

## Aquamarine

by Linda N. Masi

Aquamarine rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand to reassure herself that she was not dreaming and read the letter in her other hand for the fifth time. It was the fourth Saturday in the month of March, and she was among the grade twelve girls observing their West African Examinations extension boarding classes in the hostels. She had collected the letter at about noon the day before when Mr. Titus, the School's postmaster, came to deliver mail for the girls at the mail guard's guard hut. The bold, elegant, right-slanting handwriting was her mother's, signed by her—*your loving mother, Dorathy Ugochi Ahia*. After ten years of separation and silence, it felt as though she were seated before her mother, holding her hand at the touch of the crisp unscented white lined paper; locking eyes with her in the words in black inked from her heart, a material evidence that she was alive. Yet, she had written her mother a letter at the beginning of term in mid-January, why did it take two months and one week for her mother to send this reply? And imagine, a response that read, *Don't come and visit me at Enugu. Remain with your Auntie in Konduga*, after all the years apart! Aquamarine held her breath for a moment to ease the knot that had formed inside her chest, then she exhaled slowly.

She roughly folded the letter, stuffed it inside its white envelope and shoved the envelope inside the zip up mesh bag in her suitcase. Best to forget this instruction from her mother that could cause a heart attack until she was through with her West African Examinations in mid-June. She wished that when next she brought out the letter the word *Don't* would have moved from the beginning of the first sentence to the beginning of the second sentence.

Aquamarine zipped the bag and pressed down its bulky sides. It contained other posts and notes she considered private or special: There was a draft copy of the letter she had posted to her

mother in which she had expressed her deep desire to reunite with her in Enugu after writing her exams. There were some past test papers and school tuition receipts. And there was a worn fifty naira note folded into a neat square at the bottom of the bag. A white piece of paper peeked through the torn side of the money. She could vaguely remember what the paper contained or why she had folded it inside a torn fifty naira note. She unzipped the bag, brought out the money, and read the contents of the paper:

*3 medium mudus of rice - ₦1,500*  
*1 large mudu of garri – ₦500*  
*fresh red pepper (1 small mudu) – ₦100*  
*grinding of pepper ₦30*  
*salt (1 sachet) – ₦50*  
*yams (2 tubers) — ₦900*

She sighed. This was the list of things that Auntie Ijeoma had sent her to purchase at the Gwagwalada Market just before the school term began in mid-January, and as usual, her Auntie had refused to give her any transport fare. *Children of nowadays are lazy. When I was your age, we used to save money for our parents by choosing to trek three miles to school and three miles back*, Auntie Ijeoma had said, and daintily opened the exit door for her.

Aquamarine had spent more than an hour hiking to the market. There was a scant police presence along the highways. And at the Muari post, the last junction before she turned into the path that led to the market, another policeman stood in Sergeant's position. Sergeant was a stout policeman who was a regular face she encountered on her trips to the market. He had dusky black skin and three longitudinal lines on each of his cheeks, tribal scarification that didn't do justice to his jovial attitude. She didn't know his name and usually saluted him simply as *Sergeant* while he in turn hailed her by calling her *Yellow Pawpaw* because of her ochre skin. And some other times, he yelled, *My Color, you come market?* which usually drew belly laughs from her because of the irony. And then he would say, *Fine girl like you should always have a smile on her face*. And she would nod and be on her way. The new policeman was questioning a taxi driver on the other side of the

road when she passed by. By the time she reached the market her lower lip had a clean cut in the middle, courtesy of the cold, dry hamarttan winds; her legs throbbed with pain, her sandaled feet were ashy red and she had lost most of the steam of her anger after sighting a small group of almajiri children eating rotten bananas and mouldy bread at the corner with their begging bowls on the ground. She succeeded in beating down the price of the rice to one thousand four hundred naira in a strong bargain with the rice seller. She gave the almajiri children fifty naira on her trek back home and felt no guilt in keeping the balance of fifty naira for herself instead of handing it over to Auntie Ijeoma.

Aquamarine brushed her thumb over the straight black line that struck out *yams* on the list. She racked her head to conjure the reason why Auntie Ijeoma had cancelled yams but could not remember. The tail of the small letter Y formed a big loop and curved back up like a tear-drop earring. The only thing she admired about Auntie Ijeoma was her handwriting, how the tails of the small letter J's and G's usually formed loops like the Y's. And the small letter A's were carved smooth like periwinkle snail shells. During the summer she turned thirteen she had used some of Auntie Ijeoma's longer lists to practice at improving her own handwriting which resembled the scrapes chickens left in the dirt, but she never quite reached the mark. She scrunched up the paper, but then a strange thought about the handwriting struck her and she uncrumpled the paper and studied the writing for a moment. She retrieved the letter from her mother from the zip up bag and held it in one hand and the list in her other hand and could not tell one handwriting from the other.

