The unrelenting song disrupted the frenzy of the tangle of arms and limbs. The ambience of the posh hotel room was disturbed by the exotic ring tone but the impertinent song would not cease. It was lying in the folds of sheets, waiting to strike. The phone sang, ‘when I get older, I will be wiser, I will be smarter…’ Capt. rolled over in apparent irritation. The huge artistically carved mahogany bed-frame creaked in gratitude for the respite. Chio, the sleek young lady whose limbs made up half of the tangle sighed, bed and young lady united in gratitude for the break. Grateful for the brief respite from drug-induced stamina, she stretched out languorously, her slim curves outlined.

The ringtone amused the street-wise Chio who secretly thought that Capt. was old enough to be wiser considering his sixty-five to her thirty-four years. How much older should a man get before he grabs some wisdom? Two things she had learned way back during her university days in Makurdi were to feed a paying man what he wants and to be as sweet as sugar syrup while doing it. These are the ways of profit, and skills the smart girls learn without a degree in business. Chio knew that she had the acumen for business, and a natural aptitude for extracting investments and multiplying cash. Having worked in several of these new-generation banks, she had seen it affirmed countless times that cash rolls out when egos are well stroked, so she had perfected the art and a lot more. Perfumed packaging and good behaviour equals talent, and modern Nigerian banking is about diverse talents.

The exotic song interrupted her introspection. Applying that talent now, Chio purred, ‘Dearie, why not answer it,’ Aggrieved that he had forgotten to switch the bloody thing off in the first place, or that he had forgotten to at least silence it, he had groped for it in the folds of the sheets. He snatched it up. He was always ready to pounce on anyone and anything that might cause him to blunt the sharp edge of erect equipment. He didn’t mind the expense of oiling off the rust, but he really minded wastage, especially the waste of a successful high-rise. He peered at the screen. The identity of his caller fuelled his irritation. He snapped, ‘It’s her again! You see what I have been complaining about? A reasonable woman would realise that I should be asleep at this hour. If she thinks she can keep track of me by telephone, then she is wasting her time. Foolish woman! God help all men married to women like this. Did my mother circumcise me for her?’

With sultry wisdom and the experience of dealing with a variety of egos, Chio moved over and gathered him close. ‘Dearie, do not let these people bother you. I am here for you’. Adept at pet names, and soothing ruffled feathers, she purred then offered, ‘my baby, relax with me and never mind her. Some never appreciate what they have until it is too late.’

Visibly, he calmed under her ministrations. Her mind recorded that Capt. was actually a baby. She was proud of her accomplishment. She thought: ‘impossible pet names and situations, that’s my specialty. What won’t a few well-chosen words and the right tone do?’ Adept at this job as well, she set out to justify the price he would pay for her birthday celebration, coming up on the 26 April, the following month.

At eight-thirty the following morning, Capt. called home. ‘My phone was on silent the entire night. We didn’t finish the meeting until two am. this morning and I didn’t want to start waking you guys up with calls at that hour…. No… no, I didn’t forget the folder… Just leave it there. We have started again early this morning. I am barely awake, even black coffee has not been of much help …’ He listened intently. ‘We are meeting with the governor at two this afternoon… I just stepped out of the conference hall to call you guys before I have to switch off the phone or switch the profile to silent… it’s been terrible. I had really hoped to be able to make it back home today but the way it’s going… I am really fed up with these endless meetings. Whatever happens, I hope to be out of this town tomorrow afternoon.’

Throughout the exchange, Chio was draped around Capt. like a climbing vine. With the ease of long association, she had been silently mouthing responses to his conversation in between administering kisses and circular massages to different parts of his body. It was part of the reason why Capt.’s conversation had been urgent – like hurriedly performing a task for which there was really no time. While she knew that she also got variations of this ‘I am really busy’ conversation, it actually amused her. What did it matter when she gave as good as she got, and with phone calls too?

Her relationship with Capt. was six years old. A profitable time the years had been. During that time, he had taken her on weekend vacations to a number of luxury hotels in Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna, Jos, Warri and Port-Harcourt. He had also taken her on a four-day trip to Sun City, and plans for trips to Amsterdam and other places were in the pipeline. She had noted that, on that trip to Sun City, he hadn’t even bothered to call his wife and children. Not once. Not even to give them the usual litany of excuses: ‘busy’ and ‘stressed out’.

It had been her time with him. As always, he had spent money so generously. Secretly, she wondered if he spent half of that money on his family, considering how much time he was away from them, and how much money he spent on her. She knew there were other girls, and she wondered how many, considering the snatches of coded conversations she caught and calls hastily concluded with ‘I will call you back’. She too got a reasonable number of ‘I will call you back’ messages, so she recognised the contrived bland tone of his voice and the likelihood of another presence at his end of the phone. It was all part of the game, this cell-phone theatre of the absurd. Did they say that the devil has since ceased to be the father of lies? Was Blackberry the father and mother?

