

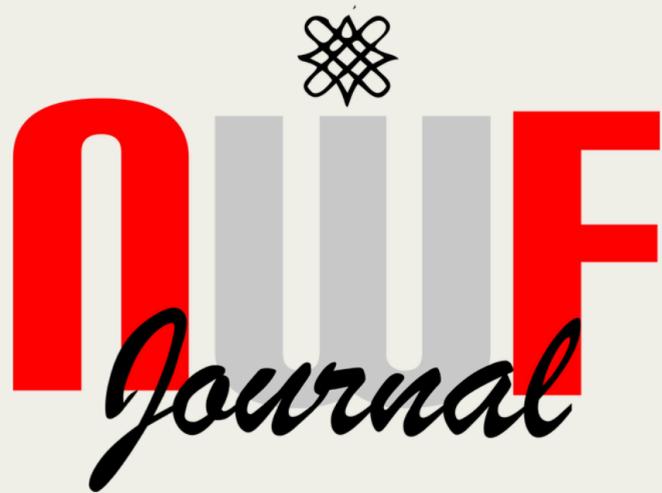
SHADOWS BENEATH THE NORTHERN SKY

NORTHERN NARRATIVES INITIATIVE



NANA JODI

CULTIVATING
CREATIVITY



NORTHERN NARRATIVES INITIATIVE

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DEDICATION

To my mom, Deborah Bello Shehu, my first storyteller, who led me into the world of dreams and stories. Here's to those moonlit nights you made magical, even when the power was out.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Nana Jodi's stories are truly outstanding pieces of art. Her approach to storytelling is powerful, evocative, and filled with emotional depth. Her artfulness resonates through beautifully crafted dialogue and sensory details that immerse the reader. The overall narrative flow is captivating, leaving you craving for more.

The first piece, "The Silence Trapped In a Broken Self", shows great thematic strength. Through strong storytelling, she blurs the lines between fiction and reality, subtly tying imagination to broader national issues, such as violent extremism, which resonate on important literary stages. The second story, "A Boy, A Dream, and Everything in Between" shines as a charming and imaginative work of children's literature. Not the usual kind, but a new dimension of eye-opening literature that allows children and young adults to taste some of the current realities of life through intentional storytelling. It is the kind that leaves a lasting impression and is worthy of recognition.

What is most remarkable about this writer is how polished and compelling these stories are. They reflect a writer with a natural gift, a clear voice, and the promise of an exciting literary future. It is evident that Nana Jodi is a talent to watch, and I am confident that her works will continue to reach and inspire a wider audience.

Mahmoodah Temitope Oyeleye
Award-winning Author Of Faded Blues

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ALL THE SILENCE TRAPPED IN A BROKEN SELF

"Alhaji Yosa, we are withdrawing my son's proposal to your daughter," said Mallam Dalla, "I... Hope you'll understand."

"Of course, I understand," Baba replied. "I'll talk with my relatives, and we'll refund the bride price."

"We don't intend to add to your family's misfortune but..." Mallam Dalla hesitated, I knew he was looking for softer words to explain why I no longer deserved his son.

"Don't worry, my friend. No one can blame you," Baba assured him before an odd silence took over.

"Ahem," Mallam Zakih, the Imam of Garin Gano, cleared his throat.

"Alhaji Yosa!" he called. "We should all understand that this is a test from Allah. This does not mean that the life of this young lady is over."

My chest tightened as his words floated into Mama's room, where I was sitting on the hard floor. I knew I shouldn't have been listening, but I could not help it as their voices slipped in through the opening under the door, like smoke, suffocating whatever was left inside me.

I clenched the edge of my khimar, twisting it between my damp fingers. My breath became shallow in the stifling air of April heat. Sweat slid down my temple, pooling at the corner of my lips. I wiped it away absentmindedly, staring at the cracks in the wall like they might answer the question I could not ask aloud: What have I done to deserve this?

I glanced up at Mama. She was sitting on the bed. Her back, a mountain between us, and her arms propping up a head that was burdened with shame.

I tried to numb my mind from the voices coming through the door's opening until it blurred together into a slow hum. I closed my eyes and tried to remember Nadab's face—the way his laughter would rise like the first call to prayer in the morning. His voice was warm and soothing, like the calm before the storm, but now he had become the storm.

I wanted to scream—loud enough to rip out the tight, burning lump stuck in my throat. It was not just pain clawing at me anymore. It was shame—the kind that stitched itself unto your very skin—staining not just your name, but your family's too. Now, I understand why Baba's relatives sneered at him, why they always said I was not enough. Maybe they had always known something like this would happen.

"A son will carry your name, Yosa," they often told him.

But, Baba shook his head and smiled. "My Zaire is enough for me." Recently, I wondered if he still believed that. And worse, I wasn't sure if I did either.

I rose from the floor. The stiffness in my knees reminded me of how long I'd been there, folding into myself. My legs felt unsteady like I might collapse any second, but I forced myself to move. Anything to escape the memories creeping in again. But they always come back. Always.

That day. That very day lives in my head, even when I try to push it away. I can still hear our laughter, my friends teasing me about Nadab as we walked to school. Then the truck came. It stopped in front of us so fast that I did not have time to scream. Men jumped out. Faces I did not know, hands I did not recognise, jabbing, pulling, and shoving. Till today I can still smell the terror, the way my heart slammed against my chest, the way my voice got caught in my throat, before it all went dark.

