

## Mister Peep



*An excerpt from Mister Peep by Olufunmi Alao*

It was a Monday morning in May. Moni sat confidently in Dr. Ajala's class. The test was simpler than she had imagined. It would be 38 degrees Celsius at noon. "Place your handouts beside your answer sheets," Dr. Ajala announced, swaying a pen in his hand. Moni stopped writing. She had only four sachets of *Indomie Noodles* left in the hostel and Dad had not sent money for May because the government owed him six month's salary. The last time Dad had called, she had told him not to worry about her – she would be fine. She had applied for jobs, but they were incompatible with her schedule. For three consecutive days she had buried her head in the dusty books of the central library, studying for this test. She looked at her watch and picked up her pen to round off. Dr. Ajala came around and signed the answer sheets of the students who had the handouts.

"Sir, you haven't signed mine."

"Your handout?"

"I don't have it, Sir."

Dr. Ajala walked away to the next student. After he had gone around the class, he announced "pens up!" He collected the answer sheets and sorted them into two separate groups – the goats and the sheep. Finally, he said, "if I didn't sign your paper, you have not written the test. Come and redeem yourselves in my office before it's too late. Good day." An unhealthy murmur went round the class and grew to a lousy swearing after Dr. Ajala had left the class.

Moni picked up her bag and met Chika at the door. "Do you have the handout?"

"No," Chika said. "I'm broke."

"Me too," Moni replied. They found their way out of the busy class area, bumping into students who were in a hurry to get to their lecture venues. Moni lived in a room of four in Moremi Hostel with Chika, Lola and Eunice. Chika poured the last *gari* she

had inside a dish. They ate *soak and travel* with groundnut and went for the last lecture.

The class ended at 6 p.m. on the dot. The evening sun cast an orange glow on the campus. Moni and Chika walked to the hostel humming to the *Kegites* band playing music at Goofey's Spot. In the room, Eunice sat on the floor filing her nails while Lola rubbed on a face mask. Afterwards, they sat cross-legged on their faded oriental carpet and ate the *Jollof-rice* a friend had brought from the next room. Moni feared they might not be able to sleep that night when she glimpsed a swarm of mosquitoes flying across the room. The last content of the insecticide was used yesterday. "I can't afford to fail Dr. Ajala's course", Chika lamented in between mouthfuls. Sadness suddenly settled on her face. "In fact, I can't afford not to have a second-class upper, otherwise I won't qualify for the banking job my uncle promised when I graduate. Oceanic Bank does not hire graduates with less than a second-class upper credit."

"So you even have a job waiting for you?" Moni asked, "I have none, and on top of that, I have missing grades." They laughed.

"Go and see the Faculty Officer," Eunice cut in.

"I already have an appointment with the F.O."

The rest of the evening was quiet. Moni's radio played Tracy Chapman's *Fast Car* as she read *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Her head ached from deep thoughts, *why has the F.O. fixed an appointment with me on a Sunday? When is Dad going to send money? Will it make sense to go and beg Dr. Ajala in the private?* She dropped the book, sighed, and slept off. *Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.*

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Tuesday was ruined by an impromptu change of venues and extreme heat. By noon Moni had wiped her face countless times such that her makeup was gone. When she ran into the F.O. at the main entrance of the Faculty of Art, there was a happy smile on his face as he said, "don't forget our appointment on Sunday."

The girls went for the Linguistics tutorials a doctoral student had volunteered to give in the night class. They returned at 11:00 p.m. to the hostel and went straight to bed. Moni woke up at about 2 a.m. and walked, half awake, to the toilet, her path illuminated by her torchlight. After placing the torchlight on the sink facing the ceiling, she headed straight into one of the five cubicles. She rubbed her eyes, yawned and peed. Just as she pressed the push button, darkness enveloped everywhere. She opened her eyes wide but she could not see a thing. *If the torchlight had fallen, it should have made some noise.* She wobbled through the darkness, guiding her steps by swaying both hands in front of her. Something rumbled somewhere, she stopped- *perhaps a rat.* She stretched out her hand when she thought she had reached the door. Two powerful hands grabbed her, and before she could shout, a hand covered her mouth from behind. She struggled and elbowed to no avail. She grunted, and prayed that someone would come around. After her vain struggle, she began to feel his body pressed against her. She groaned and elbowed him, but nothing happened. He dragged her to the sink, yanked off her G-string, and bent her over, but she turned around and clawed the invisible face with her whole strength. “Mr. Peep! Mr. Peep!!, wake up girlssss!!!”

It was too late for Mr. Peep to recover. Moni was already on the balcony, shouting. In about three minutes, the long balcony was full of girls in all sorts of sleeping dresses. A couple of them carried clubs. Chika covered Moni’s nakedness with her Hollandaise wrapper.

“Are you okay?...what happened?...what has he done to you?” Chika panted, asking too many questions at once.

“I’m okay. Nothing happened,” Moni said, turning her neck hither and thither.