These thoughts, she kept locked up in her mind’s file. Smart businesswoman that she was, she kept the most important factors in focus. Capt. has been her most generous customer since her first employment, in her moves from bank to bank, and from one investor to another. His contacts had greatly enriched her work profile and enabled her to meet the almost impossible income targets that new generation Nigerian banks give their employees. The banks need these targets to stay alive and afloat in the rabid competition that modern banking has become. They also need smart, ambitious young men and women to achieve these income targets. Young, nubile, sensuous womanpower is particularly useful when summoning up major investments, and Chio knew her onions. She knew that she was not particularly beautiful but she was fresh, young and tight; such magic keys open doors. She also knew how to stretch every advantage: body, deposits, and the transfer of money. She

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knew how much Capt. appreciated her talented investment eye.

He set the phone aside, and gave a long-suffering sigh. ‘This woman. I can’t imagine what I ever saw in her.’

‘Never mind her this morning,’ Chio soothed. And she rubbed him down, tending her good horse. ‘Dearie, I am amazed that she doesn’t realise how lucky she is to have you. What wouldn’t I give to have you for my own?’

Capt. gave a grunt of regret and affirmation. As a body therapist, she was good, so good, that he should have been too-rubbed-down to embark on the complaint trip that followed. But his anger was deep and had been nursed carefully to cover a horribly bruised ego – a fall from grace that could not be forgiven. He started again. ‘Can you imagine that she still goes snooping into my phone? Then she complains when she finds messages not meant for her. Apart from the violation of privacy, I have told her time and time again that whoever goes digging in the anus will find some smelly grease.’

Chio knew the usual complaints almost verbatim. This one was never modified as some of them were with each recounting. This morning, she was not in the mood for complaints. From experience, she knew it took some time. He hadn’t had the time to pop a pill yet. He didn’t know that she knew about his blue pills. He did not know that like his wife, she picked up his phone the second he stepped into the bathroom or to his car for a few minutes. That was how she knew he had sent one girl abroad. But, she worked hard to maintain his illusions. It was just practical and pragmatic to place his belief in the place of her disbelief. Who was it that sang the old blues ‘Who is fooling who?’ she wondered.

The phone rang; a different song this time– Chio’s phone. Alas! This morning was not to be. Was he relieved she wondered. She answered, ‘Hello, good morning. I am sorry. Yesterday, the phone was switched off when the meeting was going on… yes, we finished at about two am. It was too late and I was too tired to call back… the hotel is fine. I didn’t even have time to notice the surroundings yesterday’. Looking around the coziness of a hotel room that spoke of price and high-class pleasure, Chio said, ‘I would have preferred it if the bank had just given us the cash instead of booking all of us into this expensive place. I could have stayed with my cousin or a friend…’ She paused and held the phone closer to her ear.

As she talked, Capt. reciprocated her ministrations. Quickly, she told the caller, ‘I am sorry, I have to go now, I hear them knocking on the door. Our meeting this morning begins in less than ten minutes. I am already running late. I will call as soon as I can. Love you too.’

As she ended the call, Capt. snapped in irritation, ‘Is that young man planning to marry you or what?’ His face looked dark and he scowled.

‘Dearie, he has been asking me to marry him for the past six months and I keep putting him off. How can any other man compare to you? It is just that it would be odd if I don’t have a steady boyfriend at my age…’

Perhaps convinced that he was spending enough to have exclusive use of her, he asked, ‘Must a woman have a boyfriend?’

Cheekily, she replied, ‘Why won’t you just divorce your wife and marry me? We have been together for six years now and all I get is two or three days in hotel rooms or a week abroad. I feel bad that I have to continue to tolerate the attention of other men. Besides, I would like to have children and I am not getting younger.’

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He gave a snort of perfect understanding. ‘My darling girl, I would have divorced that woman in a heartbeat but what reason would I give? What about my children, family and friends? …I can assure you that what we have is the very best. You know, my folks at home do not see as much of me as you do’.

Chio knew that this might well be true. ‘I assure you from experience that this is the best way and without the stress that is inevitable when labels are added. As for having my children, we’ll work something suitable out for you eh?’

Secretly, she thought, ‘The wily old tortoise has to have it all, not even a real grievance against his wife!’ She gazed at him soulfully as she mentally rained abuse on him. ‘Crafty, old Monkey – Oloso (the purveyor of nonsense) and Olori buruku (bad head).’ As she had a multitude of times before, she wondered how it felt to have such a deceitful and absent husband; one who was always at work. Not even the president carried such a workload. Yes. Work covered up a multitude of things. Somewhere down the line, a thought had emerged that Capt.’s wife and children, heaved sighs of relief when he was absent. Maybe it was a case of good riddance. She wasn’t sure where the thought had come from but divorced from major payments he wasn’t worth much. Little things had added up to give her this impression. His wife’s phone calls for one. This morning’s call, and very likely, the missed calls of yesterday were made to find out when he would be back. She always seemed inordinately concerned with when he would return. Not in the manner of someone who was missing her husband, but in the manner of one wanting to know how much time remained before he returned; or one who had an agenda of her own.