Loud jeering from the window beside her bunk cut through her thoughts. She knelt on her bed and looked through the netting on the window. It seemed as though all the girls in the dormitories were clustered around the mai guardi's guard post beside the hostel gates. She looked across at Grace's messy, empty bed beside hers. Gaddo's plain bed across from Grace's and Safiya's ultra-arranged bed across from hers was also empty, as well as all the other beds in the room. She

wondered how she had failed to notice when all the girls streamed out. She folded the letter and the list and placed them inside her suitcase and hastened to join the group.

Aquamarine made her way to the front of the crowd and stood beside Asmau, the former head girl. The mai guardi perched at the door of his guard hut and the girls all remained spellbound and listened to him tell his tale about how he had seen over thirty old women selling bloody red meat to many students in the dead of last night. Some girls leaned against the large rectangular water tank beside the gate to get a better view of the smallish man. The mai guardi claimed that none of the students who went to that market returned. Two irreconcilable holes they poked in his tale were: his claim that the buying and selling happened on the giant baobab tree behind the dormitory buildings; and, after a student head count conducted at the end of the tale by Asmau, and Aquamarine, Asmau's former deputy, no head was missing.

"It must have been a dream, Mai Guardi," Asmau tried to persuade the mai guardi.

"Haba, Asmau," the mai guardi said. "Me, I know the difference of dream from trance." He tugged at the bags under his eyes with his fore fingers. "My eyes no see sleep from night till morning."

"Of course, Mai Guardi." Asmau nodded with her lips thin like plain masa. Aquamarine shook her head.

About three times in the past year, Asmau had been tempted to report the mai guardi's drunken lousiness to the school authorities. Everyone knew he was only a ceremonial guard. The armed policemen who watched the main gates did the real job.

The mai guardi turned his head towards Aquamarine to show her his eyes, also. They were like red glass beads, a sour boozy smell of burukutu lingered on his breath and the smell of urine clung to his clothes.

With a tilt of her head, Gaddo, one of Aquamarine's three close friends, signalled at the empty unlabelled brown bottle underneath the mai guardi's short wooden bench. He usually used the bench as his bed during the night's watch hours. Gaddo gave a wry smile. Aquamarine brushed a hand across her teeny-weeny Afro and allowed her eyes to follow a mosquito straggling away from the shade underneath the bench. Its engorged abdomen was translucent maroon when it strayed past the soft rays of sunlight that patted Gaddo's cornrows at an angle.

Gaddo leaned forward, snatched up the bottle and held it in the mai guardi's face. "Mai Guardi, this bottle must have been filled with something *delicious* last night."

The mai guardi scratched his head and his eyes grazed the floor for a moment. A labored look mapped his face as he spat curses at the bottle—*Mugunta! Jarabawa! Shege!* Aquamarine fought back a chuckle. Safiya, her other friend, and the other girls standing close by her, did not care to hide their smiles.

"Me, I drink only small, kadan," the mai guardi mumbled and finally looked up. His eyes bulged. "Wallahi, the girls, no one returned."

"But how did the women and the girls climb up the tree?" Jemimah said with a quizzical look on her face. She was one of the girls who usually sneaked out to night parties in the town during past school terms, after having bribed the mai guardi with burukutu.

"They just disappeared and appeared," he said, gesturing with his hands.

Everyone burst into laughter.

While the girls chatted about the "old meat sellers and disappearing students" fiasco, the mai guardi quietly went into his hut and began to gather his belongings: his small blue comb, a worn singlet, his day shoes.

"Mai Guardi," Aquamarine said. "I am sure tomorrow night you will have a more peaceful sleep."

“No tomorrow night, Little Miss.” He looked past Aquamarine and cast a worrying gaze at the humongous baobab tree. “I leave today.” His voice shook.

“Haba, Mai Guardi,” said Aquamarine. “Because of a vision or trance or dream or whatever?”

He simply nodded. That was when Aquamarine noticed the dark, damp-looking patch on the inseam of his brown mocha pants.

“How do you plan to feed your family, pay your daughter’s tuition if you leave your job?” she asked. His daughter, Afiniki, had just completed seventh grade in the school and would begin eight grade next term.

“Money will come,” he said. “But life—only one.”

Aquamarine nodded to him. The remaining hair on his balding head was tending to chalk white. He stood at about four feet eight inches tall, around her height, while Grace and the other girls were heads taller than she was even though they were about the same age.

“Mai Guardi,” Grace said with mock seriousness. “Please, come and show us where the girls disappeared before they appeared at the top of the tree.” Her voice was about to crack with laughter.

With a serious look on his face, the mai guardi stomped ahead toward the baobab tree. While Aquamarine and the other girls followed him to cross from the back of the Red House Hostel, past the Blue House Hostel, past the clothesline area and the aluminium and wood outhouse, he poured curses on the betraying bottle. There was a barbed wire fence that separated the girls’ hostel from the sports field. The baobab tree stood at the edge of the field and the forested area beyond the perimeter fence that led to the school farms. The tree was about forty feet tall. Being that this was their school’s new site, with all the virgin lands, there were lots of other trees like it in size and form—thick foliage and all. And no one had to look far to come across snakes and other reptiles. But what

set the tree apart was a huge beehive hanging from one of its branches. Some leaves shielded much of the hive so that it was a new find for Aquamarine and many other girls.

