

CELL NINE (Short Story)

Ndeli stood helplessly, drenched in her own tears. Holding the pen in between her fidgeting fingers, she was at a loss to write in the rickety note book which the police officer dropped right in front of her. *Where do I begin from? What is happening to me?* Many questions surged through her mind, yet Zik looked unabashed. The more she wondered, the more she perspired, soaking her décolletage which quaked consistently as she sobbed.

“Madam, you are wasting our time.” The stern-looking police officer reminded her, looking away. His was an unfriendly caution.

In the executive office, Ndeli noticed a fairly large post with the inscription: “FSARS Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad” and she shuddered, knowing the height of the brutality FSARS was capable of inflicting her with. She became frightened instantly.

“Sir, let me explain ...” Ndeli stammered.

“Write it there.” The officer cut in sternly, pointing at the rickety notebook. “Put down everything you want to explain in that book ... and be fast with that.” The officer’s crude unfriendly burr rang like an old bell.

Once again, Ndeli glanced briefly at Zik who was dressed in a long white traditional gown over a black pant. She bent over the table to write, attempting and cancelling many times. Her eyes were covered with indescribable mist and her strength was crashing. Her legs wobbled, and her palpitation increased with breasts that heaved in concordance with the rhythm of the fear which almost froze her palms. The police officer observed her, and a somber look on his face was all that told Ndeli what her fate thereafter would become.

Ndeli wrote on the book for some time and turned to Zik. “Tell me what is going on,” She blurted out after many minutes of tearing up. Zik looked unperturbed, gazing above the police officer’s head.

“What do you want him to say?” The police officer goaded, walking off with a sneer.

Ndeli shook her head. The tears kept trickling down. Unable to stand further, she sank into the chair beside her, and rested her forehead on the table. Ndeli sobbed for a while, and became motionless. Her mind traveled a bit.

Earlier that day, Ndeli was miming a local highlife tune while admiring her roundish pair of breasts before a tall broken mirror leaning against the cracked wall, half-dressed.

If you see mami water oh; if you see mami water oh. Never never you run away ... eh ... eh ... never run away ... If you see mami water oh; if you see mami water oh ... never never you run away ... eh ... eh ... sing a song of love, sweet melody ... hmmm ...

The song was the singer’s real-life encounter with a mermaid, who encouraged the singer never to run away from his challenges. For Ndeli, those words were meant for ‘everyman’ on ‘the street’ of life; not just the singer. Ndeli’s six-year old son, Ozo sneezed twice in succession. Her tone had descended as she observed her young son curled up on the tattered mat. Her eyes strolled over to Malu, her three-year old daughter, and then moved to Nwanyieze, her twelve-year old niece lying beside Ozo, drooling. Ndeli cringed at the sight of the saliva slobbering down Nwanyieze’s elbow and she turned away.

Just as she resumed singing, the clouds croaked announcing the looming torrential rain about to rip the face of the earth apart. Ndeli panicked a bit, the sound of her voice less audible, and her eyes fixated on the glass windows through which she assessed the elements planning a barrage. The weather threw her crummy little room into an uncomfortable murkiness as the clouds haggled with the lightning, snuffing electricity. She stopped singing and stood still; her mind wandering through her daily itinerary about to be truncated.

Ndeli slid into a decrepit plastic chair leaning on the wall seemingly covering a wide opening burrowed by rats that taunted her family every night until she stuck an old cooking spoon into it. *Rain again, today*, she gasped. *How do we feed tomorrow? My children's school fees ... the landlady's electricity bill.* Ndeli felt a cold palm grip the back of her neck. Struggling to remain calm, there was no modicum of conviction to sustain the will to go ahead with her trade for the day. She threw a pitiful look at her slumbering children who may not attend classes in another week.