“*Chai, na God go punish this Mr. Peep.*” Chika hissed. Not long afterwards, Mr. Bashir emerged from god-knows-where. From his face alone one could tell that he had just woken up from sleep. He yawned and bent down in front of Moni.

“What happened?”

“It’s Mister. Peep! It’s Mister Peep!!” Angry voices said.

“Hey! No chorus answers.” He reached out his hand to inspect the bruises on Moni’s neck. “Don’t touch me!” Moni hissed. “We’re reporting you to the Student Union Government.” She knotted the Hollandaise wrapper underarm and left the crowd.

Wednesday morning came with interrogations from the Hostel chief of security, a stern looking woman who spoke Yoruba with Hausa accent. “Until now, I have always believed that this Mister Peep is a fable, but I can see you have bruises around your neck.” Ms. Akande wrote some god-knows-what in her report book. She always wrote reports and nothing ever happened thereafter.

“I have a lecture at 10 o’clock Ma.”

“No, you can’t have classes today; you’re going to the school clinic with me...we will have you taken care of.”

That evening Moni called home and spoke to her mother. “Eh, Holy Ghost fire!” Mom screamed. Despite having said that she was okay, Mom still kept asking Moni, “I hope he didn’t touch you sha? Read psalm 21 seven times every night into a bowl of water and sprinkle it around your room for divine protection. I will call Pastor Sam and ask him to conduct a special prayer for you-”

Moni laughed, “I’ll be okay Mom.”

That week, Moni was famous on campus. Students turned around and stared at her. On Friday afternoon at the Dean of Students’ Affairs’ Office, she struggled to express herself to Professor Odole.

“Who is this Mister Peep? You people have come again with imaginary stories. Look, exam time is approaching, we have no time for nonsense talks”

“Sir, Mister Peep is not imaginary, he hurt me. I have bruises-”

“Well, maybe he is one of your secret admirers-”

“Sir?-”

“We always warn you girls seriously about bringing hooligans to the hostels.” He wrote something on a jotter and dismissed Moni with a wave of his hand. She choked with tears for she felt as though she were a piece rag, unworthy, unmournable. “Young woman, be careful with the company you keep, don’t bring trouble to us. You may leave.”

Moni managed to find her way among a litter of *Sugar-Daddies* who had come to pick up *Aristo-girls* for the weekend. She hurried up the stairs into the hostel through a conglomeration of perfumes. There were quite a number of familiar faces among these girls. Monalisa and Shekinat stood beside a Silver Porsche car with an

elderly man dressed in embroidered *Agbada*. Moni shared the same room with Monalisa and Shekina last year. She had always feared that Monalisa would initiate Shekina into *Aristo* business and it has happened. One time, when Moni attempted to borrow some money from Monalisa, she had been told in the most callous way, “Stop doing *borrow-borrow* from room to room, use what you have to get what you want.” Monalisa brought pictures of men for Moni to pick. “This guy is a senator in Abuja...this one is the Perm. Sec. to Lagos State Governor. He has houses in London and Las Vegas, he will pamper you with money.”

“No, thank you,” Moni had replied. “I’ll pay you back as soon as I get money from home.”

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In the evening on Saturday, Moni bathed in the company of eight girls on the meadow behind the hostel called the Pigeon Hole. She returned to the room, alone - her roommates had gone to town for the weekend. The Student Union Government was planning a protest. Rumor had it that the vice chancellor had embezzled the hostel maintenance fund. The toilets and bathrooms remained unused day and night for fear of Mister Peep.

After the Sunday service at the Christian Students Fellowship, Moni cleaned the room - it was her turn that week. She stood in front of the kettle of boiling water in the kitchenette, watching the vapour disappear into the air. Her Motorola rang - the F.O! She left her hot cup of tea and walked briskly to the Faculty Office. The only sounds in the entire building were her own steps. Her nerves felt so odd, as though she was going to an executioner. Even the hallway that usually buzzed with queuing students observed the Sabbath in quiet, still darkness. The only illumination came from the partial opening of the door to the F.O’s office. Moni stopped at the door.

“Are you afraid? ...come on in”, he said.

He sat at the edge of his secretary’s table with his hands folded in front of him in the most gentlemanly manner. As soon as Moni stepped in, his smile revealed a golden tooth he had bought on his Hajj. His skin color was cream-bleached sepia and his belly bulged slightly, but his shoulders were broad and menacing.

“I’m not gonna eat you up.”

His voice was towering and lofty. He stood up from the table and led her into his office. He closed the door behind him. Moni’s heart skipped. His office was roomy and finished with mahogany furniture. A small Daewoo fridge stood beside his large table and the ceiling fan swirled above. The curtains were tightly drawn together behind him. He offered her a seat and brought out a bottle of Malta Guinness from the fridge. Moni looked around and cracked her fingers. After offering her a glass cup he sat at his desk, relaxed his chair, hummed a song, and swayed the chair to the rhythm. His eyes were piercing and satisfied. Moni looked away.