“Honey!” Grace squealed.

Asmau looked to the mai guardi. “Are you sure it wasn’t a swarm of bees you saw last night?”

“No,” he said. “In fact, now I remember. There was also a big fire burning on the tree.”

Aquamarine peered at the tree along with the other girls. They found no trace of charcoal or ash or wilted leaves or the scent of smoke or scorching of any kind, only bees at their home, making honey.

While Asmau continued to drill the mai guardi with questions, Aquamarine spotted the chameleon on the fence for the first time. It was metallic grey, the same color as the fence on which it perched. It was about four inches long. She broke off a sprig from the hibiscus shrub that straddled the fence and carefully picked up the chameleon and placed it on the sprig. Four other girls gathered around her in awe of the chameleon. It stood so still, its eyes unblinking. And right before their eyes, its bumpy skin and eyes gradually transformed into the red and white chequered pattern of the day uniforms they had on. Aquamarine liked its patterned face and bubble eyes. She caressed the air inches above its head and babble talked to it.

“We could make a fortune by selling all that honey.” Grace’s voice zoomed into Aquamarine’s company and they all looked in her direction.

Before Asmau and a few other girls could say *No!* Grace picked up a stone and threw it at the hive. The stone smashed into its side and fell to the ground along with a small chunk of the comb. Honey dripped to the ground. Bees buzzed out of their home and a busy mass began to darken the skies. There were yelps and howls from all corners as the girls raced for their dormitories and some students, for the nearest door. A few girls must have felt the fury of some bees as sharp guttural cries

hit the air. Aquamarine had just crossed the clothesline when she tripped on a stone and fell face down. Her chin scratched against the grainy laterite sand. Some flip-flop clad feet clomped on her right shoulder and arm and raced past. A mass of bees circled her. She jumped up and flailed her arms about her to beat the bees away and ran like crazy. She dived on top of the pavement and banged hard on the first door of the Blue House Hostel.

“Open the door!” she screamed. There was fire on her right shin, and fire on her head.

Someone opened the door and hands dragged her into the room.

Asmau pulled out the stings as Aquamarine stood under the creaking ceiling fan, and applied laundry blue diluted in water on the swollen mounds and sting spots. Aquamarine thanked the girls and crossed from their Hostel to hers through the interconnecting door. She went straight to her corner and found Grace lying on her own bed. Her lips were quadruple their size and were marked with laundry blue. Her left ear, fore finger and her temple all had blue tinted mounds as well. She had a scowl on her face.

Just before the lunch bell sounded off at one o'clock, Asmau informed Aquamarine that the mai guardi, with his nose resembling a globular blue-brown Irish potato, had left for good at about midday, right after the bees had hummed away. “The principal should have sacked him a long time ago without any benefits,” Asmau said and sighed. Her thin cheeks sank farther into the sides of her face when she drew out her sigh.

Aquamarine didn't express her disagreement. She wished the mai guardi well. “Now the School Authorities have no excuse to continue exposing us to danger by hiring cheap security,” she stressed, bearing in mind that the principal was Asmau's clanswoman.

“Sure,” Asmau said. “I will let you know when a new security guard is hired.” She hastened away.



Aquamarine took her plate and fork from her locker and made her way to the dining hall for lunch. She knew her subtle message would reach the right ears, but whether the right measures would be taken was another matter. In late January, she had accompanied Safia to the outhouse a few minutes past midnight. While Safia did her business inside the latrine due to a case of mild food poisoning, she had waited outside for her with her lantern in hand. Moments later, to her horror, two silhouette orbs on the walled fence that stretched from the guard hut morphed into two men in pants. She quickly turned out the light of her lantern and crouched. The men sat still and scanned the hostels from one end to the other. When they looked away from her direction, she yelled *Thief! Thief!* The men vaulted the fence and fled. After she and Safiya had reported their dreadful experience to the school authorities the following day, the principal's smartest response was to liaise with the Konduga Police Commandant to release two mobile policemen to patrol the School's premises and keep watch alongside the mai guardi. *Only two policemen and one old mai guardi to guard three hundred girls, Ma?* Aquamarine had asked. *There is no cause for alarm,* the principal had replied. *You girls should not be afraid. Those men are probably hungry thieves who won't bother your hostels again, especially with the armed mobile policemen on ground.*

Inside the dining hall, Aquamarine sat in the far corner. The seats Grace, Gaddo and Safiya usually took beside her at the table were empty. Neither of them was in the mood to leave the hostel after the bee attack. Aquamarine forked a mouthful of *eba* dipped in *egusi* soup into her mouth. A little more salt needed, as usual! She swallowed and eyed the Ludo dice-sized beef coated with the whitish soup in her plate. Auntie Ijeoma's *egusi* soups were tastier and were usually dotted with chopped deep green *ugu* leaves. Yet Aquamarine preferred eating this tasteless soup because while she ate, no one hovered around her to spy if she had stolen an extra piece of meat from the tureen. She felt disturbed at the thought that Auntie Ijeoma might have written the letter *from Enugu*.