The downpour intensified with a deafening thud hitting the roofing sheets with rancor. Ndeli jumped on her feet and grabbed a piece of cloth hanging on a nail driven into the wall facing her. She tapped Nwanyieze's feet vigorously and muttered:

“It is raining,”

Ndeli walked towards the door to fetch three old buckets. Nwanyieze jolted from her slumber, and staggered towards Ndeli pulling the buckets from her and placing them at strategic positions where water dripped through the old ceiling forming a little puddle on the floor. Nwanyieze lurched for a while, gnashing her teeth with eyes half-opened. Ndeli walked slowly back to the plastic chair and slid into it. Nwanyieze turned towards Ndeli drowsily and receiving no further instructions, she slithered on the floor beside Ozo and snored irritably. Ndeli shook her head, looking askance.

Ndeli had pulled a short, lilac dress over her head. She looked once again into the broken mirror, and adjusted the dress until it sat on her properly. The blonde hair cap that she wore complemented her light skin groaning under the yoke of hardship life was dealing her. She fetched her make-up bag and took her time to get thoroughly festooned. She picked up her wrist watch - her most genuine asset with its sparkling golden chain tucked under her pillow, and wrapped it round her slim wrist. A coy smile played around her lips, as it did every time she adorned herself with it. The watch was a gift from her client.

“I love your wristwatch. May I have it?” Ndeli was tucking her money into her handbag as her client rushed into the washroom. She followed him to announce her exit and found him leaning on the bath, snoring away. Ndeli smiled, and quietly walked back to the room; making her way to the entrance. She held the doorknob and taking a last look at the room, something on the table had caught her attention.

Ndeli tiptoed to the table fascinated by the golden wristwatch which stared helplessly at her. The atavistic anxiety that the man may emerge from the washroom, gripped her. Ndeli turned summarily, and walked towards the washroom.

“Bros, I like your watch oh.” She had called out and rolled her eyes. “Make I take am? I no get watch. Abeg ...” There was quiet, and her heart had palpitated wondering if her shame would be

rubbed in. But she shook herself out of the indignity of her own thoughts. *It is better to beg and be refused than steal it*, she muttered.

“You may have it. And I hope you get off my back, *shawty*.” The young man had grunted drowsily. Silence again. Ndeli had picked up the wristwatch excitedly, and walked towards the door.

Ndeli chuckled after fastening the wristwatch on her hand. She shut the door gently after throwing a long look at her kids. Ndeli ensured that her confidence was valid by waving her hand in the air whenever she wore it.

“Napep ... Quarters!!!” Ndeli called out, and the driver screeched to a halt.

“You mean, Hotel de Ambassador?” A mischievous smile played around the driver’s lips. Ndeli looked away. “Na wetin you for call na,” the driver taunted with a grin.

“Wetin come be the difference? You know where I want to go, *shey*? Oshisco ... Abeg, how much?” Ndeli pulled off a ‘whatever’ attitude.

“Five hundred *piam* only” the driver seemed to be in love with his humour.

“Mad oh. Three hundred naira no *reash* your *konkolo* head again?” Ndeli was boorish. The driver chuckled.

“I dey always enjoy insult from pretty hawks like you, baby.” The driver teased with a wink. “Bring four hundred make I epp your ministry,” the driver waved at her in disjointed pidgin English. She smirked and hopped into the tricycle which sped off almost immediately.

Every time Ndeli was inactive was a time to mull over her challenges and plans. There was always something to think about. As the tricycle struggled through the bumpy, mucky road of Mende city, Ndeli’s thoughts roamed from one spluttered imagination to another – from paying up her children’s school fees which had kept them at home for nearly three weeks, to paying her landlady, and finding daily food for her young children. Ndeli also, reminisced over the experience of the previous day. She had earned so little that she was unable to pay her landlady for electricity supply. *My landlady is a handful. She will just rush into my room and speak inanities.* She paused. *Lord, please let me make money today to pay her. She has tried.* Ndeli prayed.

A splash of mud water drenched her, knocking her back to the present. Ndeli’s dress was badly smeared, and the tricycle driver’s situation was worse. Angry, pained, frustrated, they were both hysterical. As soon as the driver pulled over, her attempt to alight was frustrated by a cramp which rankled her, depositing a lump in her throat. Ndeli struggled to find her voice when she found herself looking into the face of a well-dressed man, enchanting and drenched in obviously expensive cologne. The tricycle driver rattled without end, although the man ignored him. Ndeli was thoroughly smitten by the air of affluence around him. And he was handsome too.