“Sweet and shy little angel...I read your articles every time on the Feminist Editorial Board. Your write-ups are too radical for a woman. But I like them nevertheless.” He smiled. He stopped rocking when his chair creaked.

“So you’ve been spying on me, Sir?”

He smiled. “Do I look like the FBI? I just like you.”

He stood up, opened the drink for her and poured it into the glass. Then he went down on his knee and held the glass forward. Moni hated him. *I shouldn’t have come here, this is self-sabotage*. His breath was tainted with beer. Moni imagined the ceiling fan fall and chop his head off. She took the glass, and waited to be free from his breath. When she had secured a little breathing space she drank a little before placing the cup on the table. He fondled a few strands of her million-braids.

“You’ve got a nicely coiffed hair. How much do you spend on your braids?” Moni brushed his hands away. She knew that he was going to invade her personal space, *shameless man*. He smiled and said, “let me take care of you, baby, you will never have problem in this school.”

“I have no problem Sir.”

“Oh...C’mon, I hope you know it’s not about your bookishness, nobody is interested in that. Don’t kill yourself with books like Aristotle, the *arithmetic* is very simple.” Moni digested these words slowly, they were like bile to her soul.

“So my grades are deliberately missing, is that the case?”

“No, I will solve that for you, but you must cooperate with me first.”

“How do you mean?”

“Awgrrrh... are you a baby?”

“When are you going to do that, Sir?”

“When you are ready for me.”

“Ready...what...Sir...?-”

“Don’t call me sir again, call me the sweet names you call your boyfriend.” Moni swallowed hard, her head bowed. “Drop your name and Matric. Number. I’ll do that for my Angel.”

“I beg you in the name of God, I want to have my grades as soon as possible.”

He placed his hands on her lap and whispered, “You will have them.” She snapped and pushed him away. “I want to go now!”

“I’m sorry...but you know, a journey of hundred miles starts with a step, let’s start from somewhere today.”

She stormed out of the Faculty Office, embittered and enraged with the world around her. She walked straight to the football field where the campus fellowships held their morning devotion and sat on the field weeping profusely into the green grass. When she belched she remembered his beer tainted smell. She imagined him laying on top of her on a pink bed sheet thrusting pleurably. She screamed. Goosepimples covered her body. She cried and gnashed her teeth. With blurred eyes she looked up to the grey sky and said, “God, You know You aren’t fair.” Her Motorola beeped, she checked the message box:

*Babe, we don kom back-o, where you dey?*

She walked back to the hostel waving absentmindedly to friends who greeted her. She flung herself dejectedly on the bed and faced the wall. She refused to talk to her roommates, not even when Lola tapped her saying *I brought groceries from home*. How was she supposed to tell her friends that that pot-bellied frog wanted her in bed? She had never felt this belittled before. She brought out a Post-It pad she had kept under her pillow and wrote on it: *I want to be alone, please*. She dropped it on the other side of the bed for them to see and slept off in her sea of thought.

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At 2:15 a.m. heavy bangs woke everyone up. “We have caught Mister Peep!” *We don catch am!!* Sleep vanished instantly in jubilation. What an awesome night! Girls raced outside.

“Where is the bastard?”

*“Na today we go kill am!”*

Before the security men could get to the crowd of angry girls, Mister Peep was already covered in the pool of his own blood, fighting for his life. Moni hit him on the head with a club she had picked from behind the flowers. The central security men came to shoo the girls away and took Mister Peep to the University Teaching Hospital.

After the morning lecture that day, the campus went sour with the revelation that the person taken for Mister Peep the previous night was not Mister Peep. He was the amputee student of the Sociology Department who had become mentally ill after surviving a ghastly car accident in which he lost both his parents and his right arm. He had been referred to the Intensive Care Unit because of the severity of his head injury. An unquantifiable burden rested on Moni’s chest as she stood transfixed at the gathering of girls at the hostel corridor. Chika, always unable to hold her lips for too long said, “Thank God I didn’t touch him.”

“Oh God, I know him, I know him,” tears rolled down Moni’s cheeks, “I once helped him pick a book that fell from a shelf in the library but last night...oh my God...” guilt struck her throat, “I did not see his face.”

There was neither lunch nor dinner in Moremi Hall and The Pigeon Hole that day. The girls were struck with fear and guilt; they converged in front of Goofey’s Spot to pray for his recovery. At about 10 ‘o clock on Tuesday morning, news came from the I.C.U. that he had passed away. All lectures were unofficially cancelled. The Moremi and Pigeon Hole girls wailed. At nightfall, a candlelight procession was held in his honor, after which Moni went to the University Chapel. She knelt at the pulpit, and picked slowly from her heavy heart, “Taiye Shonibare, wherever you may be, I pray that your soul finds repose.” She let her tears run wild. *I’m eternally sorry that I hit you. Please...FOR-GIVE me.*