After an afternoon nap that spilled into the early evening that day, Aquamarine felt for the mound on her head and realized it had reduced considerably. The bump on her shin had dissolved and left an uneven indigo-blue patch which she wanted to wash off because some of the color had stained her green and white polka dot bedsheet. She went to the clothesline to collect her towel. Some clothes lay strewn on the ground, probably as students had fled the bee attack. She picked up her yellow towel, twisted at the foot of the clothesline pole. And just a foot ahead lay the chameleon. Its head was a crushed mishmash of blood and sand, bone and brain matter, and mangled green skin pegged in the red laterite sand with its hind feet, rump and tail hanging limp in the air. Large houseflies perched about it. Aquamarine regretted not leaving the chameleon on the fence, undisturbed. Perhaps, it would have lived, she thought.

While she walked back to her hostel to pick up her hoe, she couldn't get image of the chameleon's checked face and eyes out of her head. Its loss reminded her of another face that seemed lost to her—her mother's. The day Auntie Ijeoma, her mother's younger sister who excelled at her fabric business, had come to Enugu to take her up north to Konduga, as her mother sat on her bed inside the bedroom they shared, only the left side of her face moved when she slurred the words, *Aqua-nma m, aga m eleta gi — Aqua-my precious, I will visit you*. That was ten years ago. The last time Aquamarine had asked Auntie Ijeoma about her mother was on the twenty-second of December the year before, her sixteenth birthday. Auntie Ijeoma had called her ungrateful and asked if she wanted to go back to disease and death. Aquamarine decided then, that she would write her mother a letter when the new term began in January and tell her she wanted to come home to her.

Aquamarine got her hoe from her box in the box room and buried the chameleon behind the outhouse. Soon, wild bright yellow azaleas would sprout from its grave and team with the surrounding bed of azaleas. Soon, she hoped. Then she went and had a bath.

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It was about midday, two days later, when Asmau came around and informed Aquamarine and her friends that they had a new stand-in guard and his name was Dogo. Aquamarine wondered if the security situation would really improve with Dogo, and if the other girls shared her worry. However, it was Grace who said, colored with a tease, “Is our new mai guardi also a seer?”

The girls didn’t go to the dining hall for lunch that afternoon. One of the joys of their School’s Extension Period, which they were presently observing, was that their time was theirs. They were free to prepare for their West African Examinations, which they called WAEC for short, in three weeks, however best they chose. Aquamarine wanted to go on to study Computer Engineering at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, closer home to her mother. Grace wanted to be an air hostess or a footballer and travel the world. Gaddo wanted to study Mathematics and become a Math teacher, Safiya wanted to become a paediatrician. They sat in Aquamarine’s corner and sipped *garri* and *kuli kuli* for lunch, after which they solved away at algebra and calculus until dinner time at six o’clock.

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One week later, Aquamarine brought in her washed and sundried clothes. The orangey-red setting sun cast slanted flaming bars across everything it touched through the windows in the dorm room. Aquamarine’s khaki suitcase, the foot of her bunk, and portions of the dove grey concrete floors were filmy orange. Aquamarine folded her washed items—her spare day wear, her uniform, her spare cover cloth and bedsheet—and placed them inside her suitcase. The black netting of the mesh bag inside the suitcase resembled tiny X’s all over the white envelope like markings used to check boxes in a form. Her gaze lingered on the envelope for a moment. The words in the letter had certainly not changed. She sighed.

“Aquamarine,” Grace howled as she lay on her bed. “What kind of sigh is that?”

Aquamarine sighed again. “It’s that letter from my mother. I know that you, Safiya, and Gaddo have been waiting for me to tell you something about it.”

“We know that you know,” said Grace. She dropped the *Purple Hibiscus* she was reading for Literature in English on her bed and sat up. “We just guessed that the letter must contain bad news. Safiya said we should pretend that the letter doesn’t exist until you’re ready to talk about it. But I’ve been dying to know what it says.”

Aquamarine handed Grace the letter, and then the market list.

“God forbid,” said Grace after reading the letter. “Is this letter from the right address?” And when she compared the writing in the letter to that in the list, she yelled, “Safiya, Gaddo, you people should come and tell me that I don’t need eyeglasses.”

Gaddo and Safiya left their corners to Grace’s and Aquamarine’s and pored over the letter and the list. In past terms and over the years of their friendship, they had shared different bits of their lives with one another. Grace had told about the strong bond she enjoyed with her five older brothers and how she hoped to marry a man who was into sports, especially soccer, because of her brothers. Safiya had narrated that she feared that her mother might be her sister and how she liked the soft sweaty palms of her family friend, Lukeman, when they shook hands at the car park just before the beginning of term in January. Gaddo had recounted how her father had betrothed her at birth to man who was older than her grandfather for some bags of pepper, rice and beans, and how her father had planned to marry her off at nine years of age but her mother had paid off the debt to the old man with proceeds from her tailoring business, divorced her father and then fled to Konduga with her, and how she never wanted to get married. Aquamarine had related how her mother who was once a lively teacher and headmistress had suffered a major stroke, and how her father who had promised to go to Lagos in search of medical help and financial assistance never returned until her Auntie came and took her away from her mother at their hometown, Enugu, and brought her to Konduga. And

how her Auntie wouldn't answer her whenever she asked after her mother. And how a deep fear that her mother was dead constantly nibbled at her mind until she had received the letter from her mother in late March. And way past Lights Out at nine o'clock that day and past midnight, the girls remained gathered in Aquamarine's corner, tattling.

