

CAGEWORK

NORTHERN NARRATIVES INITIATIVE



MAYMUNAH KADIRI

CULTIVATING
CREATIVITY



NORTHERN NARRATIVES INITIATIVE

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My deepest gratitude goes to the people who gave me the courage to write these pieces and the patience to refine them. To my family, thank you for your unwavering support, even when the words were heavy. To the Northern Writers Forum, my mentor, editor and fellow writers who encouraged me to keep going, your faith in me has been invaluable, thank you.

Finally, this chapbook is for every voice that has ever felt caged, may these words remind you that even in confinement, expression can still take flight.

DEDICATION

To all the women who have carried silence like a second skin, who have endured cages built from fear, shame, or expectation. This is for every woman who has been told to shrink herself, and for those still fighting to reclaim their voice. May these words remind you that your truth is valid, your story matters, and your freedom is worth everything.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Maymunah's prose is a collection of three bold, sexually liberating, and rebellious stories. Spanning gripping narratives: from a thoughtful sister eager to discover the cause of her sister's sudden madness, to a husband grappling with infertility concerns and a woman torn between an extramarital affair and her conscience, the courageous portrayal of themes that some would rather leave unturned is both fascinating and captivating. With interesting conflicts and a conversational narrative structure, Maymunah's work breaks boundaries with tenderness and respect, making it a daring, beautiful read.

Testimony Odey
Author of 'Uloma' and 'Feathered.'

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MY HUSBAND'S GIRLFRIEND

Jamila met Damilola in her fourth year of marriage. What struck her about the girl was how similar they were. They talked in the same tone, had the same interests in music and movies, and liked the same kinds of food. The only difference one could easily identify was that Jamila was dark skinned while Damilola was light skinned.

In the first two years they spent as sister wives, they never cooked at the same time, since they each had their specific week to cook for the household. Also, their husband, Ndagi, preferred Jamila to prepare certain teas and herbal mixes whenever he felt under the weather, so Damilola never participated in that.

One day, Ndagi came home early with a mild headache. He walked to Jamila's room and knocked on her door. Jamila, who had been rearranging her bedspread when he knocked, took a minute before opening.

“Assalamu alaikum.”

“Wa alaikum salam,” Jamila answered, opening the door to her husband.

“Kubebo e,” she said, welcoming him, “You're back early.”

“Yes. I was very tired, and I think I'm coming down with a headache.”

“Oh! Okun Mosoyimi, let me make some green tea for you. You can wait in your room,” Jamila said, slightly pushing him out of her doorway as she came out of the room.

“Where's Damilola? I can't hear her usual music from her room.”

“She went to get some tomato paste down the street,” Jamila replied.

“Okay. When she gets back, tell her to come to my room. I have something to give her.”

“I will,” Jamila said as he walked to his room.

She went to the kitchen, put water on the stove, and reached for the green tea in the top cupboard. When she got down from the stool, tea in hand, she saw Damilola at the doorway, wearing her hijab.

“He said he wants to see you,” Jamila told her.

“Why? Did he seem angry?” Damilola asked, her brows furrowing.

“No, he says he wants to give you something.”

Damilola looked pensive, but Jamila reassured her. “Don't worry, he didn't seem angry. Just act natural.”

“Okay,” Damilola said softly, and left for his room.

Jamila watched her leave, and her mind drifted to the first time she had heard of Damilola.

It had been months of disappointment. Four years of marriage, still no child. Jamila had endured endless fertility clinics across Niger State, sterile waiting rooms, and cold scan tables. Every test returned the same verdict: her uterus was healthy, her eggs plentiful and strong. But each month, hope rose and fell like a cruel tide.

Ndagi would peer over each set of results, glasses perched on his nose, muttering as though a hidden flaw might reveal itself.

“There has to be something wrong,” he always said. “If the eggs are so healthy, then how come we haven't been able to have a child?”

Jamila's silence grew heavy with resentment. He was a lecturer, a learned man. Surely he knew what it implied, that perhaps it wasn't her fault. But when she once suggested he accompany her for tests, he erupted.

“Something wrong with me? Do you see me? I don't smoke, I don't drink, I run every Saturday! My body is fit, fit! How dare you?”

The memory of his rage still stung. Only his mother's intervention softened him, and Jamila vowed never to broach the subject again.

Until the whispers reached her ears.