The tall mirror in the corner caught my eye, and I turned toward it before I could stop myself. The reflection staring back at me was that of a stranger in familiar clothes. Her face was darker, rougher, and dotted with scars that were not there before. The lips were now cracked and swollen, like they had been chewed up. Looking at those lips reminded me of my greatest fear—how I had screamed raw and loud, until my voice broke and there was nothing left to give.

I didn't know why I continued staring into the mirror. Perhaps I was searching for my old self, or for something familiar, but all I could see were those cold eyes. Unlike the warm ones Nadab used to love. He said they reminded him of the shade of sunsets over the hills. He told me once that he'd write poems about them if he weren't so terrible at poetry. But those eyes were gone.

Was that why Nadab cancelled our engagement? I gripped the edge of the mirror stand. My fingers could not stop trembling. He had not said it outright, of course. Nadab was always kind. He always measured his words. Even on his last visit, he had smiled. That soft, quiet smile of his, and I prayed for my health. But there was something in his eyes I could not place. Was it pity? Regret? Shame? Maybe it did not matter. And maybe it was all of it and more.

My fingers brushed the rough skin of my lips, as if touching it could prove I was not dreaming. How could so much have changed? Just two years ago, men used to flock to our house, calling me the most beautiful girl in Garin Gano. They bombarded me with marriage proposals, but Baba turned them all away.

“My Zaire deserved the best,” he used to say. And Nadab was the best. I was fifteen when Baba agreed to his proposal. Nadab was twenty. He was tall and handsome with an intelligence everyone admired. The elders made a decision that we get married a year later, after I finished secondary school and Nadab completed university. It was simple. It was perfect.

And Nadab? Oh, he cherished me like a rare gem. He told anyone who would listen that I was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. And that he would die for me any day. I had believed every word. How could I not? Back then, my beauty was my pride. A gift from my mother's Fulani blood. Tall, slim, and fair-skinned, I had inherited the elegance that made people stop and stare.

But that same beauty had become my curse. It had drawn the eyes of those beasts—their greedy, hungry eyes that saw me not as a person, but as a possession. Their favourite plaything. The thought alone made me shudder as I turned away from the mirror, from the reflection that mocked me. No mistake about that. My beauty had ruined me.

I sat at the edge of the bed. Mama shifted uneasily on the other side. She looked at me briefly before her eyes flicked away. It was as if she had seen something she should not have. It had been like that since I came back. I remembered when she used to sit right close to me, telling me stories, especially how she met Baba. She said he fell for her at first sight. His gaze found hers in the middle of the market, where she hawked milk beneath a neem tree, with her scarf tied to her waist. “He followed me all the way to my Rugga,” she'd laugh, touching her cheek shyly.

Now, the silence had taken the place of the stories. She still braided my hair, still painted my hands and legs with lalle, but that was all. I lifted my hands. The crimson bloom of lalle that curled up like delicate vines up to my hands. Beautiful. Too beautiful for what I felt inside. That day, as Mama painted them, her hands trembled like she was holding a stranger's hands instead of mine. She didn't say much; “You have to look good for when Nadab visits.” Her voice carried that stubborn, foolish hope. As if beauty could fix everything. Days dragged on, the lalle darkened but Nadab never came. Only his father did.

I traced those fading lines with my fingers, stopping at the dark letters engraved just above my pulse. Nadab. A name that once lit something warm inside me. I asked Fatimah to cut it into my skin with a razor, then rub in cashew poison and charcoal so it would stay forever. Mama was furious when she saw it, but later she let it go. After all, she knew I'd soon be Nadab's wife.

I did not realise the men had left until I saw Baba at the doorway. "Barka da zuwa, Alhaji." Mama welcomed him.

"Barka da zuwa, Baba," I echoed.

"Yawwa. Nagode." Baba's chair creaked as he settled into it, "Tahonan, Zaire." He called me.

I obeyed. I knelt at his feet. Baba cleared his throat. "As you are aware, Mallam Dalla came today with Mallam Zakih to officially cancel your engagement with Nadab."

I flinched at the final blow as if it were the first time I heard it.

He turned to Mama. "Make a list of everything Nadab's family brought to this house so we can return it immediately."

"Tau, Alhaji," Mama murmured, dabbing at her swollen face with the edge of her wrapper.

"And you, Zaire, I want you to take heart and know that it is a test from Allah, for He knows what is best for his servants."

Best. The word echoed in my heart. Was this what was best for me? To be discarded, humiliated and stripped of my dignity like a soiled cloth no one wanted to touch?

"Zaire!" Baba's sharp voice pulled me out of my thoughts. "This is not the time to cry," he went ahead and rested his hand on my head. A rare gesture. It was as if he was urging me to let it out. The grief, the fear and the shame.

He glanced at me—just once—but that was enough. In his eyes, I saw it all; the weight of disappointment, the sting of regret, and something else.

Baba looked worn, older than I remembered. The lines on his face had deepened.

After a long silence, he finally spoke, "Don't worry, Zaire," he said. "Everything's going to be alright."

A lie. I know nothing would ever be alright. Not with me. Not with this family.