Grace said she had a strong feeling that the letter and the list were written by the same person—the wicked Auntie! “That woman just wants you to continue being her house slave forever,” said Grace.

“Maybe your mother and Auntie just write the same way,” said Gaddo. “Siblings sometimes have identical handwritings. I wouldn't doubt it, though, if your Auntie Ijeoma was the copycat since your mother is older and had once been a headmistress.” She then shared that her little cousin Amina was such an annoying, yet adorable copycat in almost everything under the sun—handwriting was the least on the list.

“Don't forget that there are those who forge people's signatures and handwritings for ulterior gain,” Safiya said, and suggested that they should look for the sender's address.

When Aquamarine showed them the envelope, they observed that the letter lacked a sender's address and the postage stamp ink was faint. There was no way to tell what the last two letters of the pale purple ink stamp stood for whether “...gu” for Enugu or “...ga” for Konduga.

“I will go to Enugu right after writing my last exam on June 11,” said Aquamarine suddenly.

“What if it is actually your mother who sent the letter and she really doesn't want to have anything to do with you?” Safiya said.

“That's harsh, Safiya,” said Gaddo.

“In these kinds of matters, you have to be prepared for anything, and especially for bitter realities,” said Safiya.

Aquamarine understood that Safiya must have made her last statement because of her complicated family tree, and she said, "In that case, my mother would have to look at my face, in my eyes, and tell me why she doesn't want me." Aquamarine sounded more confident than she felt.

"I support," said Grace.

"Why don't we go to the postmaster tomorrow and find out if there is any sender's address or contact," Gaddo said. "That might be a good starting point."

Grace and Safiya agreed. Aquamarine nodded and folded the letter and list and placed them inside the envelope.

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At nine o'clock the next morning, Gaddo, Grace and Safiya accompanied Aquamarine to the post office, nestled between the typist's office and the General Office in the Administrative Block. Aquamarine showed Mr. Titus the envelope and asked him if he had record of the sender's address or if he could tell by the stamp from where the letter had come.

Mr. Titus looked through his notebook and announced, "The letter is from Ibiam Way, Enugu."

Aquamarine felt glad and alarmed at the same time because of the realization that the letter might have been penned by her mother's own hand after all, yet she didn't know how she would be received if she disregarded the stern warning the letter carried and showed up at Enugu, or how she would react if she faced outright rejection.

"And there is a phone number," Mr. Titus said. He scribbled a number on the back page of his notebook, tore it out and handed it to Aquamarine.

She noted that the number wasn't one of Auntie Ijeoma's two phone numbers.

Grace offered her phone to Aquamarine. "There's only one way to find out who is behind all this."

Aquamarine took the phone. She felt that adrenalin rush that usually came when someone was seated in an examination hall and it was time to start writing and one's head suddenly went blank and the words wouldn't come yet the time wouldn't stop ticking. She dialled the number.

A man with a mellow voice answered on the other end of the line and introduced himself as Mr. Cosmas Ahia, Aquamarine's father.

"Daddy?" Aquamarine said. But immediately, she felt like taking the word back. She did not think he deserved to be called Daddy. She hardly knew him. And all she could remember about him was his abandonment.

"Chei!" he said. "Aqua nwa m nwanyi, how are you?"

"I am fine," Aquamarine said. She felt a warm glow light up her heart as she heard afresh the ring of the endearment that he usually hailed her when she was little. The name used to make her feel special to him with a sense of an unbreakable father-daughter bond. But then the recollection of how he had left her mother and her put out the warmth in her heart and she wanted to unsay those words. She wanted to ask him: Daddy where have you been? Why did you say you were going to look for money for Mommy's health bills and for nine months nobody saw you? What were you doing all those months? Did you know Mommy used to send me to check if you had come back home at the sound of every car or bus that stopped in front of our house until she gave up hope of your returning? Did you know Mommy used to slur *Dim* in some of her night's sleeps? Where were you when Auntie Ijeoma came and took me to Konduga? And why have you come back? Instead, she said, "Put Mommy on the phone. I want to talk to her."

"Your mother is asleep," he said. Aquamarine did not like the note of finality in his voice. A memory of her Christian Religious Knowledge class story where Jesus said Lazarus was asleep, when Lazarus had been dead for four days, made her panic.

"Is she dead?"

“No,” he said.

“Does she have a spreadable disease?”

“No. She is fine.”

“Can I visit her?”

