

## **All Our Lives**

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We are city people. We live in wooden shacks alongside lagoons that smell of decaying fish and shit. We live in rented apartments with flush toilets and airy bedrooms. We live under bridges, with torn tarpaulins to cover us, feet pounding and vehicles speeding above our heads. The air in this city is rancid with sweat, gas flares, and sun-warmed garbage. Some of us live in face-me-I-face-yous. We are tired of the daily bickering with our neighbours. Of the lack of privacy. Of infections contracted from pit latrines. We wish we had our own homes. Homes full of servants and pets, with pretty gardens, and fences to shield us from the foulness of this city.

We are Chikamneanya, Ogheneakporobo, Abdulrasheed, Olarenwaju, Alamieyeseigha, Tamunodiepriye, Onuekwuchema, Toritsemugbone, or Oritshetimeyin. We are twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven years old. We are from the North, South, South-east. Some of us do not know where we come from. We are tall, plump, lanky, short. We speak Igbo, Yoruba, Kalabari, Hausa, Itshekiri, Ijaw, pidgin English, or a mix of them all. We are Catholics, Pentecostals, Muslims, Adventists. We do not believe in any god. We are single, we have wives and children that we have left behind in our villages. We come from families of five, eight, ten. Or we come from polygamous homes. Or we do not know if we have families at all. We like to eat akpu and ofe ogbonno, eba and gbegiri, amala, tuwo, beans, rice. We do not eat salad or chicken or pizza because they are expensive.

Each morning before leaving for our workplaces and each evening before bedtime, we gaze into the mirror and touch our faces, thinking of ourselves as ugly, pimply, handsome, beautiful. Our noses are like those of our ancestors – bulbous, pinched in the corners, fat, aquiline, straight, or scarred. We braid our hair into dreadlocks or in neat cornrows, or we leave our hair to grow into Afros. We are bald. We crop our hair low, or our hair is unkempt, tufts of foam with lice nesting in them. We are black. We are not black. We bleach our skin. We refuse to bleach our skin since we toil under the sun – we do not want the heat to scald us, leaving patches of red here and streaks of black there.

We are newspaper vendors, taxi drivers, waiters, housekeepers. In this city where the buildings breathe into each other, and the power lines are thin black criss-crosses in the skies, we hustle, threading our paths in a busy crowd. We look for customers. Some days, when we make good sales, we are happy. We buy drinks. We invite our friends to join us. We eat salad, chicken, or pizza. We thank God in many languages. Other days, we endure insults from customers. We curse the day we were born. We do not thank God. We survive for long stretches without food. We fold our arms and watch the government take down trees to erect mega city halls. Yet we have no proper homes. We have no light. We have no water.

At four, five, six, we were running naked around the dusty grounds of our villages. We attended schools that had no blackboards or desks or libraries. We never went to school. The lucky ones among us were taken away to live with a rich uncle or an oga and madam, who turned us into slaves and made us sell wares on the street. We raced each other to see who was the fastest. We shot down birds with our catapults and planted traps for antelopes. Later, we presented the game to our mothers who praised us and then carried them into their kitchens, to cook meat soup. We sat around small fires, opening our mouths to chew the scents escaping our mothers' pots, hearing our bellies groan as we swallowed. We told one another stories. We were happy, comfortable. We were enough.

At fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, we were chasing girls. We attacked them at streams, or in dark corners where they gathered in fours and fives to gossip. We squeezed their breasts and ran away. They pursued us, hurling curses at our grandfathers and great-grandfathers. At home, we refused to wash the hands that had touched them. We smelled our palms and imagined things. By night, we played with our manhoods with those hands, shutting our eyes tight. Not once, not twice, our mothers caught us. They laughed and said: *Obere nwoke. Keremin mutum. Small man. You don't even know how to catch a woman.* But we knew we were champions. After all, there were other boys who shied away from girls, who had never come close enough to touch a breast. We were different. We were men. We knew how to hunt, farm, fight, kill, grab breasts. The girls enjoyed it, but they pretended not to. They strutted around the place, ululating praises to

their gods as their feet slap-slapped past us, thanking them for the gift of sun, rain, and future responsible husbands. We knew they would be ours one day, or not. Or we knew better, classier women awaited us in the depths beyond our villages.

At nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, this was how we dreamt. We found ourselves walking down an expanse of gold-carpeted road. On both sides of the road, trees climbed into the skies. They bore bananas, apples, mangoes, avocados, all the fruits we could imagine. As we walked down the road, animals – monkeys, goats, tortoise, rabbits, lions – bowed, waving at us after we had stepped further away. At the end of the road, a neem tree whistled, twisting towards us. Its branches swayed in the breeze, and it lowered itself before us, urging us to climb its trunk. We obeyed. We held on tight. The neem tree straightened and grew and grew. Eventually we climbed off onto the clouds. We shielded our eyes; it was bright all around. A gate creaked open. We saw people lying flat on their bellies, singing, *All Hail the King*. We marched on their bare backs and walked on into glass mansions that were ours and ours alone. House servants fell on their knees, welcoming us. We walked past great fleets of cars, past gardens square and verdant, past pools clearer than the skies, and on into enormous palaces. We sat on thrones. In this dream, we owned the city. We owned the people. We owned power.

At twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, we were leaving our homes in the villages. Our mothers cried their hearts out. They said, *Who will bury us when we leave this world?*

*Us*, we answered.

*Who will take care of us when we are old, guiding our paths when our eyes grow tired?*

We kept silent.

*Who will look after the wives and children you have left behind?*

Silence.

*Who will marry our girls?*

No reply.

*When will you return?*

*When we are rich and famous and own people and power, we said.*

*Fools, they called us. You cannot even weed your fathers' farms properly. What makes you think you will make it in the city? The city is full of night women who will steal your senses. The city will devour you.*

Still, we packed our few clothes, wrapped them in raffia baskets, wide linen wrappers, polythene bags. We left. Our mothers cried. Our fathers gazed into the night.

We are now city people. We can be Matt, Jason, Alex, Garth, Arthur. We can be twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. We can come from London, New York, Paris, or any other exotic place our fingers can never locate on a map. We can be tall, athletic, broad, sinewy, thick. Our hair is auburn, rooty blond, steel grey. We can speak American English, garnishing our sentences with “wanna” and “gonna”; flecks of “fuck,” “holy fuck,” “shit,” “damn” or “nigger”. We act like we own stretches and stretches of land, stately homes, estates, penthouses. We say we are cousins to the President of the United States, grandsons of the Queen of England, close friends with the Prime Minister of France. We carry ourselves like people who don't shit.

This is the year the internet arrives in our city.

The cybercafés are our second homes. They are tight spaces on ground floors in one- or two-storey buildings. Because the government never provides us with regular power, you can hear generators, chained outside to metal rails to stave off thieving boys, bleating into the day and night. All night, mosquitoes sing into our ears, their songs louder than the clacks of our fingers on the keyboards. We rub insect repellent onto ourselves until our skin is waxen.

By night, the internet is so fast that the drowsiness in our eyes flees. We download photos from websites we cannot recall. A wiry-built white man baring

his chest. An African-American, grinning, his hair tousled, both ears studded in a full semi-circle. Hunks. Perfect jaws. Perfect cheekbones. Glorious bodies. By night, we glow in these bodies that are not our own.

Do not think we are searching for love. Love does not exist in this city. We are men of the night. Our reward is money.

In the beginning, we fill in lengthy forms on dating sites. We keep a note of the sites we have signed up for: Matchmake.org. CupidHearts.net. DateMe.com. We begin with our sisters who live in the more comfortable African cities:

Johannesburg, Cape Town, Douala, Windhoek, Accra. They are foolish, these sisters. See how they bare their breasts on screen, as though they are a thing for sale, raw meat displayed at a marketplace, flies and dust licking at them.

*Whores*, we call them. *Darlings*, they call us.

*Will you take us to America?* they ask.

*Yeah, baby*, we say.

*Do we get to fly first class?*

*Yeah, baby. And you're gonna roll in my jet and watch the world beneath you fade to nothing.*

*Darling, you are so sweet, you make me wet.*

*Yeah, baby. You are sweeter.*

The sisters loyal to their families ask if they can bring along sick parents and younger siblings who have been sent off as apprentices. They ask if they can bring their favourite aunts and uncles. *Do they make masala chai in Texas? Can a decent meal of bobotie be bought in the streets of London? Baby, I hear there are tall tall buildings and many Rocky Mountains and the weather is always freezing cold in Canada, will there be gardens at least to plant ukazi?* We tell them, *Yes, yes, yes.*

It is upon their eagerness that we feed. But this eagerness dies all too quickly when we ask them to send money.

*Darling, they say, you are rich. What do you need my money for?*

*Baby, we begin, issues with the bank. The fucking account is frozen.*

And this is how we watch them delete us from their lives. Sometimes, they ignore our online presence. Other times, they ask, *Baby, have you sorted out the problem with your bank account?* We do not reply. We pay heavily for the internet. Time is a luxury. We cannot waste it on them.

The city is a fat, dark aunt with a tight-lipped smile, who embraces her prodigal sons. Yet, she cares little for them. She churns and churns us until we are millet chaff that the strong breeze sloughs off. And we drift deeper and deeper into the pitch-dark corners of her home. We lose our jobs. We lose the shelters where we once lived. We roam the streets.

