

These Letters End in Tears

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a novel

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MASOBE

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*For the ones living in hiding.
You are not alone.*

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• 1 •

I can't remember a time in my life when I wasn't running from something. A lot of the times it's this town I'm running from, afraid that I will become rooted in filth in a part of Cameroon where nothing and no one ever gets out. I fear that this town will turn me into something I'm not. Ordinary. A creature existing for the mere purpose of surviving.

I knew from an early age I was different. My daydreams were unwonted. My prince would walk down the aisle only to turn into a princess as he reached me. The audience, previously cheerful, would shake their heads disapprovingly and walk out. But I was dazzled by the shape-shifter before me. These were deviant fantasies, something that had to be kept a secret, something that would go away if I just focused on thinking normal thoughts. That's when I started to wear masks. I had one for every occasion. But the mask I wore the most was "unproblematic," "obedient," "well-behaved." I even let my mother pick out a personality for me: wear this, walk like this, people will talk. I lived in perpetual fear of becoming a disappointment.

I would have kept living this way, resigned to a life in hiding had I not met you, Fatima. I'd not imagined that

everything could go from drab to vibrant in just a matter of seconds, or that my chest could flutter as if it were full of a million butterflies. It was August 2002, the day I first laid eyes on you. It was one of those gray days when heavy clouds hover over earth from dusk to dawn without releasing a drop of rain. It seemed the torrential storms of July had drained the skies of moisture, leaving August with a permanent frown and no tears to shed.

I had grown accustomed to carrying around this feeling of emptiness inside me, an infinite hollow waiting to be filled. I woke up with that feeling, carried it with me all day and took it to bed. Life felt monotonous; going to and from school, sitting through lectures only to repeat the routine the next day. It felt as if there were two beings living inside me; one was content with the boredom and the other was constantly on the lookout for something thrilling. When I tried to silence her, sticking to my routine and the life my mother laid out for me, she made *us* sad for days. I persevered in spite of being at odds with myself, hoping that someday soon, something worth living for would come along.

We were down by Ayaba stream, on that barren patch of land you and your friends called a football field; a rectangular plot between a maize farm and an eroded compound that used to be a school. I think of that day as if it happened only yesterday. It was the moment when my universe took a definite form, the moment when the two voices in my head quieted down and my wandering self-found what it'd been searching for. You were wearing that ugly jersey you loved—the faded blue one with holes in the left shoulder—sprinting after a football with a herd of gangly boys on your tail. You

were lightning and the boys were the clouds chasing after you, never to touch you. You were exquisite, a being torn between softness and hardness. You were just like I'd imagined.

I think that day I was wearing my striped jumpsuit, the one with toggles at the waist and a breast pocket. You loved that dress. You said it gave me an hourglass figure. And you would walk behind me just so you could stare at my bum, even though you knew it made me uncomfortable. You had a playful spirit, Fati. I hope life hasn't stolen that from you. The dress is frayed now, just like that blue jersey, but I've kept it. I pull it out every now and again and press my face to the fabric just to remind myself that our time together wasn't conjured by my imagination.

Time seemed to freeze when I saw you that first day, Fati. The dark clouds parted ever so slightly and a single ray of sunshine touched you. I felt everything in and around me come to life. I felt awakened in ways I could not articulate.

You did not see me at first, so I just stood there and watched. Your team, grim-faced, every single one of you, was huddled in defense next to the bamboo goalpost, which was stuck deep into the ground and missing a net. You were so focused, as if your next breath depended on keeping the ball from going through the goal frame. And even though you were the only female on the court, you seemed unperturbed, utterly at ease with your surroundings. I admired that about you, the way you asserted yourself, like the entire world was yours for the taking, regardless of what other people thought.

Standing there mesmerised by you, I did not see the ball flying off court and in my direction. Fate must have played a hand in the events that followed: the ball landed at my

feet, bringing you to me. Suddenly you were within arm's reach, handsome and beautiful all at once, lean muscles on a mesomorph body with flawless dark skin like palm kernel shells, just one shade darker than mine, glistening with sweat. Your eyebrows each had a slit in them. The most enthralling thing about your body was your chest, flat as a boy's. I would find out later that you wore binders to smush your breasts because you were dysphoric about them. Up close, I saw how unique your eyes were: a shade of brown like upturned soil with a ring of starry gold around the pupils. They seemed to see right through my mask, and I found that disarming.

You smiled, raking your gaze from my head to my toes, lingering on my mouth and chest for too long. I fidgeted, looking down at my feet. And yet I felt an intense pull toward you. Something about your aura felt familiar, like I already knew you.