At his cousin's wedding in Bida, she noticed relatives avoiding her eyes, hushing conversations when she approached. By the end of the ceremony, she discovered that her husband was marrying again, a girl from Kwara. The shock burned through her. She boarded a bus back to Suleja that same evening, refusing to wait for him.

When Ndagi returned, their house shook with her fury. She talked and talked, cried and shouted till she lost her voice, nursed herself and then resumed arguing with him again. Ndagi spent all his time by her side, silently begging her, asking her to bring down her voice, telling her to be reasonable, but Jamila couldn't get past the betrayal. Ndagi was resolved though. He cared deeply for Jamila, yes, but to him, something was definitely wrong with her, no matter the doctors' reports. A new wife was his solution.

Afterwards, as days turned to weeks, the tight frown on her face dissolved into indifference and Ndagi brought Damilola home.

The girl was tall, light-skinned, slim. She entered with quiet poise, smiling with her eyes as much as her lips. She spoke softly, enunciating each word, and presented two blue kimonos to Jamila, her favorite color.

Jamila had braced herself for hatred, but she found none. This wasn't an arrogant interloper. This was a gentle girl, kind in a way that disarmed her.

Still, the first year of Ndagi's marriage to Damilola was marked with tension. Each time Damilola announced her period, Ndagi grew more anxious. Having one wife who couldn't conceive was bad enough but having two was unbearable. For the first time, he began to doubt himself. But instead of facing the truth, he buried himself in work, locking himself in his office as Head of Department, returning home only at Maghrib.

That distance left Jamila and Damilola alone for long hours. Slowly, cautiously, they grew close. They shared meals, sang along to Lionel Richie, gossiped idly.

One afternoon, after hours of gisting, they dozed off on Jamila's bed. They woke with their bodies entwined, Damilola's head on Jamila's chest. For a moment, pleasure flickered through them, before shame jolted them apart. Damilola muttered a goodbye and fled.

A week passed in awkward silence. Then slowly, their ease returned, deeper than before.

The second time they napped together, this time in Damilola's bed, they did not resist the urge to hold each other. They spoke of Jamila's childhood, her late mother's lessons on patience, forgiveness, and obedience. But for all her mother's teachings, Jamila had never learned how to enjoy life.

Until Damilola.

The dull hours Jamila once spent in front of the television were now full of laughter and color. And as they held each other that day, Jamila didn't know when she leaned in to kiss Damilola. It was brief, soft, and shocking, and Damilola kissed her back.

And so their relationship began.

Over the next months, they discovered each other's bodies, exploring a passion they had never known with Ndagi. With him, intimacy was duty, a few minutes of effort before he drifted into sleep. With each other, it felt natural, liberating, joyous. They spent half of their time talking and the other half laying together, making out, trying out new positions they saw online and letting the pleasure wash over them. It was as though they had spent their entire lives playing this meek character they had been taught was the perfect way they should be, and now they were free to be passionate, to show happiness, to feel pleasure.

The day Ndagi came home with a headache and almost caught them, Damilola had to hide in Jamila's bathroom while Jamila made him green tea. When he called Damilola into his room later, he handed her some clinic flyers.

"I will go to the clinic with you," he said, eyes heavy with worry.

Her eyes widened. Was he finally ready to get tested?

"What of *Uwargida*?" she asked, referring to Jamila.

"No, she doesn't have to come for now. We'll tell the clinic we're newly married and need tests. It's easier to explain."

Damilola raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Newly married? They had been together nearly two years.

But even then, he kept postponing. Finally, when they did the tests, he insisted on collecting the results alone.

The next day, he sat in his car staring at the paper that sealed his fate.

“Severely low sperm count.”

His fingers trembled, his chest tightened. The world tilted. For the first time, he admitted the truth: he was the problem. He wanted to crumple the paper, throw it away. But he knew that wouldn't make it go away.

He couldn't bear to drive. He took an Uber home, clutching the results like a curse.

For once in his life, he truly did not know what to do.

But he knew who he needed to talk to.

Not his mother. Not Damilola.

Jamila.

Yes, Jamila, his first wife, the woman he had wronged, yet who remained his pillar of calm. He would confide in her. She would know what to say.

He staggered down the corridor toward her room, the paper crumpling in his fist.

As he reached her door, he paused. He could hear sounds, laughter. No, not just laughter. Giggling. Voices overlapping. Two women.

And then, something else.

Soft moans.

