A gray SUV stops beside me in the rain and its windows roll down.

“Hop in,” the driver says.

He is either of two things: a kidnapper-cum-organ harvester, driving around in a storm, searching for stranded women on deserted streets; or he is a miracle from God, sent to save my body from ending in a ditch like an empty plastic bottle, swept away by Lagos waters notorious for submerging cars and houses. I stay under the safety of the awning above me and peer into his face. Are kidnappers often bespectacled? Do they wear starched shirts and gold studded cufflinks and hold their steering wheels with pomp? Bad eyesight suggests a preoccupation with books or microscopes. It’s not a marker of members of the underworld who make a living from collecting ransoms and negotiating the prices of breasts and kidneys.

He looks at me, awaiting my answer. The rain falls in heavy pebbles, dense sheets that land on the skin as if the heavens wish to stone us earthlings for our plentiful misdemeanors. I look at the car and the man in it. Do I risk drowning out here or disappearing into his clutches? Death is the final destination for both choices if things go awry.

By my estimation, it’s only past five—I can’t be sure since my phone is dead—but the clouds are dark, and nightfall, like an eager guest, has arrived too early. There are no witnesses to my impending abduction. The sorry stampede for taxies has now quieted. The people running in the rain, and those who walked on in defiance have all disappeared. Only the flooded gutters remain, the puddle gathering around my feet, the impatient motorists falling into an unruly chorus of honking. I heft my shopping bags from one hand to the other lest the vegetables and the okrika shoes and books in them soak in the dirty water. I wish the three secondary school girls who had joined me under the shelter earlier had remained and kept me company, despite their wet uniforms that plastered to their small and shivering

frames. I hope they are safe at home. I hope their bodies aren't tangled up somewhere in an underbridge.

The man keeps his eyes on me as he sits hunched over the steering wheel. The awning is doing a poor job hiding me from the storm and I wonder, if I get home, will Auntie Efe permit me a hot water bath? Sharp lightning zigzags across the clouds, welcoming loud peals of thunder. I swat the rain from my face.

"Hey, hop in," he calls, his voice almost a scold now. The rain flies into his car and he winds up a little, making thin room for our interaction. "Are you not Zik's sister? I live on your street. Let me take you home."

A chill greets me when I slam the door. My hands quiver as I fumble with the seatbelt. I'm thankful for this saving grace but not impressed at how easily I've flung myself in harm's way. Glasses and a white shirt do not make a man safe. Watch him drive me to a lonely corner of town and cover my nose with a perfumed handkerchief and I become a statistic. Nollywood has prepared me for this. Blogs write about these incidents by the second. Yet here I am in his car, blowing warmth into my palms.

"You're cold?" he asks as we enter the road.

My eyes answer him: Clearly.

"Let me make the car warm for you. *Pele*."

He turns a knob, twists another, and soon, the seat warms against my bum, the air between us no longer frosty.

I scan him. Forties, specks of white hairs in his beard. He sits with the slouch of a man domesticated by home-cooked meals. A fat nondescript wedding band. The navy blue frames of his glasses look like my late father's: functional, yet fancy. He appears moneyed—his brown-leather wristwatch, the scent of the car, the stately dashboard and its red and green neon lights. Maybe he is the type to gift you things time and again if you agreed to go out

with him, the type that could break a one-year spell of unemployment. Considering how he commanded me into his car, it's certain he spends his Mondays to Fridays barking orders to people who acquiesce to him, people who have their livelihoods leashed to his moods. I scan the backseat. A disarray of papers, a food flask and water containers, a pair of shoes. No ropes or knives, no skulls. Maybe he isn't so wealthy. If he was, why isn't a driver carrying him about town in this rain? Lagos big men hate to drive. Maybe he's codedly rich, the type that struggled to attain his wealth and insists on driving himself as a homage to his humble beginnings.

The traffic thickens as we approach Zenith Bank, the cars lining so close like dogs sniffing each other's bottoms.

"You're sitting straight as if you're ready for flight," he says. "Is the seat warming you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Then relax, I don't bite."

"It's an old habit. I love to sit this way."

He chuckles. "So what do you do?"

"I rounded off Youth Service a year ago and I'm job hunting."