“I will come and visit you in Konduga when you finish your exams in June. Please, remain with your Auntie.”

“Only you? Why won’t Mommy come with you? Is there something you people are hiding from me?”

“We did not expect that your mother would survive her illness and your Auntie has contributed so much money to pay up her medical bills. Money that we cannot pay back even in the next fifteen years.”

“And how does that concern me?” Aquamarine said and wished she had framed the question in another way that didn’t make her sound rude or indifferent to her mother’s predicament.

“Aqua nwa m nwanyi, your service to your Auntie is a deed of gratitude on our family’s part.”

“And a repayment of debt?” she said. The endearing name put side by side with the reality of her bonded service to her Auntie was like drinking bitter chloroquine tablets with Fanta.

“More like you saved your mother’s life with your service,” he said.

She didn’t like that his words made her feel like a saviour and a servant at the same time. But his reference to her mother made it easier to take in his view. “Are you taking care of Mommy?”

“Yes,” he said. “I stopped that *ntakri* phone recharge card sales business when I returned to Enugu about ten years ago. I now sell vehicle spare parts. The business has been slow, but your Auntie has been very supportive.”



Aquamarine felt like ending the call at that moment. She didn't care to congratulate him for stepping up his line of business, instead it gored her heart to hear that he had returned at about the same time that Auntie Ijeoma had taken her away, and he hadn't bothered to contact her or make plans to bring her back to Enugu. She pulled the phone away from her ear and was about to press the End Call button when Grace gestured writing on a slate with her hands and silently mouthed the words *Ask him who wrote the letter*.

"Can Mommy now use her right hand?" Aquamarine said into the phone.

"She's learning to use it again."

Aquamarine recalled how her mother had taught her to write figure eight by placing her large right hand over her own small hand and together they had drawn one small circle and another small circle to sit on its head. Her mother couldn't have recreated her bold and elegant writing to perfection if she was learning to use her right hand afresh. "So, who wrote the letter?"

"Aquamarine," Mr. Ahia snapped. "Are you accusing your father of forging your mother's handwriting?"

She felt remorse at having annoyed him, but she believed he was the one who owed her repentance and not the other way around. "Or is it Auntie Ijeoma that wrote the letter?"

"Hekwa!" he said in an exasperated voice. "Your Auntie is a generous woman. At least, she pays your school fees, feeds and clothes you. The least we can do is respect her."

"We?" Aquamarine believed his opinion would remain the same even if she told him how Auntie Ijeoma usually measured the yams and rice and beans just to be sure she didn't cook any extra food in her absence; how her Auntie usually counted and recounted the pieces of meat in the stew and soup pots just to be sure not one piece had disappeared without her knowledge; not to mention the beatings for little mishaps, the accusations, the suspicions and a host of other things.

“Okay,” he said. “The truth is that your mother asked me to help her write the letter, and I wrote the letter with her help.”

Aquamarine wondered why he had forged her mother’s handwriting and how much “help” her mother had given him. “The letter says that Mommy doesn’t want me to come to Enugu. Is that your arrangement with Auntie Ijeoma or is it Mommy’s wish?”

“Hello?” he said.

“Hello?” Aquamarine said. She was about to repeat her question when she heard her father mumble something away from the phone, as though he were speaking to someone else with him. Then Aquamarine heard a grunt and a garbled word that sounded like her name from a voice softer than her father’s.

“Is that Mommy?” Aquamarine said. “Hello? Mommy?” All she could hear was a disconnected tone. Somehow, she did not feel surprised that her father had pretended not to hear her when she had asked about the content of the letter. She felt upset that he had cut the call at the point when she would have found out if the voice in the background belonged to her mother.

Aquamarine dialled the number again and no one answered. She dialled again and an intercept message responded, *The number you have dialled is not available*. And the call was diverted to voicemail.

Aquamarine gave the phone back to Grace. She shook her head sadly, and through the ajar door of the post office, she momentarily noted the rich cherry red bloom of the lone hibiscus shrub at the center of the Admin Block square and she said to Safiya, Gaddo and Grace, “I think I just heard my mother’s voice.” She wanted to scream with delight, but her eyes itched at the same time. She could not decide which to let loose before the other—the squeal or the bawl.

Grace was the first to shout for joy and throw her arms about Aquamarine, then Safiya and Gaddo. But by the time they were mid-way on their path to their dorm, Aquamarine was on the verge of bawling.

“Maybe it’s not a good idea for me to travel to Enugu,” said Aquamarine. “What if my mother is on my father’s and Auntie’s side and she doesn’t really want to see me?”

“Let’s not assume the worst,” said Safiya. “It would be wise to hear your mother’s own version of the story, from her own lips, before you make a final conclusion.”

“But I have only fifty naira for my transport fare to Enugu,” said Aquamarine.

“What do you have us for?” said Grace. And Safiya and Gaddo nodded in agreement.

Grace led the fund drive from bunk to bunk when they reached the hostel. A number of girls gave donations that ranged from twenty naira to one hundred naira. Gaddo and Safiya also contributed and they succeeded in raising about four thousand five hundred naira, more than half the total transport fare from Konduga to Enugu.