“‘Sorry’ is supposed to give me a bath, and of course, get me a clean dress to put on?” Ndeli was pissed. Her phone ringtone, “Guitar boy” was loud, engaging the attention of the man, who smiled briefly. Ndeli looked at her phone screen and ignored the call.

“I like that song; I mean your ringtone.” Ndeli was surprised that a cute human would love ‘Guitar boy’. “Meanwhile, I can ...” the man stammered. Ndeli mellowed seeing his hairy wrist stretched towards her.

“Just that you ruined my ... Don’t bother.” Ndeli looked pitifully at her body. The driver paused for a while, observing the unusual reactions far from what he had expected.

“I can get you a new dress at a boutique right away, okay?” The man offered in guilt. He dipped his hand in his jacket and handed the driver some cash.

“What about her own, Oga?” The tricycle driver asked politely, pointing at Ndeli.

“I will sort her out.”

“You sure so?” The driver winked. The man smiled, stretching his hand towards the driver for a handshake. He turned to Ndeli who was undecided and fidgeting invisibly.

“Shall we?” He gave a signal and led the way. As soon as he opened the passenger door of his car, Ndeli sat on the front seat. The tricycle driver shaking his head in excitement sped off.

He intermittently revved up the car engine which only moaned mellifluously. Never had Ndeli enjoyed the luxury of a car this exquisite. The car swayed gently on the rough road; Ndeli’s eyes caught his on two occasions, or so.

“I am Zik!” He suddenly declared, as if he read her thought. “Actually, my name is Zikora” He sped off on the smooth tarmac at the end of the bumpy road where Hotel de Ambassador was situated. *Zik of Africa*, Ndeli murmured under her breathe, remembering her social studies class back in the day.

“I am Ndeli.” She announced keeping a straight face. They rode past Hotel de Ambassador and pulled over in front of a boutique in the plaza next to the hotel.

“I think, I have seen mami water today ...” Zik chuckled, winking at her. “You are the mami water ...”

“Well, that’s not a good compliment.” Ndeli managed to say.

“On the contrary, I think it is.” He retorted cheerfully. “Mermaids are very pretty and destiny helpers.”

“Hmm ...” Ndeli looked away. “Mami water means challenge.” Zik nodded wistfully. There was an awkward silence.

“Let’s go into the mall” Zik announced courteously. “I want to get you some dresses ...” Ndeli’s mind was blown away.

“Dresses? No, oh ... just one dress is enough.” Zik smiled as he held the car steering. Ndeli was resolute.

“If that’s what you want,” They alighted and made their way to the boutique.

He started up the car engine again, and looked intently at her. She swallowed hard.

“Thanks for the shopping experience. It’s been a while,” Ndeli stammered. Zik raised his eyebrow, indifferent.

“You mind hanging out with me for a couple of hours?” Ndeli shrugged while she observed her impressive reflection on the car side mirror. “I take that as a yes then.”

They had zoomed off.

Back to her reality, with Ndeli’s forehead leaning on the table, she continued to struggle with the dream-like images that flashed through her mind. There was a tap on her left shoulder. Ndeli raised her head; face to face with a much younger officer who stood staring blatantly at her.

“Follow me ...”

His voice was cold; brutal. Zik was no longer in the room and Ndeli wondered what had happened to Zik, and what was happening to her. The younger officer waved at her and as they left the office, he led Ndeli through a dark, murky corridor. They took many bends until they stood by a door. The young officer knocked and a voice spoke coldly.

“Corporal Tanko, bring in the criminal.” Ndeli cringed. Corporal Tanko pushed the door open.

Inside the office was a senior officer, with a pernicious appearance and a humongous tummy that protruded through the spaces in between the buttons of his uniform. His office was cozy yet stillness pervaded the space. Ndeli looked at the inscription on his uniform ‘SP Norbert Sunday’; and then, his frosty face. Like most inhabitants of Mende city, Ndeli was not a fan of police officers.