He nods severely. "Interesting. Small girl like you, already done with youth service. You look like you're still writing JAMB."

"That's what everyone says. I wrote JAMB six years ago."

"Wow. That's the advantage of going to school early. So tell me, what are your areas of interest?"

I switch to interview mode and reel out my accomplishments. Administrative work. Secretary of Red Cross CDS as a corps member. Agriculture and English teacher in my place of primary assignment. I helped drive a campaign to raise money for the borehole project in

one of the communities in Ilorin West that had no potable water. I work well under pressure. Interview mode comes easy if you've spent thousands of hours on Jobberman applying for every opening.

He laughs hard and his body shakes softly. "You sound like you've spent your whole life rehearsing for interviews." We meet another hold-up and he takes the moment to wipe the edges of his eyes. "Look at what Nigeria has turned its youth into. No one knows how to relax and have a normal conversation."

I become shy and lightly slap my wet hair where it itches, but something in me glows with pride at how prepared my answers came. If anyone doubts that I am born ready, I will whip out this encounter as a trophy. I'm even wearing my best outfit, a blue chiffon shirt and a green suede skirt. These days, I take to dressing for the market as if for a job interview. Who knows where you'd meet your future employer?

"Now tell me what your *true* interests are. What do you love to do in your spare time?"

"Read novels—I am building a bookstagram account with the few books I have and whenever I go to the market, I add one or two copies to my collection." I quickly check my latest additions, Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother* and Isidore Okpewho's *Last Duty*. Only their spines are wet from the rain. "I also watch slapstick comedies on YouTube, and I silently judge people's outfits on Instagram."

"That was more sincere. Are you new in Lagos?"

"Yes. I arrived two months ago."

To avoid eye contact, I watch the swish of the wipers slicing into the rain now relenting by the minute. A bike man in an oversized raincoat passes us, chivvying his way through the fleet of cars and missing my benefactor's side mirror by a hair's breadth.

“Not today, Satan,” he murmurs, winding down to adjust the mirror. I’m impressed he doesn’t curse like most motorists, like Uncle Zik.

“I assume Zik is your elder brother,” he says to me.

“He’s my uncle, my mother’s younger brother.”

“He’s a good man, the few times I’ve interacted with him. He has a good head on his shoulders.”

“I’d say the same if he found me a job as quickly as he promised,”

“That’s the problem with you young people,” the man says. “Impatience. I have many relatives on my neck begging me to help their children find jobs. They think once you’re in Lagos, you have automatic access to employment as if all you need to do is stand in the middle of the road and an employment letter will fall from the sky. You did a good thing coming down here yourself. At least you can see with your own two eyes the job market is tough. Where did you come from?”

“Umuahia.” My seat is getting too warm. He notices and turns off the heater.

“You must be overwhelmed by the madness of Lagos, coming from such a small, small place.”

His condescension isn’t peculiar. It is the same with most people who have returned to Lagos after short visits back to Umuahia or other smaller towns they call home. They sojourn to the big cities for opportunities and their exodus grants them the nerve to look at the streets of their childhood from under their noses. Not that I won’t be guilty of this when I return home.

I always knew I wanted to leave Umuahia. A good percentage of my dreams began and ended with me pulling my Echolac box out of the bungalow I shared with my mother. I knew my desire for escape was intense when, within every hundred meters on Azikiwe road, I was accosted by one silly boy or another who hoped we could reenact an old teenage

rendezvous. Or whenever I stumbled into a wicked primary school teacher who once flogged me relentlessly with the edge of a ruler, and then there she was, old and wizened, asking what are the plans I have for my life. Umuahia is a place I found too small for my wingspan, too stultifying, a place where my big dreams would not bloom. But hearing this stranger call it small makes me shift in my seat.

He continues his interview, though it's not the line of questioning I've primed myself for. "Do you get the chance to hang out in Lagos? Have you seen the city?" he asks.

"Not as much as I'd love to."

"I could take you round on Saturday. I even have a party to attend this evening. I'd be grateful if you would come with me."