With a slight tilt of the head, you urged me to pass the ball, even though you could reach for it yourself. I probably looked stupid gawking. But how could I not stare, Fati, when you bewitched me with your gaze and those lips . . . God! Your lips: pinkish brown and perfectly proportioned, the upper one darker than the lower. They curved upward in an asymmetrical line when you smiled, and then the dimples on both cheeks would deepen. I learned in time that your lips were as sinful in action as they were to look at.

I tried to get my feet to move, to pass the ball, but they wouldn't budge. You moved one step closer and my heart skipped a bit. I caught a whiff of sweat mixed with rose oil when you stooped for the ball; it was an intoxicating scent. You oozed charm with every move, Fati. Your teammates were

calling out behind us, eager to continue the game, but you just stood there, ignoring their calls, shifting the ball from one hand to the other, refusing to release my gaze.

Then you winked at me and I knew I'd been missing a vital piece for years. Cliché as it sounds, I knew I'd found the one. That my life would never be the same. And yet you were back to the field before I could articulate a coherent sentence. It was probably for the best, because if I had said anything then, I'm sure I would have embarrassed myself.

But you, Fati, as I would come to know, were a tease. You knew the effect you had on me and you toyed with it. I lingered until the match was over, until I was one of the few people left in the arena. I wanted you to notice me, but you refused to look my way, refused to make eye contact. It was almost as if you were going out of your way to ignore me. I wasn't bold like you. I couldn't just walk up and demand your attention. People like us learn to read the signs as best as we can, but there's always the fear of misreading the room, of approaching the wrong person and being outed.

I was a wreck for weeks after that, did you know, Fati? I thought of you day and night, always on the lookout, hoping to catch a glimpse of you in a crowd. I returned to the football field almost daily, but you never showed up. By the end of two blurry months, I was certain I had dreamed you up.

"Miss Too-Cute-to-Kick-a-Football" was the first thing you said when I saw you again three months later. I had all but given up hope by then. But like I said, we were fated to be together, and the universe was always going to find a way. Who would have thought, when I woke up to my neighbours arguing, that the day would end with me seeing you again?

They were at it again, my best friend Nkeh and her boyfriend, squabbling and bickering like they did most mornings, making me regret my decision to rent a room next door. I knew better than to try blocking the sound by burying my head under a pillow. Nkeh was my favorite person in the world, but she could be a handful, always dragging me into trouble, and I'd learned never to play the pacifier. You did not like her, and you loved everyone, Fati.

But the quarrel that morning wasn't between Nkeh and her boyfriend. When I pushed my squeaky red metal door open, a quibbling crowd was gathering in the courtyard to discuss what happened the night prior: Nkeh's room had been broken into and most of her belongings had been carted away. She'd not been in her room—probably out with her good-for-nothing boyfriend—and I had been sound asleep and not heard a thing. I heard one of my neighbours say, "Someone was seen on the Southside this morning selling a radio the same mark as Nkeh's. We should go there now o, catch the thief before they rob us blind." This was the incident that led a group of vexed Eastsiders to the Southside, hunting for a thief.

For some peculiar reason, the university had maintained a reputation for barefaced segregation ever since its founding. An inheritance of our colonial past, the school was German-built, with multiple hulking structures sitting on a broad green bed in the purlieu of Bamenda, a style that seemed light-years ahead of its time. The highborn undergrads dominated the Westside; the middle class, the East; and the plebeian, the South. I thought it was for the best, as the tensions among these three classes were always high. The upper crust, I believed, were a stuck-up bunch and plebs, as we sometimes

called them, were angry and thieving. The middle class was a mix of both.

Things like that happened often—conflicts between the three groups. We could not go long periods without engaging in brawls. The fights were especially ugly in the dry season, which was no surprise, with the sweltering sun altering people's moods. I dreaded tagging along, but I had no choice. Nkeh would never let me hear the end of it. As I crossed the veranda and joined the group, I think I saw an accusatory glint in her eyes, as if to say this should not have happened with me asleep next door. But you could never tell with Nkeh.

The Southside dorm blocks were identical to ours, two lofty buildings painted chiffon white like every other structure in the school, with sawtooth roofs facing each other. But the place was in a poor state compared to the Eastside. The walls were stained with seasons of rough handling and neglect, and the quad was littered with papers. Music blasted down from several floors up and the balcony railings were heaving with clothes hung to dry, even though the school disapproved of these habits. But it was no surprise: the rules did not always apply to the disorderly Southside lot. As soon as we arrived, the Southsiders abandoned their weekend pursuits and converged in the yard, outnumbering us. Some of them, the girls mostly, observed the dispute from the balconies, yelling obscenities down at us.