SP Sunday scrutinized her with a cynic smile. She looked away agitated and fidgety.

“You are the woman caught with drugs, right?” Ndeli’s mouth remained agape in shock until he spoke again, as though he croaked.

“Where are the other members of your syndicate?” His incendiary question hit her like a piece of rock.

“Sir?” Ndeli was lost.

“I said: where are your partners in crime? Drug peddlers ...” SP Sunday yowled at her.

“I am not a member of any syndicate, sir.”

“Then, why are you here?” He turned to Corporal Tanko who wore an indifferent countenance.

“Honestly, I don’t ...” She tried to explain unsuccessfully.

“Corporal Tanko, take her to the haven.” Corporal Tanko saluted him and turned to leave. “Let her remain there until she’s ready to show us love, or sing.” SP Sunday ended with a wry smile. Corporal Tanko nodded, and waved at Ndeli. They were back to the murky corridor and proceeded to the end of it.

Retrieving a bunch of keys from his pocket, he unlocked a cell. A tiny ray of sunlight was peeping through the dilapidated walls of the corridor, and a bold inscription was evident on the entrance. Cell Nine. Ndeli read it, and felt a deep cut pierce through her heart. She had never slept in a police cell before then; not even when her late boyfriend’s family accused her of murdering him.

“What? You people are locking me up for what offense exactly?” Ndeli became confrontational.

“Better keep shut, and start thinking of how to get out of here if your ATM card is handy.”

Corporal Tanko snarled back at her. He nudged Ndeli gently and she stumbled as she inspected the stuffy space. On the dirty dilapidated wall was written Cell Nine – THE WOMEN’S HAVEN. Ndeli’s body vibrated and finally, shrunk into a piece of emotions, grinding to a disastrous halt.

“No one is telling me what is going on ... My children are alone at home ...” She lamented as she dropped on the bristly floor. Corporal Tanko watched her briefly, and moseyed into the darkness. Ndeli’s thoughts roved once more to the previous day and its beauty after they zoomed off in Zik’s car.

After another shopping binge, Zik and Ndeli had driven to a cozy bistro. They had sufficiently treated themselves to portions of ice cream and fine dining, and had returned to his exquisite apartment where the entertainment continued.

“So ... you are a student? ... Working class girl ... or ...” Zik asked; his expensive cologne sexier than his voice.

“I am a single mother ...” Ndeli answered, embarrassed.

“Really? But I didn’t ask to know that. I only wanted to know your occupation.” She listened to his velvety voice, and the short laughter that succeeded his worrisome question.

“I just lost my job ...” She stuttered as she looked away.

“I see ...”

“But I will get another job soon ...” Ndeli quickly added. Zik shrugged off her awkwardness. He had drawn closer, holding her right palm in his. His fragrance became stronger. Ndeli wore a peculiar smile that gave her away, but Zik was not interested in dwelling on that.

“I like you a lot.” He whispered smiling like a combustible pipe. “... after all, we just met.” Ndeli turned diffidently away. “But I can promise you something worth the while.” Zik breathed deeply and continued. “Let me say that, these few hours have been quite exciting. And indeed, there is this brief stability that I can’t find words to explain now, I found chatting with you.” They both laughed.

“Don’t get me wrong.” He added. “I mean, not stability in the way many young men use it these days.”

“Okay,” was all she managed to say.

“Let’s be very good friends ...” His words rattled with a gust of emotion.

“We just met and you want me to be your girlfriend?” Ndeli winked.

“It feels awkward, but it is what it is,” He gave her a hug. “I hope you do have a bank account?” Zik chuckled, fidgeting with his phone. She nodded. “I may not be able to drop you off. Let me transfer cash to you.” She smiled in gratitude.

“I am grateful, sir.” Zik looked at her intently.

“Sir?” He was not smiling.

“Sorry ... Zik,” She exclaimed with a loud laughter.

“Shall we?” Zik announced, leading the way out of his living room. Ndeli was grateful for what this friendship would mean. She would never have to patronize the men at Hotel de Ambassador, and she would better take care of her children. She couldn’t be more grateful for a fruitful day that began with a mishap and ended with brand new dresses, shoes and other accessories; and also, a promise for more beautiful days ahead in friendship.