Ndagi froze, his hand hovering at the doorknob, his mind caught between two unbearable truths. He braced for impact as he opened the door. What Ndagi saw next, he has never been able to retell. His wives were together on the bed, Damilola on top of Jamila, her top half bare with her breasts hanging out and Jamila underneath, completely naked with her hands around Damilola's waist.

“Innalillahi!” He had screamed, as both his wives simultaneously shrieked, pulling up blankets to cover themselves, while they searched for their clothes around the bed.

The results fell out of Ndagi's hand and floated to the floor as his chest began to pound. He reached for his head as the migraine continued, becoming worse than when he opened the test results in his car. He staggered forward as light fluttered away from his eyes. It felt like he was in a misty cloud and he could no longer see. Then he fell, head first, on the floor in the middle of Jamila's room.

THE GHOST OF LADI'S MARRIAGE

The heat was the first thing Shamsiya remembered about university. All four years she spent in Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University (ATBU) Sokoto were hot: heat that seemed to stick to her skin, that seeped into her scalp, that followed her even when clouds gathered during the rainy season.

Coming from Lokoja, Kogi state, she thought she knew heat. Lokoja was hot, yes. In Lokoja, Shamsiya could decline a fun event just because of how hot it was. The heat waves were massive and lasted for months. She would spend 30 minutes outside and large sweat patches would already form under her armpits. Regardless, Sokoto's sun was an unrelenting tyrant that showed her no mercy. It was worse than Lokoja. Her wardrobe shifted quickly in her first year. She took out the fitted jeans and thick Ankara blouses and began wearing loose-fitting gowns, cotton wrappers, and thin hijabs that let air breathe through.

But more than the weather, what stuck with her about those years was her loneliness. Shamsiya was not a social butterfly, never had been. She passed her days in lecture halls, libraries, and her tiny hostel room. She smiled politely at classmates but rarely went beyond small talk.

It wasn't until her second year that she found someone she could truly call a friend, Binny. Lively, sharp-tongued, and loyal, Binny had taken one look at quiet, awkward Shamsiya in a crowded cafeteria and decided they would be friends. That was it. From then on, they moved together. For the rest of her degree, Binny became her anchor.

Before Binny, the only person who had ever filled that role was her older sister, Ladi. Growing up, the sisters were inseparable. But by the time Shamsiya packed for Sokoto, something had changed. Ladi, once her closest confidante, had begun pulling away.

By her 200 level, Ladi got married. Shamsiya traveled home to Lokoja for the wedding, half excited, half nervous. The air in Lokoja felt different from Sokoto's, a heavy, humid heat instead of Sokoto's dry burn. But home was still home. Her parents' voices filled the compound, neighbors streamed in and out, and the whole place buzzed with preparations for what was clearly going to be a wedding of unusual grandeur.

Her soon-to-be brother-in-law, Ya Tanko, had money, and he wasn't shy about spending it. He had rented one of Lokoja's biggest halls, hired professional caterers, and brought in decorators who turned the place into a palace of gold and white. Shamsiya couldn't stop staring at the chandeliers. Her family had never known such extravagance, and now Ladi's wedding placed them in a new league. People murmured admiration as they passed by, whispering "Did you see the size of that cake? Ladi married well o" and Shamsiya could see her parents straighten with pride.

For once, she felt a thrill of joy for Ladi. Her sister had always struggled academically, failed WAEC twice, abandoned any hope of gaining admission. Marriage seemed like another kind of path forward. Who said success had only one shape? Shamsiya knew of married women who went back to school later. Maybe Ladi would too. For now, she deserved this happiness.

But beneath her joy was an unease she couldn't shake.

When she visited Ladi with gifts before the ceremony, expecting a smile, her sister sneered.

"You don't have to be my chief bridesmaid o," Ladi said, adjusting her gele in front of the mirror. "I have very close friends that can do it. You know I'm not like you, I have many friends."

The words stung. Shamsiya's throat tightened, but she forced a smile. "But I want to be your chief bridesmaid na, Aunty Ladi. Since you told me of your wedding, I've been dreaming about it."

Ladi only shrugged, as though her presence was an afterthought.

Still, the day came and went beautifully. Shamsiya wore her lilac bridesmaid gown with pride, trailed behind her sister like a shadow and smiled for endless photographs. She watched as Ladi beamed beside Ya Tanko, as guests gasped over the spread of food, as her parents accepted congratulations. Everything glittered. Everything shimmered.

After the wedding, Ladi's social media turned into a stage. Posts of "pepper them" captions filled her feed, love notes to her husband, pictures of new handbags, shots of expensive jewelry, videos of their glamorous home. Whenever Shamsiya scrolled, she saw a life of abundance. Her sister, who once shared a narrow bed with her, was now living a life that could silence critics.