I was eager for the thieving bastard to be exposed so I could go back to the brimming basket of laundry awaiting me in my room. The taps in the middle-class dorms only ran from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. four times a week, and the clotheslines would be filled by the time I got back. I would have to lay my

wet clothes out on the lawn to dry—something I hated doing as the grass was usually crawling with weaver ants and my arms were still covered in bites from the last time I resorted to this method. I could not press the clothes either for fear of increasing my already-inflated electricity bill.

But Fati, I'm sure you're familiar with that saying, the one about how man plans and God laughs, because God was definitely smirking at my worries that morning.

The quarrel was at its zenith, Southsiders making a stand that they knew nothing about a burglary and Eastsiders contending that they knew who the burglar was. The threat of suspension was the only thing keeping the spat from turning into a full-out brawl. My eyes drifted from the commotion, and suddenly there you were, an unexpected presence in the crowd, reeling me in from across space. I forgot how to breathe while my heart danced. It was just like that first day, only this time, I was also self-conscious about how I looked. My afro was a disaster: uncombed and disheveled, with curly strands sticking out every which way on top of my head. The *kaba* I wore had a scoop neckline with a ragged hem just above the ankle, green like an avocado. It was a gift from my late grandmother—boring and dowdy like its bestower, but precious to me—and my feet were stuffed in a pair of well-worn flip-flops. Instinctively, I reached up and tried to smooth my hair, but the stubborn strands never could follow instructions.

You, Fati, instead of balking at how unkempt I looked, gave me that secret smile of yours and I just about melted from embarrassment. I had searched for you for months and

you waited until I looked at my worst to show up? Seriously, Fati.

I tried to make myself smaller, to fade into the crowd—anything to escape your smouldering stare, but you wouldn't let me. Your gaze was firm and unyielding. And then you did what no one had ever done in the history of the University of Mankon. You forgot you were a Southsider, and that I was an Eastsider, and that we were not supposed to mesh. You crossed *the line*: an invisible, infinitesimal line carved into our school's foundation and esteemed by our ancestors for generations prior. You violated the terms of war just so you could stand next to me.

I can still hear your voice, sonorous and sleek like *ilung*, saying, "Miss Too-Cute-to-Kick-a-Football," and now, after the years have gone by, warmth still slinks into my heart at the memory of you speaking to me for the first time. You sounded just as handsome as you looked, soothing and dreamy. You were quite tall, just as tall as me, and had this larger-than-life personality exuded with so little effort. The only blemish on your face was a small scar below your lips, but I would discover other imperfections later: thin, ropey scars on your lower back, mellowed into a smooth and shiny shade darker than your skin tone, left there by your brother.

Moments later, your friends had followed you across the line and were asking you who I was. "She's my wife," you responded.

I thought you were crazy, saying something like that for your friends to hear, for onlookers to hear. A quick denial sprang to my tongue, but never made it past my lips. Your pals chuckled at your declaration, but I don't think they believed

you meant it. Or if they did believe you, they didn't seem to mind. Your friends had to know about your sexual orientation, the way you carried yourself like one of them.

If I'm being honest, I was flattered by your statement. If you knew who I was, it meant you noticed me that first day, that you too had been looking for me, and that I hadn't misread the signs.

I didn't realise you'd spoken again until you gave my arm a poke.

"I'm Fatima," you said. "What's your name?"

My eyes lifted to meet yours, and I was stricken once again by their beauty. They were darker than I remembered, and the unusual rings of gold around the pupils seemed to sparkle even brighter than on that first day. Gorgeous, I thought. Though I didn't think you looked like a Fatima. With your khaki shorts and black wife-beater tank, I thought you looked more like an Alex. You were Muslim. Your name implied as much, but having little exposure to Islamic culture at the time, I couldn't come up with a proper masculine Muslim name for you.

Back then, when I heard the word *Muslim*, I thought of soft-spoken women in hijabs, with elegantly henna-tattooed wrists and lily-stained fingernails. Two of these women I knew sold *kuru-kuru* down by Hospital Road and one of them had a docile daughter named Fatima. You were none of these things; your hair was buzzed to the scalp, and you walked and behaved with the arrogance of a *kaffir*—a term you later told me was used by Muslims to describe an unbeliever. You broke my stereotypes of Muslim women and I will never again think that all of them are soft-spoken hijabis. You intrigued me in every sense of the word.