Then Mama spoke, her voice flat, and distant. "Don't worry, Zaire. If we are lucky, someone from far away might come and marry you."

My breath caught. Of all the things to say, of all the things in the world. This?

My fingers dug into my palm as something clawed at my throat, begging to be let out. I bit down on my tongue, hard, until the sharp tang of blood filled my mouth. A distraction. A way to keep the scream from breaking free.

My head pounded. My throat burned. I needed something—anything—to pull me out of this suffocating haze. Beneath my khimar, my fingers found my arm. I pinched the skin hard, letting my fingernails dig into my flesh, and pressed more until raw pain replaced the ache in my chest. Still not enough. I repeated the action. Again. And again. I came to realise that only raw pain could match the fire in my heart.

The call for Zuhr prayer broke through the silence. It stretched over the walls and across my skin. It was a familiar summons that should have lifted me to my feet, yet I sat there—still, heavy as stone.

"You should go and pray, Zaire," Baba said. "We all need Allah's guidance in these trying times."

I forced myself to move. My body was heavy, as I picked up the tin kettle by the door to perform ablution. Afterwards, I spread my prayer mat in my quaint room, stood in position, and tried to steady my breath. But the moment my forehead touched the ground, it all came back, bit by bit.

Everything! Every touch. Every word. The breath of those monsters still clung to me. I could feel it up close; the hands that took from me, and those eyes that demanded that I watch as they stole from me. They wanted me to know that I belonged to them.

My body gave out. My knees buckled, and I collapsed onto the mat. The world spun around me. I clutched at my arms, as if I could hold it together.

Mama's voice reached me first before her hands did. "Zaire. I thought you heard what Baba just said."

I tried to speak, but the words were stuck in my throat. My lips trembled. "Mama, they raped me. Again...and again.

"Zaire..." Her grip tightened as she placed a finger on my mouth. "You don't need to talk about it."

"But Mama—"

"Shhh..." Her eyes darted toward the door. "Don't let people hear you."

She didn't want to hear it. She didn't want people to hear me. But I needed someone to hear...to listen. Someone to see me, really see me. Not as the ruined daughter. I wanted someone to hear the screams and the many silences that were locked inside that big hole in my chest.

When Mama left the room, I did not move. I reached for my arm again, dragging my fingernails over the still-sensitive skin, over the raw cuts I had already made. Deeper this time, I dug into my flesh. Blood welled up in thin red lines, sharp, hot and real. And for a fleeting moment, I could breathe.

The silence surrounding me pressed against me. For the first time since we returned, I missed my friends. Samsara. Shantu. Juldee. We had been bound together in the darkest of places, fellow captives turned family. I missed Samsara's sharp wit, the way she could make even the worst of nights bearable with her defiant smirk. I missed Shantu's quiet strength, the way she held our hands when the screaming became too much. And Juldee ... Juldee, the only boy among us, yet somehow, the most broken. I swallowed hard. The things they did to him! He never spoke of them, but we saw it all—the pain and the shame, but never spoke of it. Juldee taught us how to keep our minds from going crazy. *If you have nothing to say, just tell a story. That was his rule.* We told stories to escape. We spun them out of nothing, and it became a magic in our crumbling world. Until the night it all ended.

Our captors had left for another raid, except for one—the one they trusted to keep us in line. But Samsara had been watching, waiting. Even with the weight of her unborn child pressing against her spine, she planned with purpose, slipping the insecticide; poison she had hidden into his food. Waiting, as his body grew sluggish. And then, when he was too weak to fight back, she took his own knife and ended him.

Just like that, we were free. Yet, even now, far from that darkness, I still felt the weight of the invisible chains.

One night, I woke up gasping again. It was too early, the sky was still tinged with grey. But I knew what had caused it. Mama had said I should attend my cousin Nima's wedding. I did not want to go. The thought of it clawed at my ribs. The noise, the crowd, the stares. And the what ifs. Like, what if something happened? What if I stepped outside and never came back? What if they took me again?

But Mama insisted. She still had hope. She still believed. Maybe some suitors would see me, take an interest, and wipe away our family's shame with marriage. I could not blame her.

Just as I predicted, the wedding was chaotic.

Yangunbe's music pounded through the air, vibrating in my chest. The yard was alive with colour and laughter, bodies sprawled on plastic mats, hands scooping rice from communal bowls and crimson drinks sloshing in careless hands. While others danced, swaying in loose circles as their voices rose with song. I stared on, looking forlorn.

Did any of them know? Did any of them understand how quickly life could shift, or how easily the ground they stood upon could be ripped from beneath them?

The moment I entered the house, a few heads turned to look at me. I felt their eyes, the weight of their eyes pressed against my skin. I slipped away before it could suffocate me, and found my way to my aunt's room. Inside, the bride and her friends gathered around the mirror, painting their faces and adjusting their headscarves as their light, unburdened laughter filled the room.

"Zaire, can you help me tie this headscarf?"

Nima's voice pulled me back much later. I hesitated. "I don't know how to."

She laughed. "Of course, you do. You're the expert, remember?"

Remember? There were too many things I had forgotten about myself. But I didn't want to disappoint her. I stepped forward, closing the distance between us. That was when it happened. My wrapper loosened. Something clattered to the floor. A knife. My knife.