That night, Capt.’s phone sang again. Yet again his wife wished to confirm that he wouldn’t be returning that evening and ascertaining his return for the next day. Chio gave him a silent ovation for his acting as she watched him yawn elaborately into the mouthpiece, saying, ‘I just entered my hotel room. No, I haven’t had dinner yet. I am just too tired to eat. I will just take a bath and go straight to bed. Ok, good night, see you people tomorrow.’ The call ended, and Capt. turned to face Chio. He looked a little bewildered but exclaimed, ‘She sounded so cheerful!’

Chio was sure her internal radar had picked up his thoughts and she asked, ‘Why don’t you want her to be cheerful?’

A little impatient, he retorted, ‘Not that! She sounded quite relieved that my return would be for tomorrow, not today. Imagine? I hope she is not up to anything, or else, she is out of my house. If I find out… I will just have to watch that woman carefully.’

She dared not laugh. These blackberry calls! Were she and he the only ones who took such prerogatives? Would his wife dare? Would she have the effrontery? She watched him and saw that his fuse had shortened with similar thoughts. Mindful of her role, she calmed his ruffled feathers. ‘Don’t even think it. You know she won’t dare.’

At ten a.m. the next morning his flight was delayed. Abuja international airport thronged with passengers. Capt. and Chio sat facing each other on opposite rows of leather airport seats. They kept their conversation to a discreet minimum. Chio knew that Capt. was not inclined to public acknowledgements; he was careful of his
reputation as a supposedly morally upright man. Not everyone cared about his or her reputation in the manner that Capt. did. The man on the other side of the seat did not care. He was permanently and loudly on the phone. In an earlier call, he had told whoever was on the other end of the line that he was in Port Harcourt. Now, he was claiming to be in Ghana. Chio discreetly watched as Capt. looked around in apparent confusion. Had they by some queer accident arrived at Kotoka airport instead of Nnamdi Azikiwe airport in Abuja? She watched him read the signs and billboards in the manner of someone verifying his whereabouts.

Chio remembered that. Capt., a veteran at making these calls knew how unwise it was for his passenger colleague to sprout such lies in a public place. She recalled the incident he had narrated to her just before their relationship had become personal. He had taken her shopping in one of the exclusive city stores as part of his courtship. They had been standing in the aisle of the supermarket close to a man talking loudly on his cell-phone and telling someone that he was in Port Harcourt. Now, he was claiming to be in Ghana.

Quite clearly, she recalled Capt.’s tale of how a phone call, not even one as public as that had been, had cost him discomfort and more so long ago. As he recalled, Ije, his longtime skeletal girlfriend at the time, had called while he was in a meeting to say that she was stranded in transit in Kaduna during a National Labour Congress strike. She had arrived in Kaduna from Kano hoping to get easy transport to meet up with him for a planned three-day visit to Abuja capital city. There had been no transport to Abuja from Kaduna on that day; neither had she found a taxi to return to Kano, and she had had to call Capt. to rescue her. During that phone call, Capt. had quickly excused himself from a meeting of retired military officers. He told them that his wife was stranded in Kaduna because fuel had been really scarce that week.

All had sympathised as he raced to her rescue. Chio thought that a few must have suspected that the alacrity with which he had acted did not align with his nonchalance towards his wife, but who would dare say so? Surely, they must have wondered why his wife had needed to travel by public transportation. As he had boasted at the time to impress her, Ije was not even his regular girl but he made sure she was adequately compensated. Capt. had been casual when he said Ije was handy to have around because she was talented with complex computer jobs—a regular girl Friday. Chio came to realise much later that he particularly liked girls with additional talents. Soon after that phone call, two of his cronies had sympathised with his wife about being stranded in Kaduna. It had been an uncomfortable situation and he had had to be really inventive to cover it. The girlfriend’s name and the tale had stuck in her mind.

Watching as the scowl on his face deepened, Chio wondered if he was recalling his wife’s cheerful relief yesterday. Was he, like her, recalling a long ago phone mishap or was it just the shredding of dignity and phone antics of the man across from them that had pissed him off? Then it struck her. The man opposite must have been like a blow beneath the belt—the irritation of watching a parody of yourself on stage. A part of Capt.’s annoyance must have been that the man did not have his breeding. As she toyed with these thoughts, the exotic song once again drew her attention.

He searched for the phone in his suit pocket. ‘Who is this?’ he asked of the caller at the other end.

Chio watched him with keen interest. A finger moved and he terminated the
call.

‘I don’t know who that was! Anyway, it was an international number so they will call back.’

‘Madam or Miss?’ The wily old fox. He didn’t know who it was, indeed! Tales all around! No doubt about it, the world was a better place when ‘blackberry’ was just a fruit.