By day, we climb into molues – those rickety peeling buses, whose insides smell of all things foul and rotten, compressing us, sticks in a matchbox. We pick pockets. Sometimes, we are lucky. We swindle fine leather wallets and purses, and, in them, wads and wads of crisp notes. We celebrate festive seasons like everyone else in this city, with chickens and beer and cheap, russet-haired women we coax off the streets. Other times, we are unlucky. Some of us get caught, dragged off the molues, and beaten with clubs and machetes, until our bodies are bloodied canvasses. Some of us have our fingers chopped off. Some of us sleep in tight cells where older inmates sink cigarette ends into our bare backs. We scream and scream. The city does not hear us.

We return to the internet, to our second homes. Now we choose to be women online. Black women flaunting bodies with an oily sheen. We visit websites that we cannot recall, downloading photos of the women we are pretending to be. At first, we are shocked by what we have become – our sisters, who have cast aside the dignity of their bodies. Now we are them, parading our *assets*, toying with ourselves, laughing in our borrowed nakedness. Still, we glower. We wonder if there are still good girls we can marry and take home to our dream mansions. In our hearts, we are angry with our sisters for their cheapness. We hope they come back to themselves from this place in which they are lost. But who says we are not lost too?

In our stolen bodies, we create new profiles on new dating sites. The sites seem to multiply every day as though they are birthing children and grandchildren who can no longer recognise their ancestry. Each one struggles to outperform the other with its new features: voice chat, live cam, a “viewed profile” check-box, location filtering, custom avatars. We meet men who are gullible enough to buy anything – a bra, a necklace, a handbag – if we tell them it has touched our skin.

*Perverts*, we call them. Old white men, with streaks of greying hair and lined skin. We detest them, but they promise us the whole of the States. First, they send postcards. We never look at them. Then they send pictures of their burly selves in thickly wooded hills. *Me going camping, hun*, the handwritten caption says. Then they send half-naked pictures of themselves, beer in hand, sitting on a patio. A patio we long to sit on, breathing in American air and watching cars and flimsily dressed skinny white women amble by, white wafers from the skies landing and melting down our parched throats. We tell these old men that we wish to come to the States, to Paris, to London. We beg them. We say we will be their slaves. We say we will let them have us any way they know how to. We say we are dying to bring their children into the world.

They send money. Chunks of foreign currencies. We rush to the banks, smiling. We convert the money into our local currency. We feast. We jam the city with loud music. We close off streets, invite the world to our celebrations and have the best of young women. Sometimes we remember home. We send money and gifts, imagining our mothers dancing around the villages, eulogising us, our fathers gazing skyward, thanking their gods for the generous blessings. The foreigners ask if we have received the money. We don't answer. We shut down our accounts on the dating sites and set up new ones elsewhere.

Or.

Some of us are unlucky; they do not send money. They say they are going through a divorce and are heavily in debt. They curse their ex-wives. They tell us to get a loan from a bank or a family member. They promise to pay back the loan when we arrive in their foreign lands. When we tell them that we are incapable of obtaining loans, they rail at us. They threaten to stop loving us. Soon our chats dwindle, and we become strangers. We part ways.

We are tired of our fake lives. We are bored. We become ourselves again, or we become partly ourselves, or we give up on cyberlove for a while. We take pictures of slums and send them to foreign organisations, and foreign men and women to whom we profess our love. We beg for their pity. We say we are poor Africans who sniff glue, or poor Africans who exhume freshly buried people and roast their flesh for food, or poor Africans fleeing tribal wars.

Or we do not say we are poor Africans. We act like normal people who wish to love and be loved. We are humans, after all. Our own needs are valid, too. We send pictures that show us garbed in our Sunday best – in clothes that are tailored from kaftan, brocade, kente or akwa-oche. We long to marry our online dates, to be absorbed into another world so different from this city, but we cannot afford to cross the city's border. We do anything to get our lovers to send money. We take nude photos of ourselves. We film scenes of self-pleasuring. We record ourselves dancing naked. They get excited. They mail us tickets. We leave, or we do not leave.

Some of us encounter a different kind of love, and the city tries to lynch us. A cybercafé manager has caught us visiting sites where men seek love from their fellow men. Men kissing men, one sucking the other's manhood, each taking turns to ply themselves from behind. At first, we are disgusted. Our minds scream abomination. We wonder how a man can find joy in another man's body. How unnatural it is that the love between them is consummated through the small hole where shit exits the body. We don't understand this kind of love. We are confused when our bodies begin to respond to such passions, longing to be explored by men. We imagine men's lips crushing against ours. We imagine being held at night. We yearn for this different kind of love.

But the city is spitting us out. It has had enough of us. The police want to take us off to cells that smell of shit and never see daylight. The people are burning our homes and demanding our heads. We are fleeing. We are placeless. The city no longer recognises us. The skies burst open, drenching the littleness that is left of us. We leave our dreams behind. We cross the city's border. We take up new lives.