I moved quickly, bending to snatch it up, but when I straightened, I met many eyes. Wide, frozen and afraid. I should have said something, perhaps explained

That this knife wasn't for them. It was not meant to harm anyone. That was the only thing that made me feel safe. But the words wouldn't come out. I tucked the knife into my bag and walked out, ignoring the whispers that followed me home.

When Mama came back, she was on fire. Spitting, crackling and burning. She lunged before I could move, her fingers locked around my throat, squeezing and crushing.

"I will kill you before you kill me." I could see her furious eyes even as my vision blurred and my ears roared. My body should have fought. I should have panicked. But the pain—oh, the pain—was soft, so warm like a wet cloth on my fevered skin, numbing and soothing like a voiceless melody. Let it happen, a soft small voice inside me whispered to my hearing.

Maman Laddo's shrill voice sliced through the calm fog. "Are you crazy, Maman Zaire?" She said as her hands pried Mama away, tearing me away from that strange, beautiful and weightless moment. I slumped forward, coughing, yet it was as if my body had slipped loose from me, drifting somewhere far beyond reach.

"Zaire...! Zaire, you've killed me!" She later sat down, rocking herself back and forth as she clutched herself like a grieving widow.

I watched her mouth move, but my mind had shut her out. Baba came home to the wreckage. He did not say anything. He only looked at me. A long, tired stare that seemed to reach into my bones. Then he turned away and left.

Days blurred together. But Mama's face stayed the same, empty and unreadable. I had become a girl with many names in Garin Gano. A story told in whispers. A lesson. A warning.

And then—Nadab. He's getting married.

To my friend. To Dije, my childhood friend, my neighbour, the one whose house stood just beyond our wall. We could hear the ululations over the wall when they came to pay for her bride price. They say she's a decent girl. And me, a ruined thing.

That night, the nightmares came again. It always did, like clockwork. I jolted awake, breathless. Sleep was the enemy. It took me back to the monsters, over and over again. I curled up, arms wrapped around myself, rocking slightly as if that could erase the images burned into my brain as the crickets hummed their lonely and eerie sound that stretched through the darkness. I needed something. Something to make it stop! My mind kept pondering. Then, I remembered.

I reached for my makeup box. An old recycled biscuit container. The razor was still there, waiting. The first cut was slow. A precise carving, letter by letter. Nadab's name. The name that once meant everything. Now, it was a wound on my skin, a stain I needed to erase. Blood welled up, bright and thick, but the pain was dull, distant. I pressed harder, watching the letters disappear beneath the crimson tide. But the pain, where was it?

I pressed harder. Still nothing. Only warmth. A strange, floating warmth. My head felt light. My body swayed. The room swirled. Edges blurring, spinning, and fading into a deafening silence.

“Zaire!” A voice called, distant and panicked.

The glow of a kerosene lamp sailed across my face, and I squinted lightly. Mama’s panicked face hovered above mine.

I smiled. And then, everything disappeared.

Moments blurred, stretched, then snapped back into focus. I found myself lying on a mat in Mama's room. My hand throbbed and was wrapped in layers of stiff bandages. The air was thick with the scent of burning incense, and the low hum of prayers swelled around me. I tried to sit up, but a firm hand pressed me back down.

“Stay still.” A somehow strange but familiar voice said. I raised my head a bit and I saw him. It was Mallam Zakih, his eyes closed as he recited hadith over me. While Baba was standing at the corner, arms folded and his eyes were dark with something I couldn’t name.

“Don’t worry, Alhaji,” he assured Baba. “A Jinn has possessed your daughter, but Insha Allah, we'll soon have her again.”

A Jinn. That was the answer. Not pain, not grief, not the weight of everything I carried. Just a spirit lurking in my body, twisting my mind, making me like this. I wanted to laugh. I let them believe whatever gave them comfort.

I did not fight it. What was the point? I let Mama whisper prayers over me, and allowed the smoke of burning incense wrap around me like a ghost. They were trying to bring back someone who no longer existed and I let them try.

Days passed, then weeks. I was never alone. Mama’s eyes were always on me, watching, waiting, desperate to will me back into the daughter she once knew. Laughter had long since abandoned our house, leaving only regret, pain, and the ghost of many silences. I had ruined them. I heard it in the way Baba sighed at night, in the way Mama’s voice wavered when she thought I could not hear. She wanted Baba to take another wife.

“You need more children,” she whispered to him one night.

I did not blame her. I couldn't fix what was broken inside me. But I could fix this. I knew what I had to do. But first, Samsara! I had to see her. She needed to understand my decision.

Peering through the window, I peered out, checking to see if Mama was still outside. She was bent over the firewood stove, stirring a pot.

“Now!” I told myself.

I reached under my mattress for the pocket money Baba had once given me. It was not much, but it would be enough. No bag. No extra clothes. Nothing that would raise suspicion. Just me.

Pulling my hijab over my head, I took one last look at my small room, at the walls that had held my silence, and pain. Then I turned and slipped out with my heart hammering. I left through the back door, while Mama was still stirring soup on the stove, unaware. I did not stop. I couldn't. I stepped quietly outside and followed the path toward Samsara's house. When I reached the door, I raised my hand to the wooden frame and softly called, “Salam alaykum.” and waited.