This is when I relax in my seat. He's not a kidnapper, after all, just a regular man doing regular lecherous things like picking up a girl in the rain and inviting her to a party the same evening. If he drove me home safely without this aside, without asking for my number or casually implying he needed some form of reward for his largesse, then I'd be surprised and file him in my short list of miracles. *A living parent, graduating school before twenty, breath in my lungs, a man who does me a favor without expecting something in return*.

I decline his offer. "I run errands for my uncle and I also babysit my cousin. I have no time for parties."

"Then we could do Sunday. Or will your uncle flog you?" He smiles now, surprising me with front teeth darkened by wear and tear. "You can lie to him and say you're going to see friends, or you have choir practice. That's how it's done over here. In this city. If you keep waiting for permission, you will never make progress in life. That's what I always tell young people: grab the bull by the horns. Seize the moments life presents you."

His chameleon-ness amazes me, how he switches from a man encouraging me to lie to my uncle to a man motivating me to reach for greatness.

"I've only known you for a few minutes and you're already asking me to deceive my uncle," I say. "By the next hour, I'm sure we'd be planning a heist."

"I'm only trying to help. You can't stay holed up in that house forever. A fine girl like you needs fresh air. How old are you?"

"Twenty-one." And severely under-achieved, I want to add. This—a life of tedious errands and babysitting and hiding out from the rain—isn't the dream I had for myself after school. My hopes were arrogant and towering. I saw myself in a prim office with an enviable job title engraved beneath the name plaque on my door. I believed I was such a prized candidate, twenty-one and book smart with my grades to show for it. I was so certain companies would sweep me off the job market. But now, I'm no longer sure. All I do these days is go to the market, haggle with meat and vegetable sellers, and return home to wipe the snot from Muna's little nose.

"Twenty-one!" Something lights up in the man. He's like someone who has found a dear item he thought was gone for good. "At twenty-one, I'm sure your mom already had you. In the North, you'd be a grandmother by now."

"Does that make it right? Twenty-one-year-old grandmas?"

"You're not getting my point." He scratches his beard, producing a dry, scaly sound. "It's not a question of right or wrong. I mean at twenty-one, you're a full-blown adult."

We are sandwiched between more cars and he asks for my name. When I tell him Ure, he mutters it three times under his breath, tasting it in his mouth like strange, spicy food.

"Ure, Ure, Ure. I watch you most days when you take the little girl to school," he says. "You're petite, just the way I like my women."

"And how many are they, your women?"

"I have enough for a man my age. Any woman taller than five feet does not enter my eye."

“Then I do not qualify. I am 5”3.”

“No, you cannot be 5”3.” He looks me over. “You should be five feet. What about your bust size, your hips?”

“Are you a tailor?” I ask in a loud voice. Instinctively, my hands reach for my breast. My panic returns. Is he who I suspected from the beginning, a butcher on the prowl for human meat? “What do you need my bust size for?”

He grins, surprised at my directness. Men his age are always avuncular, demanding respect and compliance from life. I have known them: uncles, teachers, family friends. I have been raised to keep a low profile for them, to not get on their bad side. They tell you with their eyes to watch your language and consider it a privilege, a pleasure, when they find you—a small girl—worthy of interaction. They never say it openly, in order not to frighten you, but their eyes warn you when you’ve been too crass with your retort.

“Is it a crime to ask my next girlfriend personal questions? I could travel next week and decide to surprise you.”

“I have enough underwear, thank you.” This is a lie of course. I could use more pants and bras. I have worn my best pairs to tatters and getting more wouldn’t hurt. Not from this man, though. The voice of the housemistress from my all-girls boarding school days bubbles forth in my mind. She always issued a warning whenever we were heading home for holidays, a warning about men who are too eager to buy underwear for girls. *No sooner than they have handed you the lingerie, they will ask you to lift your dress and show them how well it fits. Before you know it, the handshake starts to get past the wrist, extending to the elbow and in a matter of months, you’re in the family way.*

“So, do you agree to be my next girlfriend?” His smile is cloying.

“I’d pass.”

He shrugs. “Offer valid while you’re still in my car.” He’s the type to laugh hard at his own jokes, a genre of narcissism I despise. Ifeanyi, my father’s tailor, comes to mind; a lewd man who would burst into laughter, revving in his own sense of humor, before he allowed his listener to catch the gist. “I hope you’re not one of those Twitter girls who get angry easily. I just asked you a harmless question. Or maybe you have a boyfriend. Do you have a boyfriend?”