It should have been enough to quiet Shamsiya's doubts. But something about Ladi's sneer haunted her.

By Shamsiya's final year in ATBU, those doubts found their answer.

She was sitting in the crowded library, bent over her final year project in Microbiology, when her phone buzzed. It was her mother. The tone in her voice made Shamsiya's stomach clench.

"Ladi... has gone mad."

The words made no sense. Shamsiya asked her mother to repeat them once, then again, then a third time. Each time, the words were the same. Her sister, the glamorous bride, the one who posted shiny things online, had tried to set her house on fire, with her daughter, baby Afreen strapped to her back.

Shamsiya couldn't breathe. The last time she'd seen Ladi, she had just given birth, glowing with new motherhood. How could madness grow in that short time?

Her mother's voice broke through the haze. "We stopped her in time. Afreen is safe. But Ladi... she doesn't talk. She doesn't eat. We've brought her home."

The library spun. Shamsiya wanted to pack her bags right then, but her project tied her down. For two frantic weeks she worked day and night, writing, compiling, rushing to finish. The moment she submitted, she boarded a bus to Lokoja.

At home, she found her life rearranged. Baby Afreen, fragile as an egg, was handed to her care. Ladi was back in their father's house under constant watch and a specialist came weekly.

The once-vibrant sister Shamsiya knew had shrunk into a ghost. She refused to breastfeed. She refused to talk. She sat by the window for hours, her eyes glazed, her phone untouched. This was the same sister who once scrolled TikTok until dawn, who had been the life of every gathering. Now she only shrugged at questions, stared through people, and turned away even from Afreen's cries.

Shamsiya sat with her for hours, begging. "Please, tell me what happened. Was it Ya Tanko? Did he hurt you?"

But Ladi only shrugged.

The silence grew heavy, a wall between them. Meanwhile, rumors swirled outside, Ya Tanko was already planning another wedding. He hardly came to check on his wife. He showed no interest in his daughter. To him, it seemed, Ladi had ceased to exist.

Each time Shamsiya cradled Afreen, she felt a knot tighten in her chest.

This baby had two living parents and yet it was as though she had none.

Two days before Shamsiya left for her NYSC orientation camp in Niger state, Ladi finally said something that wasn't a shrug.

“When they say ‘for better or worse’,” she murmured, eyes fixed on the window, “ask them what kind of worse. Because some worse... it can eat you alive.”

Shamsiya froze. “What?”

Ladi looked at her for a second too long, then shrugged and turned away again.

“Please, Auntie Ladi, tell me. I don't want to have to ask another time. I don't think I can take the suspense. Was it him? Ya Tanko. Did he do something to you?”

Ladi's lips twitched, “They said he was a good man. He had money. That I was lucky. I was young and had a perfect catch. I started to wonder if maybe I was the one that was broken.”

Shamsiya reached for her hand, but Ladi pulled away.

“Tanko was never there. He never truly cared. He never wanted to be a husband or a father, he only wanted a wife and a child. And as it turned out, he didn't want the child without the wife. He didn't want the responsibility” Ladi's voice cracked. “The night I lit the fire, I didn't want to burn down the house. I didn't know what I was doing. It was like an out of body experience, I didn't feel the heat of the fire, the pain. I wanted to feel something, but still, even with the rising flame that laid before me as I stood in front of the gas cooker that night, I still felt nothing”

Shamsiya grabbed Ladi's hand, this time Ladi did not pull away. Shamsiya did not have the words to console her sister, so she pulled her into an embrace in which they stayed in and sobbed silently.

LITTLE SPOON

Malik laid on the bed we had shared through the night. He was asleep, his chest heaving slightly, and the blankets were ruffled, half on the bed, half on the floor. He looked so handsome, like a god.

The first time I met Malik, he had looked as handsome as he did today, and somehow, somewhere deep inside of me, I knew we would one day have sex. The hot, slow and steamy sex that only happens out of intense love, burning wild in our chests. Even though my husband had been standing right beside me, I knew Malik and I would happen, and for that, I felt extremely guilty.

I was an Islamic studies teacher at Kupe International School, a private-owned boarding school for girls. I spent most of my time inculcating Islamic doctrines in my students, up until two months ago, when my husband, Ango, decided it was time to up and leave for Abuja.