Aquamarine had tears in her eyes when she thanked the girls. While her flesh and blood family had given her up for money to realize their dreams, her family of friends had given up money for her to materialize her dreams. Tears of joy, they said one after the other and patted her on the shoulder for encouragement. But to her the tears were coming from a place that had nothing to do with joy.

#

On April 13, in their hostel, Grace received a phone call from her older sister, Helen, who had visited them the term before. Helen had spent one month between March and April at her month-long National Youth Service Corps orientation camp at Damaturu, in the neighbouring Yobe State. And with the camp over, the youth corps members had to report at their various postings to

serve the nation. Helen had studied Nursing at Bayero University and had hoped she would be posted to the Central Hospital in Damaturu.

“Only those who know the ‘Ogas at the top’ got the best postings?” Grace grumbled into the phone after having listened for a while to Helen speak.

Whenever Helen called, like a big sister, she usually spoke to all four girls—Grace, Safiya, Gaddo and Aquamarine—in a conference call after having had a private chat with Grace. During Helen’s last visit to their school, Aquamarine had shared her insecurities about her physical development for Grace’s nursing advice. At sixteen going on seventeen, she was yet to develop breasts and had never menstruated. And too eager to fit in, in ninth grade, with all her friends already showing signs of womanhood, Aquamarine had bought herself a padded underwire bra and stuffed it with crumpled pieces of paper. Her biggest mistake: she wore her breasts and bra that year to compete in the two hundred meters race for her house during the Inter-House Sports Competition only to have the paper balls fall out of place when she breasted the tape. Her hailing for winning the race that helped her house clinch the golden cup was: Aquamarine, golden girl, paper breasts! Helen’s last word to Aquamarine on that last visit was comforting: *Have patience, the signs of womanhood will come when they will come.*

But as Helen’s voice rose from Grace’s phone on speaker, Aquamarine heard worry. Helen said she had been posted to Gujba College to work in their dispensary unit and promised to call once she arrived there, which was only a two-hour journey away from Damaturu.

“Are you not bothered about the gunmen attack that happened last year in the male dormitory of that college?” Aquamarine said.

Helen sighed. “Nowhere is really safe. Even the Central Hospital at Damuturu was struck right after the college attack last year.”

“Hmm!” the girls chorused and nodded, as though Helen could see them through the phone.

“I hope you girls are studying hard.”

“We are,” they said in unison.

“All right then,” Helen said. “My bus is about to set off for Gujba. I’ll call again when I reach there.”

“Safe trip!” Aquamarine said in one voice with the other girls. They were all smiles.

“Good luck in your exams.”

“Thank you!”

At six o’clock the next morning, when Grace called Helen’s line, a man with a gruff voice answered the call. “Allahu Akbar!” he yelled and ranted something in what seemed like Arabic. There was a rap of gunshots in the background.

Grace wouldn’t eat any food from morning till evening. She wept.

“Maybe she lost her phone in the bus,” Aquamarine said and offered a plate of red yam pottage from dinner to Grace. “You should eat something.”

Grace shook her head, sat up straight and wiped her cheeks with the back of her hands.

Aquamarine set the plate of food on the bed beside Grace. “I’m sure once Helen settles down at her post, she would recover her lost line and call you.”

Safiya tuned channel after channel on her phone’s FM stereo. “At least, if there was news of an attack one of the radio stations would have carried it by now.”

“We’re talking about a remote village in Yobe State,” said Grace.

“Let’s just hope for the best,” Gaddo chipped in.

Aquamarine nodded to Grace and wished that her nod would glue Gaddo’s encouraging words inside Grace’s heart and build strength, yet she felt so hopeless when her thoughts drifted momentarily to her own mother. The thought of facing her mother felt like diving off a cliff. The

level of cushioning in the landing depended on what lay beneath, what one met at the bottom—rock or water.

That night, at a few minutes past nine o'clock, when it was Lights Out and each girl lay in her own bed, after Aquamarine heard Grace's sniffling become slight snores, she turned over on her bed and slept. But about an hour later, Safiya's voice woke her.

"Aquamarine! Aquamarine!"

Aquamarine opened her eyes and saw Safiya kneeling close by her bed with her eyes wide with fear.

"There are soldiers in our dorm," she said.

"Soldiers?" Aquamarine jerked to a sitting position. Grace was hastening and packing whatever. All the other girls in the dorm seemed suddenly busy packing things and making side comments. Someone was whimpering at the far corner.

"Are we in trouble?" Aquamarine said.

"They said they came to protect us from terrorists," said Safiya.

"Terrorists?" Aquamarine jumped to her feet and began to dash for the door but Safiya grabbed her arm and pulled her back and shoved her day wear into her hands.

"You better dress up," Safiya said. "They said we should all dress up but that we shouldn't pack any other thing, not even our phones."

"What kind of instruction is that?" Grace said and punched a number on her phone. "I wouldn't go anywhere without my phone." She listened for a dial tone and sighed. "No network in town to reach my father."