It’s okay to ignore him now. We are inching close to home. If he decides to eject me from his car for my insolence, I can walk or plod the rest of the distance.

My silence fails to deter him. An elevator pitch ensues: a poor boy in the backwaters of my hometown holds no candle to him, a big man. Why let him, this imaginary boyfriend, stop me from milking the joys of life, ehn? I think of the boys I’ve known and roll my eyes at their presumed ability to stand in the way of my seeming progress: Chinedu in secondary school, who kissed and told; Akpan my course-rep in ABSU, who was non-committal and called himself an agnostic hedonist; and Segun during Youth Service, a delicate boy who used more gel on his hair than I ever did and always fell asleep after sex.

The man in the car intensifies his pitch: he, too, has a beautiful woman waiting for him at home, but there are ailments only young blood can cure in a man of his standing. He asks if I *must* get home tonight. Can we make a detour and utilize the perfect weather?

As he prattles on, I think of his wife. I assign her an ineluctable face. It would be cliche to imagine her unpretty and suspect that her lack in the beauty department was the reason this man is acting the fool, leasing himself to a damp girl he only just encountered. Maybe his wife is even the type who polices her precious man, just like my mother did my late father. She banned my father from laughing and lingering and from commenting on the choir mistress’s voice after church service. My mother threatened my father that she would

not follow him back to that church. After all, he was not the only man who enjoyed the other woman's offkey ministration.

I eye my driver's hands. He's keeping a looser grip on the steering wheel now. He's feeling confident in his maneuvers. My assumed "provinciality" emboldens him. To him, I am nothing but a girl from Umuahia. He must think this is my first time riding in a car as posh as his, my first brush with civilization, even.

"Well, since you've decided to be unforthcoming," he says, giving up, "I hope next time you'll be more relaxed. See? I am taking you home after I rescued you from the rain. You owe me one. You haven't asked for my name. Does that mean you're not interested in me?"

For peace to reign, I ask.

"My name is Funbi Saint Brown. You know about the popular Saint Brown dynasty?" I shake my head no. "I run the printing company just outside Ogudu estate. I print posters for political parties. This season our hands are full but not too full to take on a little fun."

This must be the peak period for his business. Elections are coming up exactly this time next year. The walls on the street are already lined with the faces of various candidates, the upright and the crooked, vying for different offices.

"Do you need more hands for your printing press?" I switch back to interview mode, swallowing pride. "I could be very useful with editing and other administrative services."

"We don't have any vacancies right now, my dear. The only vacancy I have is for a sugar baby and I've offered it to you but you're squeezing your face like I've offered you shit."

Sugar baby takes me by surprise, stops me in its directness. This is the first time I hear someone put a name to this, let alone advertise a vacancy for it. I imagine it's an offer best reserved for girls who care nothing for books, an offer definitely not for girls like me

who are dreaming of running the biggest bookstore in town someday. A store more dignified and elegant than my book vendor's—his dingy operation only attracts a few people. My age and looks qualify me for the sugar baby position this man offers, of course, but the combined weight of my self-importance and my dreams makes the offer quite underwhelming.

I look him over. It is still hard to reconcile his rabidness with his spruceness, hard to think that this man who never leaves his house without dashes of perfume here and there, who certainly patronizes his dry cleaner weekly, who is surely a well-behaved father, a devoted husband, is without shame making this offer to me. He has it in his power to give me a more reasonable job without any dubious clause. But he won't put me to work at the printing company. I look him up and down again. I don't want to imagine the world where he and I end up in the same bedroom. I bind and cast whatever strings of events would make me regret not taking this offer.

We get close to the gate that marks where my aunt and uncle live. The rain has subsided but the streets are flooded. A man stops to piss in the waters while people roll up their trousers. Some gather their skirts and shoes in hand and wade their way home.

Mr. Saint Brown pulls over in front of the house. "Will I get a hug tonight?" He's already opening his arms.

"No, some other time, Sir."

"Can I have your number then?"

"I'd rather take yours." I lift my blank phone, pretending to type as he reels out his number. I repeat it after him for greater effect.