should have told madam he would leave soon if her husband did not pay his salary.

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joke's boubou swung to the wind's rhythm as she walked up the stairs and into irenitemi's marble-floored living room. you are looking funky, irenitemi said, admiring her best friend's style from head to toe and punctuating each compliment with ahn ahns! followed by an abrupt pause, almost to say to joke, take in all your beauty. joke smiled widely, wrapping her arm around her friend's shoulder, her thank you for the compliment. since the day irenitemi heard about joke's husband's infidelity, she showered joke with words of affirmation even when she looked ordinary. today was one of the days she looked ordinary.

when joke sat on the velvet sofa, she removed a large mango from her bag and bit the thick skin off. joke, are you that hungry? you didn't even wash it? irenitemi said in shock, as she walked towards the fluorescent-lit kitchen. the question bounced on the corridor's walls as she grabbed a knife, tissue, and toothpick from the wooden drawers. as joke reached to take the toothpick from the tray of objects her friend had placed in front of her, all irenitemi could see in front of her was her friend's face buried in the mango's flesh.

i haven't eaten since morning, sis, joke responded as she licked the juice off her chin. had to rush to get my hair done, and you know how saturday lagos traffic is – there was a tanker that had broken down on the express, so I couldn't stop at chicken republic.

irenitemi was already distracted by joke's shiny damask bag with bold text that read *happy birthday stella, courtesy of st augustine's 1986 set*. joke caught irenitemi's glance at her bag and reminded her of their unfinished conversation from stella's 50th birthday party. irenitemi and joke had been standing side by side on the queue with all the other funky mummies and daddies whose excited faces hid their hunger. the mc, a man whose jokes were surprisingly free of unnecessary violence for a

nigerian comedian, had announced to the inattentive guests that the food would be there shortly. his last word was followed by the band's rendition of simi's joromi, a reminder for irenitemi and joke that the food would be there late.

they always play music when the food is running late, joke shouted, in an attempt to prevent the music from drowning her words.

what? irenitemi responded and added, i can't hear you, joke. joke rolled her eyes and smiled. she knew irenitemi knew what she had said, and so they both laughed.

remember what ms alade always told us, joke. never go out without eating, the two friends said in unison, laughing some more for old-time's sake.

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ms alade had been their house mistress as well as pe teacher – the latter a revolutionary feat at the time. the lack of women staff in their all-girls secondary school was ironic. pe classes consisted of olympic-favoured sports: high jumps, long jumps, javelin, relay races, and victory dances. irenitemi and joke were great at high jump but were not so keen on practice. to replace the time that would have been spent in pe classes, they attended home economics class.

ladies, cooking is important. no man will marry you if you cannot cook, the teacher said, chewing each word slowly like a storyteller sharing some precious, ancient proverb. stella, a friend of the two girls, responded by saying, excuse me mrs williams, i don't mean to be rude, but we did not come to school to learn a skill for our future husbands. mrs williams said stella was out of her mind for disrupting her class and reported her to the principal. the girls hailed stella for her bravery. it was stella's third strike at *impoliteness*, and that day, she was suspended. she never returned to st augustine's but was remembered as the daughter of the authors they read who refused to be silenced. her legacy was as strong as the aroma of fresh moi-moi waiting to be wrapped. it was hot here, but they preferred this sweat to the sweat from ms alade's pe class.

two weeks after stella's abrupt departure, joke and irenitemi stopped attending home economics classes and started pe lessons. the principal had announced that the pe classes were compulsory. ms alade didn't need to inform this assembly that it was her idea. they knew when her eyes gleamed with joy as they moved from girl to girl, almost to say, i will be seeing you this week...unless. nobody clapped after the announcement, but they dared not let out a grumble lest they be suspended for disrespecting authority.

and now, a round of applause for st augustine's performance of *the joys of motherhood* by buchi emecheta, the principal said.

you will all thank me one day, ms alade said, adjusting the mat she always held askew so the girls could safely land. one by one, as ms alade blew her red whistle, each girl ran towards the bar, jumped, and twisted her body in the air. looks like you're dancing, no, looks like you are flying, a girl said. her words ended on beat with irenitemi's hips and feet, which both landed gracefully on the mat. girls, look at her hip height on that jump, take note, ms alade announced, as irenitemi wiped the sweat from her face with her towel.