“Zaire!” Samsara's voice lifted in surprise, when she opened the door.

“Don't be a stranger. Come in,” she ushered me into her room. I was lucky that she was the only person at home.

I stood there by the door for a moment, taking in the sight of her as she sat on the edge of her small mattress. She picked up her daughter from the worn mattress and cradled her in her arms.

“Come and have a seat, Zaire,” she said, as she gestured to the spot beside her. I walked over and sat close to her.

Samsara didn't rush to speak, but I could see the concern written in her eyes as she looked at me. I did not want to say anything, but the words were already bubbling up as they had become too suffocating for me to hold inside.

“Samsara,” I said as I stood up and started pacing the tiny room. “I tried to forget. I really did.” I finally let go of the tears that threatened to gush out. “But I can’t! The past—it won’t let me go.”

I turned to face her. “The agony in my parents’ eyes, I can’t stand it. I don’t belong here anymore. I’m leaving.”

Samsara’s face remained calm, but her hand tightened around her daughter’s small body as she asked, “Where would you go?” I refused to answer her, but I knew she understood.

“Zaire...” She looked at me for a brief second before looking away. “You know, sometimes, running isn’t the solution.”

I stopped pacing as my chest tightened with every breath I took. “I know. But maybe it's the only way for me to forget”. My voice broke. “To feel something else, something other than this.” I held onto my chest as I sat down beside her.

“You know,” I continued, “Nadab said he would never marry a bandit whore.” The tears I tried to hold broke free. “I thought when we came back, that was it. We will move on. Nothing will matter again.” I paused. The tears kept pushing against the back of my throat. “But how do I start over?” I whispered. “Every day, I see the shame in Mama’s eyes. And that quiet regret on Baba’s face?”

Samsara did not say anything for a long moment. She placed her daughter carefully on the mattress. The delicate manner in which she did it showed how much she valued every little moment with her child. I stared at her and wondered how she did it. How she kept moving forward with a part of her past in her arms every day.

“You don’t have to go. I know we’ll get through it, somehow...” Her voice was unsure.

“You should understand,” I said, “when I tell you I’ll do anything to forget, Samsara.”

“I do understand.”

“No,” I said. My hands were shaking now. I pulled the sleeve of my hijab down just enough to reveal the raw, jagged scars that ran down my arm. “You don’t, Samsara. Look, I’ve become addicted to pain. I...I can’t feel alive without it.” My voice broke as I turned my arm, revealing the full extent of the damage I had inflicted on myself.

She gasped, her eyes flickering between the purple scars and my face. “Zaire, why?” She covered her mouth, stunned. “You’re killing yourself.”

I shook my head, a hollow laugh escaping me. “You can’t kill what’s already dead.”

“Oh my God!” She held her hand to her mouth as the tears she was holding back finally spilled.

“Do you really think He’ll look at sinners like us?” I asked.

“Who?” Samsara’s eyes clouded with confusion.

“God,” I said, almost to myself. “Do you really think He’ll forgive someone like me? Someone like Us?”

Samsara’s eyes fell, “I don’t know. Sometimes, I wonder too” I knew she was thinking of her own actions; her sin, the one that had freed us all, but at such a great cost. “What I’ve done. Myself...what I’ve become.” Her voice trailed off.

“Sometimes, I can’t even pray.” My voice broke the silence. “I knelt on that mat, but couldn’t move a muscle. Who would listen to a sinner like me? After what they made us do, I can’t forgive myself, let alone ask God for forgiveness.” I paused. My throat tightened. The words were almost too painful to be spoken out loud. “Most nights, all I can say is Lailaha illallah, and even the prayer gets caught in my throat sometimes”

Samsara’s tears fell quietly, her fingers brushing against Angeli’s cheek as if she were trying to comfort herself through her daughter. “I can’t go to church, you know.” She choked on the words. “They called Angeli a ‘baby terrorist.’” She wiped her face, as a defeated sigh escaped her mouth. “And my mother, she doesn’t speak to me anymore.”

My heart sank. “But why?”

“She told me to choose—her, or Angeli,” Samsara said quietly. “She said she won’t have anything to do with a terrorist’s blood. She wants me to dump Angeli in some orphanage in the city.” Her voice cracked as she looked up at me. “Tell me, Zaire. What am I supposed to do? They look at Angeli and see a terrorist’s child. But when I look at her...” Her voice dropped. “All I see is myself.”

And just like that, I understood. I understood everything. The past we could not escape and the guilt that hung on our necks like a noose.

“That knife was in my bag.” The words slipped out. I knew she had heard about the incident. Who hadn’t? Every child in Garin Gano whispered about it. I swallowed hard, “I carry it sometimes. I have to. No one else will protect me. I had to do something.”

The confession felt like a huge stone pressing down on my chest, but I forced the rest out. “I’m afraid... afraid they might come back.” My breath hitched. “I have to be ready. If they take me again. I won’t let them. I’ll make sure I die first.”

“Zaire!”

“I never meant to hurt anyone...”

“I know, Zaire but those bandits, our kidnappers, are never coming back. They're all dead.”

“We don’t know that,” I said. “I can’t be sure. One of them might have survived.”