As they both stepped out into Zik’s lobby, two police officers sauntered through the gate, and without a word snatched her handbag which they ransacked pronto. The officers subsequently, ordered them into a rickety vehicle parked outside the compound. Zik and Ndeli though completely taken over by shock obliged them.

Inside Cell Nine, the day broke slowly, and Ndeli counted the cracks on the walls slowly, one after the other, over and over again. She had been stripped of all her accessories, including her treasured golden wristwatch. Ndeli gasped in exhaustion each time she tried to figure out what may have become of her young children.

She thought about the new angel she had found - Zik. That was the man who requested her friendship in less than two hours of their acquaintance. That was the man who looked ready to afford her a ‘baby-girl-life’; and took her shopping in less than fifteen minutes of knowing him. All too soon, everything ... her hopes ... are upturned. *Zik! But ... what was our crime? Are we guilty of any offence?* She hissed more than a thousand times overnight, yet Ndeli found no answers to the questions that bugged her. She worried over her fate; and what may have become of her new beloved friend, Zik.

As the day unfolded, she could see the light rays throw their shadows through the cracks on the wall. Footsteps approached the end of the long corridor where Cell Nine stayed orphaned. *Are there two, three or four persons? And who could they be?* Ndeli anticipated impatiently. Then, two men appeared. It was Zik and a stout and light-complexioned man. She stood up and walked towards the entrance. Zik looked as dashing as he did the day she met him.

“Zik!” she gasped, observing Zik whose face wore a stern look. He tapped the stranger panting a bit.

“Ndeli, how are you doing?” The stranger looked around the small decrepit room. Her eyes were weary. The somber look Zik wore discouraged her. She sat down because her legs wobbled.

“Zik, what’s happening?” Ndeli was hysterical. “I don’t even know what I am doing in this ...” She looked round the room with a disdainful glance, “... stinking and awful place. Please, get me out of here,” There was a discomfited silence, and Ndeli became confused the more, managing to struggle to her feet.

“This is my boss ...” Zik started, waving at the stranger who broke into a broad smile. The stranger walked closer, and whispered:

“Zik told me you are his new friend ... And you are Ndeli.” She sighed.

“I met him only yesterday ...” Ndeli explained with a suspicious gaze; almost tearing up.

“Actually, a hard substance was found in your handbag, Ndeli ...” the man rattled with a smile. “And that’s why you are here.” Ndeli’s eyes widened. *How? My handbag?* She screamed. “But Zik and I have been working hard to get you out.” Ndeli shuddered as she recalled the search after which they were brought to the police station.

“I have never seen any hard substance in my life, and ...” Ndeli tried to defend.

“That is not necessary now ...” the stranger cut in. “Like I said ...” He paused and blinked several times. “But we will get you out of here on one condition ...” The strange man whistled while taking a deep exhalation. Ndeli’s face was expressionless.

“May I know what the condition is?” She scrutinized the strange man’s face for the first time.

“My dear, you must have do business with us.”

“I must do business with you before you can help me get out of here? Interesting!” Ndeli picked the words slowly as she turned to Zik. “What kind of business?” The strange man caressed his facial hair.

“Hard substance,” he paused, while Zik paced away from him a bit. A dismal smile played around Ndeli’s lips. “As soon as your answer is a yes, you will have Six million naira paid into your bank account at once.” Ndeli turned her face towards the dirty wall surrounding her miserable life at that moment, and winced.

“Hard substance,” She repeated, drawing on the dirty floor of the cell. “You want me to peddle drugs.” Ndeli thought aloud, almost inaudibly.

Six million, she began to wonder. *I am already detained. My children are alone starving right now. What difference would it make even if I said no?* She gasped desperately. *If you see mami water oh; ... never never you run away ...* The song flooded her mind as she observed the cracks on the walls. Cell Nine wore a putrid smell that morning, and outside, the rain was thrashing the earth without mercy.

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Poet of Self-Expression

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