His business would flourish there, and my mom was based there, so there were “no downsides to this,” he had said. He hadn’t discussed it with me, hadn’t sought my opinion, he had simply decided that we would relocate to Abuja and I would have to go with him. So I quit my job.

In Abuja, I met Malik, at a bank. He was a customer care representative and helped me out with the issues I had with my mobile banking. Ango went with me to the bank because he needed to open another fixed deposit account. He kept saying he didn’t “trust” his former bank with his money. I don't know what he meant by that anyway, and I didn't ask.

After he walked me to the customer care unit, he walked away. For a while, Malik and I talked. He was very friendly.

I thought his friendliness was prompted by the nature of his job, but three months into our relationship, he said, "I had tried to make you laugh as much as I could because your smile was just so beautiful."

I didn't want to accept Malik's advances at first. It felt immoral and just wasn't the way I was brought up. But he won me over. He called me frequently and had a keen interest in however I was feeling and whatever I was doing. My affection for him was swift and deep. It truly took me by surprise. I didn't know it was possible at my age, to feel that way. I became an integral part of his life, and he, mine. On the days we spent together, I dreaded going back home to Ango, and the nights we spent apart only made us yearn more for each other.

On our first date, Malik arranged a brunch in his apartment. It was Sunday, mid-noon. There was a blanket on the floor, toast, pineapple juice, and some red apples.

"What's this, Malik?"

"It's a picnic brunch."

"A what?"

"A picnic brunch."

"That's not a thing."

"Oh, it's not a thing? Then how is it here?"

He began to smile broadly, and I smiled too.

"Very mature."

"You mentioned that you've never been on a picnic date, and so I figured that when you do go on one, I'd love to be your date," he said as we settled on the blanket.

The toasts were cut in little squares, so whenever I tried to complain about the fact that we were sitting on the floor, he would pop a little toast square in my mouth. I'd scrunch my face up like a five-year-old and he'd let out a loud laugh, throwing his head back as he did.

"You know, Malik, I'm a little too old for this stuff."

"What's that supposed to mean? Don't you know forty-five is the new twenty?"

"Ha! Tell that to my back pain. And since you're twenty-five, that's the new what?"

He smiled a little and looked down at his glass of pineapple juice.

"I'll love you forever, hope you know that."

"I know. And that terrifies me."

"What does?"

"Forever. You're promising forever even though it doesn't exist. It's so brave yet scary. This certainty of your love in your words, it can't last forever, 'cause forever itself doesn't last forever."

He was quiet for a moment, then he said, "Okay. I won't promise you forever. But I will promise you that I'll always love you, for as long as you live, and as long as I live, and as long as you keep eating toast."

Malik was an only child, he had told me, spoiled rotten by his mother, but partially disciplined by his father. He never really knew independence till after he graduated university and began living on his own. At that point, he refused to receive handouts from his parents and didn't even want their connections for jobs.

He wanted to find his feet on his own after so many years of living a very sheltered life. After about two years of job searching, he settled for a bank job, which drained him physically and mentally. But he wasn't completely disdainful towards his job because if he had not been working there, then he never would have met me. He always knew what to say to make me blush.

He popped one more toast square in my mouth and I used my right hand to support it, cause it was halfway in. He smirked at me with his charming eyes and I smiled at him. The smile lasted the whole day, even when I laid next to Ango at night.

Ango had wanted a male child. Someone to take over his business when he was gone, he had said. But we ended up having three daughters, and he has never forgiven me for that. Ango was five years older than I was, but he had let stress and unnecessary worrying about his business get to him so much, he looked sixty-five, even though he was just fifty.

Our two eldest daughters were married already, to men Ango had carefully picked out for them. I had no say in it and had simply sat like a trophy wife on both their wedding days.

I missed the zeal I approached things with, before I got married. The passion I had for craftsmanship, and the joy I felt whenever I wrote poems. Now, all I amounted to was someone Ango put on display whenever he wanted to brag about something. His wife that had a master's degree, even though he does not let me make use of it. His wife that didn't look like she had three children, even though he had never assisted me during my postpartum periods.

Being with Malik was the one thing that made me happy these days. Spending time with him and conversing with him made me get up every day with a smile on my face. He didn't want me for what I could give him, didn't want me for the services I could provide for him. He didn't need me to cook or clean, he in fact found chores very calming to do. He simply wanted me for me. But Ango was never like that, he never fully saw me as a person. I was merely an accessory to make his life easier.