“Zaire, maybe it's time we all let go of the past,” Samsara said.

“How can we?” I shot back, the words sharper than I intended. “When we're reminded of it every day? I can’t stay here, Samsara. I can’t.”

“But where will you go?” She asked gently as she placed her palms, warmly against my back. It felt so warm and comforting, trying to anchor me to the moment, but I won't let it. “Anywhere, but here,” I said decidedly.

“Have you thought of where exactly?” She asked again.

“No.” I lied. I couldn’t let her see it. I already knew where I was going. I had heard of a place—a safe haven in Zurmi Local Government. They called it a refuge for women on the run. Some people said it was a place for wayward women. Who could be more wayward than me? If it meant starting over, leaving everything behind, I would do it. I would walk away from everything. I had to.

I let my head fall on her shoulder, and for a moment, everything felt bearable. It was the first time in what felt like forever that someone was not judging me or looking at me with pity.

“Live well, my friend,” Samsara said softly.

“Goodbye, my sister!” The words came out more like a prayer than a farewell, for I knew this would be the last time I would get to say it to her.

And just like that, the moment my foot crossed the border of our village, I felt something snap inside me. I could almost feel the pieces of who I was, of my name, falling off me like a broken shell.

I could not see what lay ahead. The road that stretched before me, seemed empty and endless, like a blank page. I did not know if I was walking toward something or just away from everything, but one thing was for sure, my feet were moving of their own accord, one step after the other.

Even though I told myself I was leaving it all behind, something still tugged at me, saying, “No matter how far you run and how many borders you cross, you would never outrun the past—the ghosts and the faces, the voices and the silence, because they were all trapped in your broken self.”

A BOY, A DREAM, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

In a small town, deep in the heart of Hausaland, and far in the north of Nigeria, lived a sad little boy. who was always watching the midnight stars and whispering a thousand wishes, hoping maybe, for just one to come true.

One starry night, as the trees slept, Abu hung his head out of the window and stared at the sparkling sky with brooding eyes.

“I wish I could go to school,” he whispered. The stars, silent, twinkled back at him.

Abu pictured himself all dressed up in a smart school uniform, the colour of the bluest sky, he could almost feel the smell of the new fabric. But just as he was about to step into the classroom, he heard his name.

“Abu!”

The voice sliced through his dream. Abu jumped and turned, his back to the stars.

“Come to bed, son.” His Umma tapped the space beside her on the frayed mat where they usually slept.

“It's not a bed, Umma. It's a mat.” Abu grumbled as he joined her.

He soon fell into a deep sleep. He dreamed that he was back at school, but this time, so was Samaa. The brothers giggled and played football just like old times.

The next morning, radiant sunlight streamed from the window and peeped through the gaps in the straw curtain that served as a makeshift door. Abu stretched, yawned, and sighed at the same time. His dream had given him false hope because he was alone. Samaa was not there. Abu remembered the last time he saw Samaa. He was crying while his brother was grinning from ear to ear.

“Don't worry, Abu,” his brother said to him as he hauled his sack of clothes over his shoulder. “When I come back next year, I'll make sure I help Baba so that he'll send you to school”.

That day, Samaa left for Quranic school in the neighbouring town. He never came back. Abu wiped his wet cheek, rolled out of the mat, and hurtled towards a corner where the clay pot sat. He picked up his chewing stick from the tray that covered the pot.

Even though the sun was smiling, the grey clouds were in a bid to shade its merriness. The cool breeze ruffled the leaves on the trees, promising rainfall. Abu flopped on the step of their mud brick hut, chewing his stick as he watched many children scuttling down to school along the bicycle-wide road. They were dressed smartly in their well ironed uniforms, motley school bags, and matching rubber sandals. Seeing them reignited Abu's longing. Immediately, he scrambled to find his Umma who was working in the kitchen, a thatched roof held up by four posts.

"Umma, when will I go to school?"

"Abu, I thought we'd talked about it." His Umma put the millet basket away and tapped the ground next to her, inviting him to sit. "We still don't have enough money to send you to school."

"But Junior's Umma sends Junior to school." Junior was Abu's friend until he started going to school where he made new friends.

"Abu" His mother called. "We are not like every other family that can afford anything they need. Your Baba and I are now struggling to put food on the table."

What table? Abu wondered. We eat our food on the floor.

He was quiet for a while.

"Umma," he said in almost a whisper, his deep brown eyes flickering with sadness. "I don't want to become an *Almajiri* like Samaa."

"I will never send you to that place. No child of mine will ever go there!" She shuddered and muttered to herself.

She went on, muttering to herself that if they had money, Samaa would not have been sent to *Makarantan Almajirai*. They had realised too late that Samaa and other children like him were not receiving any Islamic education, but were only made to beg for alms on the street.

“Do you think Samaa will come home, someday?”

The brightness waned from her face. “Let’s hope so.” She whispered.

Just then, Abu heard the pitter-patter of rain on their neighbour’s tin roof. As the cool breeze swirled around licking every heat it could find, Abu’s ten-year-old burning heart cooled. He dashed outside in the rain, twirled, and splashed in some puddles.

“Abu, you’ll catch a cold!” But the sound of his Umma’s voice synced with the soft rhythm of the millions of raindrops as he danced away his sadness.

