

Beneath These Skins

"Hi! My name is Sarah Parker." She says and you smile at her.

"I'm Ese Osemwenke." You reply, trying hard to stop yourself from asking her if her middle name is Jessica.

She is pretty, with shoulder-length hair the colour of corn silk, and eyes that are very blue you can tell their colour from across the room. You reckon that just like you, she'll be speaking at the United Nation's CEDAW Session; she has that confident and assured air around her that you recognize so well because it's like looking in a mirror.

"Your name is beautiful." She says to you in the deep sultry voice you find hard to believe belongs to someone with such dainty features. You would have expected her voice to be wispy and bird-like.

"Ese." She tries it out on her tongue. "It's beautiful, just like you are." She says, and you feel your mental shutters coming down with a roar that threatens to burst your eardrums. You fight the burning urge to clamp your hands over your ears, to shut out the roar, to shut out her beautiful contralto.

You've heard those words a million times too many and you know just how quickly they can turn ugly as soon as people see what's beneath the carefully painted façade. You have learned the hard way how fickle and fleeting acceptance and respect usually are. You know that no matter how forward-thinking the world thinks it is, biases still run deep in the DNA of the human race.

No one likes the messy stories.

No one is comfortable with wounds or scars or the not-perfect lives. So, your smile widens, showing your straight, white teeth with the tiny gap between your incisors. Yes, you smile and even offer inane comments here and there, but you push all thoughts of the sexual abuse, first from the au Pair, then from uncle Ighenegbai, into that place you have sworn will never see the light of day.

You imagine how the easy rapport she has built with you in so little time would disappear if she knew. You know how she will flounder, try not to show how uncomfortable she is with being uncomfortable with your *damagedness*, how she will try not to make too much of it, and then wonder if she's making too little of it. You know that whether she judges you or feels sorry for what you've been through, it will distance her from you because you're *the broken toy*.

She is saying now that she has seen a bit of the world, and you hope she doesn't ask if you're from Africa and what the *country* is like apart from all the starving children and the safaris.

"I have been to Cape Town. Your accent doesn't sound South African." She says and you're impressed.

"I'm Nigerian." You say, but you don't tell her that your life had been far from the pictures of emaciated children the media is filled with. You don't say that you were born with a silver spoon shoved down your throat and that you had been expected to live a stereotype because of it. You don't talk about how no one took you seriously, especially because you were a girl-child, and that you were told to *enjoy daddy's money* until a rich suitor came along. You don't tell her that you defied daddy and got that job anyway, or that when you refused to sleep with the boss, he fired you and told everyone you were just a spoilt brat who was clueless on the job. You don't tell her that growing up, you were not expected to have a mind of your own, and most people either labelled you spoilt for taking advantage of daddy's fortunes or *spoilt* for not.

"I have done a fair share of traveling too." You tell her.

"Great! Whereabouts have you been?" she asks, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

"I lived in Scotland for a few years." You say, but you leave out the part of fleeing two weeks before your arranged wedding. Of course, you don't mention the fact that your father had chosen your suitor without consulting you, or that your would-be groom had been almost twice your age.

"I visited Edinburgh, spent a few days there." She says. "What was it like living in Scotland?" she asks, and you tell her about the beautiful landscapes, the enchanting way the brogue rolls and sloshes off the tongues of the natives, and the amazing landmarks. What you say nothing about is how difficult it was to fit in and how you were the one with the weird accent. You say nothing about the veiled racist remarks or the time *Niggas Whore* had been spray-painted on your car. You don't tell her of the lecturer who refused to answer your question because you said 'Eh-din-borg' instead of 'Eh-din-bu-rah' and how the entire class had dissolved in laughter.

"I returned to Nigeria after eight years." You say.

"Wow, you must have missed home during that time." She replies.

Yes, you did, every single day of those eight years, but you had been trying to find yourself and you hadn't been sure how best to do that, and the days had just continued to roll into each other. You don't tell her that despite missing home, you hadn't been able to return because your father had cut you off and had forbidden you to come back. You can't tell her how much you regret not reconciling with him before he died and how at the funeral, you had still been the outcast.

"After that, I lived in Brisbane for a few years." You continue.

You don't mention how finally going back home had only made things worse and how you'd felt lonelier and more displaced than ever before. You don't say anything about how the people you had left back home either envied you for having flown the coop or resented you for jumping ship. You don't bring up the people who consider you selfish and self-serving, or those who call you unpatriotic and faithless for upping and leaving, the ones whose eyes scream *traitor*.

“Then work took me to Perth and then Auckland for a couple of years.”

“Did you return home to Nigeria often?” she asks.

You give a non-committal shrug and say yes, a few times over the years. You don't say anything about how you never felt like you belonged there anymore and how *home* felt even stranger than all the places you've been in the intervening years. You gloss over the fact that you started to experience a new kind of discrimination, one even worse than what you suffered at the hands of foreigners. You don't tell her how you've become the outsider everywhere you go, leaving little bits of yourself behind every time you move, and how you're not even sure of where *home* is anymore.

No one wants to see brokenness.

You share with her instead, your adventures, and all the glamorous places you've seen. You both bond over your shared cities, two strangers who are clicking on the surface. Two accomplished women who will likely become friends without getting to the messiness beneath. You know this very well because you have learned to play this game like a pro and have perfected the fine art of creating charades. It is the only way you know to survive; you paint on your face, wear your picture-perfect masquerade like armour, and plough on through life.

You see her eyes flick to your hands which are in your laps and you self-consciously pull your sleeve over the scar on your wrist before you can stop yourself. The scar is old and belongs in another lifetime, but you know from bitter experience that people will always define you by it. You're not interested in anyone's pity or judgment. You look up at her defiantly and what you see in her eyes surprises you. She leans over and lays a hand on your arm.

“I'm a survivor too.” She says with so much tenderness, and you are surprised even further when you burst into tears.

Maybe, just maybe, you do not always have to be the strong one.