Ango was a very distant husband, but he was hardly ever physically abusive. There were a few shoves here and there and the constant emotional abuse, but he had never hit me.

The first and only time he did was the day Malik and I had sex.

It started with the dried bloodstain on his clothes. I had gotten my period two weeks ago, and one night, the bedspread was soiled. I had been extremely hormonal and stressed, so I couldn't wash the bedspread. I rumbled it up and threw it in the laundry basket, where his clothes also were. Eventually I forgot about it completely, and it got buried under piles of dirty laundry that I was always too tired to wash.

The blood had somehow rubbed off on his own clothes, and when he saw it two weeks later, he was more disgusted than angry. So he hit me across the face. Twice.

The slaps stung sharply. Ango threw his clothes and the bedspread at me before storming off.

I couldn't think straight. The entire string of events were like shockwaves through my body. The side of my face where he had slapped me still hurt, and I didn't want to touch it. I was too scared it would hurt more if I did.

I packed a few clothes in a duffel bag, told our youngest daughter that I'd be staying a few days at my mother's place, then drove to Malik's apartment in Kubwa, tears blinding my vision the entire trip there.

"Have you been crying? Your eyes are bloodshot red!"

I wanted to respond, but instead, I collapsed in his arms, wailing loudly and holding onto his shirt. He led me in, made me some tea, and let me cry on his chest, while he slowly stroked my back, listening to my discordant mumbling of what had happened.

"Your husband is a bastard," he said. "He doesn't deserve you."

That night, when we were both calm and hot for each other, he was slow and gentle. He had never been with an older woman, so he was very eager to please me, asked repeatedly what I liked and what I'd rather he not do.

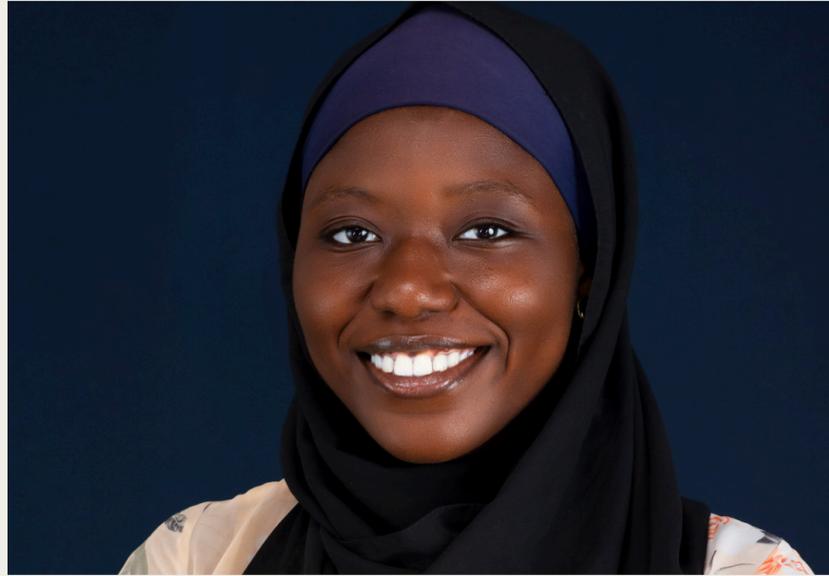
After we made love, he cuddled me. I had never felt what it was like to be the little spoon. Ango was always too busy for affection. But Malik was attentive, he listened to me and touched me how I wanted, caressed me and held me tight till we both fell asleep.

So now, as I stare into the mirror, I can feel the lightness of my heart, the adrenaline. I feel reborn.

I see a woman that has been cheating on her husband for months and is extremely elated by it. Elated, yet concerned.

I look at my reflection and I see a beauty only Malik recognizes, a happiness that sits comfortably in a giant pool of guilt.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MAYMUNAH KADIRI

Maymunah Kadiri is a fiction writer and content editor with a profound dedication to storytelling, particularly exploring themes of emotion, culture, and everyday human experiences. Her writing career began with short fiction, earning her accolades such as winning the ANA Kogi Writing Competition in 2019 and the ANSA World Cup Writing Contest in 2020 and 2021. Beyond her creative pursuits, Maymunah has gained professional experience in content writing and editing through her work with The Tech Peak and Oversimplified. As an editor for the Association of Nigerian Student Authors (ANSA), she contributed to fiction collections like *The Pandemic* and *100 Days of Stories*. She is particularly keen on refining her fiction craft and exploring innovative approaches to character development and narrative structure.

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