Every day, Abu spent his mornings helping his Umma. They dug into piles on various dump sites, scavenging for recyclables to sell. At noon, he always joined his Baba at his market shed to learn his trade as a cobbler.

Later in the day, after the August rain cloud paddled away and the radiant sunbeam stretched up above and poured into the little town, Abu scampered down the dirt road rolling his bike wheel. On his way to Baba’s shed at the market, he came face to face with the bullies—Junior, and his new friend, Razaki. They trapped him in a circle and before he knew what was going on, Junior snatched his wheel.

“Give me back my wheel.” Abu protested.

“And if I don’t?” Junior smirked.

“He will send his crazy mother after you,” Razaki scoffed.

“My mother’s not crazy.”

“Yes, she is and so are you. Who else goes through other trash if not crazy people?”

“And look at his clothes, like those beggars in the market,”

Abu stared at his tattered kaftan, the colour of dirt, and his mismatched parched sandals.

“What’s going on there?” Abu’s Baba called from his shed. Hearing his voice, the two bullies scampered off, giggling. Abu’s wheel danced at his feet, collecting tears from his eyes. He picked up the wheel and went to the shed, drooping on the wooden bench.

Abu looked up to her with tears in his eyes “What could you be looking for, Umma?”

“Hope... hope for tomorrow.” She blankly stared ahead, then bent and continued sorting the cans “Just hold on to your trade for now.” She called out.

“But I don’t want to be a cobbler, I want to learn the ABCs.”

“Let’s keep on seeking, son. Someday, when the time is right, we shall find.”

Later that day, Umma sent Abu to pick some kindling in the nearby forest. And after Abu gathered as much as he could carry, he then decided to hunt for some yellow-black grasshoppers, for his Umma knew how to turn them into delicacies. He caught a lot of the insects and caged them in a black nylon bag he found around. By the time he was ready to go home, darkness had fallen upon him. No matter how fast he ran, he couldn’t outrun the darkness that made all directions seem similar to him and he couldn’t tell which way was home. That was when it dawned on him that he was lost.

Abu felt fear swelling inside him, it made him weaker and weaker, as he heaved his patched loafers. He later dumped his burden that slowed him, and followed the waning moon. The cold breeze whipped against his face, as his weary feet carried him deeper into the night.

Soon, he started hearing faint screeching noises of car wheels. He waded towards the sound and found himself under a giant bridge.

Abu sighed with relief when he saw that he was not alone. Several men were hovering over a fire while some lay on the concrete floor of the bridge.

“Sir, do you know the way home?” Abu tapped one of the men by the fire.

“Home?” The man echoed as if the name rang a bell.

“Whatever you mean by home, I have no idea boy.” He dismissed Abu while he continued rubbing his two hands together over the fire.

That's not the answer Abu expected, but he was too tired to think or even move. He managed to wobble over the hard surface of the bridge. The chirping of crickets and croaking frogs was overwhelming. But as soon as Abu lay his head on the cold concrete, he immediately dozed off. Shivering to the bones and swatting at tons of mosquitoes that feasted on him, Abu had the most miserable night of his existence.

The next morning Abu woke up alone. The bridge was abandoned. The weird noises being made by his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten anything since the previous afternoon. He went over the bridge, scanning the commuting faces for anyone willing to help, but everyone was in a bigger rush to get out of the scorching sun. Then, he saw an old, weary beggar who was sitting beside the bridge.

"You're a long way away from home, son." He told Abu when he recognised Abu's description of home. "You see this road?"

"Yes sir."

"Do not take any turn. Just go straight."

Abu thanked him and went on his way. The walk back home took Abu longer than leaving. Drenched in his sweat, he was breathless and weak. As well, he was faint with hunger. He sighted a boy who was a little older than him sifting for stale food scraps in a dump pile beside the road. Abu remembered his Umma's words 'seek, and you shall find'. And so Abu ended up following the boy's trail. He was not as lucky as the boy, for he found nothing edible. But he found something else—something he dreaded so much—a leftover polish paste and a worn shoe-brush—like the one his Baba often used. As much as Abu detested the idea that crept into his big head, he had no choice but to succumb to it.

Down the busy road and beneath the tin roof, the aroma of warm food lured Abu to a food stall. He went over to the first man and noticed that his shoes needed polishing.

"Mister? Mister, do you need a shoeshine?" Abu asked kindly.

"No!" The man snapped.

“Hey, get out of my shed,” grouched the grumpy, chubby woman.

“These Almajirai are thieves.”

“I’m not a thief ma,”

“Get lost!” she snarled.

Abu dragged his heavy legs out of the shed and held back the tears that threatened to gush out of his eyes.

“Hey boy,” It was a different man, he waved him back into the shed and Abu went to him.

“Are you sure you know how to handle that brush?” The stranger smiled.

“Yes, sir.”

“Alright then!” The man let out his dusty shoes to Abu.

“What are you doing here?” The angry woman returned.

“I’m the one who called him.” The strange man spoke in his defence, and Abu sighed with relief.

Abu took a deep breath as he knelt before the man. That was the first time he worked on any shoe without his Baba’s supervision. First of all, he brushed off the sand and then layer by layer, he polished the shoes just like his Baba taught him. And when he was done, the man was impressed.

