

FLASH FICTION

Evenings in Monroe Apartments

by Gladwell Pamba



"Red Barre" by Maria Messias Mendes

Every evening after dinner, mum perched in front of the dressing mirror and drew her brows with a black eye pencil, applied the red lipstick, and when her trembling hands held the eyeliner, she leaned close to the mirror as if about to kiss her reflection. When she faced me, I met an angry or flat or excited face, depending on how thick or long she'd drawn the brows.

“Will Empress Lily turn heads and enter cars?” she asked. I nodded and she smiled tightly. “Are you sure the cat eye is sharp enough?”

She looked at her ass in the reflection, pushed it back, arched her back and stood on one foot. Before she stepped out of the house, she said, “You will not open the door for anybody. Not even Jesus when he knocks.”

Stroking my cheeks, she reminded me to turn off the lights at nine pm. Her hug left a tickling sensation in my nose and her perfume lingered on my chest for hours. Mum's thudding stilettos faded from the second floor down the winding staircase to the cabro. *Tap! Tap! Tap!* Before getting into the taxi, she pulled down her sequined mini-dress, looked up, waved at me and blew cherry-red kisses. I snatched them from the air, the tiny invisible butterflies, clinging to them until she returned. Every time the taxi vroomed down the street, the desire to go with her exploded in my gut, consuming me. I fought back the stinging tears and the screaming absence. It felt as though mum folded air in her clutch bag and went away with it, leaving me gasping to stay alive.

For hours after her departure, I remained on the same spot, kneeling on the couch and staring outside our apartment building. Mr. Murgor came home from work; Liam's dog ran after fireflies on the lawn; smoke rose from Mrs. Kimani's patio and the Rudolfs drove out for dinner — to the Debonairs or the Pizza Inn along Ngong Road, probably.

When the clock chimed *twinkle twinkle little star* at nine o'clock, I turned off all the lights. I watched the night thin out. The downstairs neighbour staggered to his room, leaning on the door and fumbling with the lock, the Rudolfs' Range Rover blasted music as they disembarked and Mrs. Kimani exhausted her pack of cigarettes. When everyone in Monroe Apartments eventually switched off their lights, the night felt abandoned as life curled behind quiet walls.

The air held a certain kind of dense chill after hours of staring outside. I wrote my name on the blurry window panes and blew hot air on them, rubbed off the name, rewrote, rubbed, rewrote until the approaching taxi pulled over on the kerb and dropped off mum. I tiptoed to my bed, holding my teddy tight and my eyes closed. I only knew it was morning when mum planted butterflies on my forehead, stripped the window naked, letting the sun fill my

bedroom, saying, “Anthony, darling, time for school.”

One evening, the air turned dense and chill again, and I wrote my name on the panes. Blew air on it, rubbed it off, rewrote, rubbed off. I wrote all my classmates’ names and rubbed them off, rewrote. I watched Mr. Murgor drive in from work and back out, watched Liam lock his German Shepherd in its kennel, watched Mrs. Kimani open the screen door. I watched until my school bus hooted and hooted, and eventually left. As the neighbourhood bustled with life, my head pounded, my stomach grumbled and my ears craved for the sound of mum’s approaching taxi, but that never happened.