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as the two waitresses opened the steel containers, they revealed the tasty food that had been stuck in traffic. freshly leaf-wrapped moi-moi reminded them of saturday mornings in boarding school. large wraps of pounded yam and egusi travelled from tray to table for the guests at the high table at stella's birthday. and there was jollof rice, fried rice, white rice, rice and beans, and ofada rice available for guests.

jollof rice and moi-moi, and please put small stew at the side with cow leg, cow leg, not meat, not chicken, cow leg, joke requested whilst typing and deleting the words of a message to her daughter that read: eriifeoluwa, pls change your profile pic, you have better pictures dear.

as her tummy grumbled, joke hoped that the caterer would be generous with her portion of food but also knew that the guests at this party were many and the food was little. and so, she did not complain when she was handed the small portion of food, alongside cutlery and serviettes.

have you bought it yet, irenitemi asked, swaying her hips to the music as she waited for joke's response. joke, this man hasn't changed. i can't buy gold without him knowing, and i don't want him to think i don't love him. i have heard of stories of women in lagos who are the breadwinners of their families and who cover their husband's shame. as for me, i have a husband that provides for our family. this gold business might bring wahala.

irenitemi poured some mango juice into her glass, paused, and said, every woman needs something they can hold, sis. what do you own that is yours? there might be a day you will want to leave, and the gold will be your ticket home. i know you have your vex money but that won't be enough if you ever want to set up a business, so please, my sister, just go to aunty funke. keep the gold and sell it.

aunty funke owned one of the largest jewellery shops in lagos. she regularly flew to dubai to buy gold. women trusted her because there was a story that the men with the long beards in the shop would only ask, madam, how many carats of gold do you want? and then give aunty funke the rarest jewellery. aunty funke was envied by many for her wealth but admired by others because she saved their lives. through the work of her hands, aunty funke had saved women from their selfish husbands who watched their families starve. through the work of her hands, aunty funke had provided income for women to pay their children's school fees. through the work of her hands, aunty funke had saved the faces of nigerian women who would rather die than be unable to flaunt deola sago's iro and buba. and so, aunty funke's gold truly saved women from public disgrace. stella and irenitemi were proud recipients of the favour. and now that many women were sharing stories of their husbands' madness, after years of silence, it was time for joke to receive aunty funke's blessing.

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the truck you saw last month was for my husband; he has finally left my house, irenitemi said.

in all their years of friendship, joke had always felt irenitemi's humid loneliness. today, as the fan's blades rotated clockwise, she felt the cool breeze of relief, which whispered that irenitemi's joy would return. still, she asked boldly, i can't believe that's what the truck was for – why did you let him go? at stella's party, you said you would give your marriage another try.

joke had not finished her last word before irenitemi said, i am tired of trying, couldn't try anymore. i have forgiven him, but my body keeps the score. it was irenitemi's honesty that made joke respond with her truth. my husband is opening his legs to everyone in lagos, and i know this, but irenitemi, my marriage cannot fail. he can do all the rubbish he wants to do outside, but inside he is mine.

irenitemi feigned a shocked expression so that her friend did not think that her heart was as sour as unripe mangoes for concealing what she had known since stella's birthday party. she knew joke's husband was a liar and a cheat. this was the reason she told joke to buy gold; she was still his property.

joke always extended grace to her husband but never to herself. it was always one excuse or the other. she was married to a man who saw love as a power play. at their wedding, when asked what he loved about his wife, joke's husband burst out laughing and said, oh, what is there not to love about her, and never completed his sentence. she knew he only loved that he could finally call someone fully his. that day, joke had

laughed a little to fill the awkward silence, which even the band's loud music could not swallow. as she exchanged a quick glance with her friend who sat at the high table, irenitemi's tummy rumbled with fear. their lives had become like buchi emecheta's *nnu engo*. how did they not see this coming? she thought, dodging the photographer's bright flash.

the two women understood that they did not want a life of *suffering and smiling*, yet their lives were entangled with this patriarchy. joke was married to a man that didn't like or love her. her fear of loneliness and what-will-people-say followed her to adulthood. as a marriage counsellor at the church, it would be both unfortunate and amusing if she left her husband.

is it our fault that we chose the wrong men? joke asked as she wiped her nose with her dress.

they failed us; we did not fail, irenitemi said with a sigh.

the fear of failure had crippled them since they were young, and now, they confronted a different kind of failure. why were their names erased as though they had no lineage? why did their children take the fathers' names and states of origin? where was the money and joy marriage and motherhood had promised them?

for years, joke never spoke badly about her marriage because she enjoyed princess privileges, but even princesses, she thought, must start to feel lonely in their palaces. joke had nothing to call hers.

as joke reached for another mango slice, she said, i'll inflate the children's school fees and the grocery shopping and save the money so I can someday buy funke's gold.

it was in irenitemi's house that the two women realised they were truly their own gold, their own lifeline, their mothers' inheritance. buy that gold like every day of your life depends on every single carat, irenitemi said.

joke sat and listened to her friend sob as her head touched her knees. her posture reminded her of the girls at the salon whose response to the hairdresser's i have to hold it, pele, it won't pain you again, was like a churchgoer praying – a bowing first and then a passionate cry. as irenitemi's cries grew louder, joke felt her friend's pain. joke did not comfort her friend with touch or words because she remembered that even the girls in pain at the hairdressers always needed some time. when the room was silent, joke's words came, sis, love is long-suffering not suffering.