“Nice job, son,” he said. “You have a great skill. This is much better than begging like those boys.” He pointed at some young boys standing idly waiting for leftovers. They reminded Abu of his brother, Samaa. “You must be hungry. One plate for the boy,” he called to the restaurant owner, the woman from before.

When his meal arrived, Abu’s eyes sparkled. It was rice and beans with stew, his favourite. “Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me! This is your reward for polishing my shoes.”

Abu gobbled down every last crumb from the plate, drank some water and thanked the kind stranger again. He put the brush and leftover polish-paste container in his pocket and then set out on his way.

By the time the sun cast its orange hue over the horizon, Abu had started seeing familiar surroundings. He curved his hand over his eyes and caught sight of his tiny home. He could also see his Umma sitting outside with her chin resting on her hand. And with what was left of his strength, Abu dashed home calling, “Umma! Umma!”

When his Umma saw him, she jumped up and ran to him. “Abu! My son!” She said as she scooped him in her arms. “We looked everywhere. Thank God you’re home, son,” She said, heaving a sigh of relief. “I thought we had lost you too.” She cried.

“No, Umma, I just got lost.”

In his Umma’s embrace, Abu let out the tears of joy without restraint. While he sat outside to drink Koko, Baba returned. “Abu?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes, Baba,” Abu scurried into his wide arms.

“I’m just coming back from the forest. We’ve searched everywhere.” Baba said as he whisked Abu up, just the way he often did to him when he was smaller and for the first time in his life, Abu’s tiny heart felt warm and content.

That night, Abu smiled as he whiffed his Umma’s soda-soap smell, and he slept soundly enjoying his Baba’s loud snoring once again.

Early the next morning, Abu roused with the sun in all of its radiance. After breakfast, he went to the junkyard with his Umma as they always did. But today was different for Abu, because when other children laughed at them, while they were going to school, Abu did not mind. Instead, he looked up to his Umma and held her hand, “Don’t worry, Umma,” he smiled, “This time, we’ll seek.” His Umma was speechless. Her face lit up with joy as she warmly squeezed Abu’s hands.

When Abu finished helping his Umma, he took his shoe-repair kit and made his way to the market. He did not go to his Baba’s shed as he often did. Instead, Abu had a big idea. He went from shop to stall looking for people who needed their shoes fixed. And many people agreed to let Abu mend their shoes, after which they gave him a currency note.

By the time the sun formed a coral glow in the East, Abu met his Baba at his shed and showed him his stack of cash.

“Wow, son!” His Baba swelled with pride. “ You made more than what I did myself.”

“Really Baba! Tomorrow, I’ll make some more.”

“You’re really a cobbler, son.” His Baba grinned proudly.

The next few days, Abu worked harder than ever. Most times, he spent hours with his father learning a few tricks. Then he would roam about the market fixing as many shoes as he could get. Some paid him in cash, while others offered payment in kind—vegetables, fruits, soap, Maggi, palm oil, and sometimes even grains. And Abu would bring these to his Umma whose eyes never ceased to sparkle. Now, most people in the market prefer to wait for Abu once in a while to fix or polish their shoes.

One warm night, after supper, Abu’s Umma gave him a polythene bag. “We got this for you with the money you’re able to save.”

“What is this Umma?” Abu looked first at his Umma, then at his Baba, who were sprawled on their sleeping mat, grinning. “Open it,” he urged Abu.

Abu’s mouth dropped open when he saw a school bag stocked with books, a uniform and sandals.

“But Umma, I want to help you and Baba at home.” Abu sulked.

“Going to school is how you’ll help us, son,” his Baba said.

“And we’ll make sure you do, even if I have to recycle every single can in the world!” His Umma added.

Abu jumped with joy and hugged his parents.

“But Umma, what about the blankets?”

“That can wait, son. This TIME is for school.”

Abu’s mouth widened into a big smile as an idea crept into his mind once again. He snapped his fingers, “YES! I know what to do. I’ll polish more shoes every day after school and save some more and next TIME, we’ll buy the blankets”.

“I have faith in you, son.” His Umma said.

“This TIME is for me to SEEK.” Abu held his Umma’s hands.

“And so you shall FIND, my son!” His Umma smiled. “Now come to bed. Oops! I mean, the mat.” She added, as they all exploded with laughter.

That night as Abu watched the dazzling night sky, he was beaming like the stars. He flashed a thumbs-up to the stars, and whispered, “One down”. He was sure that he saw a star wink back at him. For the first time in his lifetime, Abu knew that this TIME was his turn!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



NANA JODI

Nana Jodi, also known as Nana Bello Shehu, is a writer and literary critic from Sokoto State, who is passionate about telling stories that explore contemporary issues of gender, trauma, and the environment, particularly from a Northern Nigerian perspective. She holds a BA in English from Sokoto State University and an MA in Literature from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. As a Northern female writer working in English, Jodi is dedicated to preserving indigenous stories for both children and adults. Her goal is to spotlight societal issues while educating the next generation through relatable and thought-provoking fiction. A published author with short stories in print, she also writes fiction for children and adults, including several unpublished works such as picture books, folktales, and young adult fairy tales. Her love for creative writing has led her to numerous workshops and webinars across the country, where she continues to grow and connect with other creatives.

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