"Where do they want to take us to?" Aquamarine pulled her day wear over her nightdress and knotted her wrapper around her waist.

"They haven't said."

Safiya was dressed in a flowing blouse and wrapper underneath her day wear. She clenched her green and white revised standard Bible to her chest. Aquamarine noticed something bulging on Safiya's stomach and wanted to ask her what it was but decided not to. The squarish shape of the bulge reminded her of a diary. Aquamarine reached into her suitcase and snatched the letter from her mother, along with a blue biro. Aquamarine felt obliged to return all the monies raised for her transport fare back to the contributors, but Grace advised her not to do any such stupid thing. "You might really need that money along the way."

Aquamarine stuffed the money inside the envelope, wrapped the parcel inside a black cellophane bag and carefully dropped the small bundle underneath her clothes, wedging it against the belt of her day wear and the knot of her wrapper. "What else did you pack?"

"Toothpaste, toothbrush," Safiya said.

Aquamarine reached for her upper locker to grab her toothbrush.

"Here." Grace handed her a little bundle.

"Thanks." Aquamarine checked the items through the thin see-through cellophane: her green toothbrush, the red plastic of her half-used toothpaste, a bar of soap, and her yellow face towel.

Grace then sat quietly at the foot of her bed. Her eyes were red and swollen, probably from her worries of yesterday about Helen, Aquamarine thought. She seemed to be in that focused mood athletes tapped into just before a race began, just before the moderator said: *GO!* Under the atampa wrapper that she tied along her waist she wore a pair of black jeans. Her sneakers were grey. Her black t-shirt had Rihanna's smiling face emblazoned on it.

Aquamarine grabbed her sandals from underneath her bed and slipped her feet into them.

"Where are they taking us?"

Before Safiya or Grace could answer, someone kicked the door open. Four uniformed men armed with AK-47 rifles and black berets burst in through the door

“Hurry,” said the lankiest of the men. He looked the youngest. “We have to leave now.”

The girls all hastened out. Close to the cluster of trees that lined the path to the hostel, there were about four trailers and countless motorcycles that droned around them like wasps. Aquamarine was alarmed that Dogo, their new mai guardi, was missing at his guard post. A host of rough-looking men, all garbed in army uniforms, were seated on the walled fence that stretched past the guard hut, just as Aquamarine had seen the two intruders do, months before. While the long-bearded man who stood before the girls and who seemed to be the commander of the group cleared his throat to speak, the feet of the men standing slightly behind him caught her attention. Some wore black boots, some flip-flops, a large number of them were barefooted, and in all they looked rather unkept. Aquamarine didn't need a seer to tell her that the real Nigerian soldiers were miles away.

“You will come with us,” said the long-bearded man.

A heavy silence shrouded the girls for a moment as they processed the message, and then, varied cries, curses and invocations broke out from different corners. Aquamarine felt invisible for a moment. She wanted to yell *Kidnappers! Kidnappers!* and recreate her small moment of victory over the two intruders who had straddled their fence months before. But the sheer number of the men that surrounded them made her feel dizzy. There must have been over five hundred men, and even if she and the other girls summoned the courage to fight back, how could their bowls, buckets, mosquito nets twisted into ropes, hoes and cutlasses reserved for manual labor compare to the kidnappers' assault rifles and machine guns that they held pointed to the heavens like a forest of black metal stumps? The harmattan breeze momentarily blew the smell of the men in the direction of the hostels. She knew from the news what became of women and girls abducted by scoundrels like these. She thought of her mother and brushed her hand over the small bulge on her stomach and felt the cellophane that contained the letter and her transport fare plastered to her skin with sweat. These rogues won't steal my dream of reuniting with my mother, she mused.



Aquamarine turned and saw tear lines glistening on Grace's cheeks. "These must be the men who killed Helen," Grace murmured.

Aquamarine whispered reassuringly, "We can't be sure that Helen is dead. Don't give up hope yet. Besides, these men probably operate in different groups. Have you seen Helen's corpse with your own eyes or heard anything about an attack?"

Grace shook her head.

Aquamarine looked to the Commander, and said, "You are strangers." Her voice quavered. "We will not go with you."

"Yes," yelled Grace, "We will not go with you!"

All the girls spun Aquamarine's and Grace's words into a chant, "We will not go with you! We will not go with you!" with Aquamarine and Grace in the lead. But when the Commander released a string of gun shots into the air, they all fell silent.

"You better come with us," the Commander said.

Jemimah and some girls broke into a run, but several gunshots in the air stopped them in their tracks. Aquamarine wanted to give Safiya, who stood by other side, an elbow nudge. She wondered why Safiya had not muttered a word since the Commander introduced himself and his mission. Gaddo threw herself to the ground and started pounding the sand with her fists, imploring the earth to open and swallow her. The young soldier who had spoken to them inside their dorm slung his rifle to his side, grabbed her by the arms and swooped her up to her feet.

"You won't be hurt if you do as I say," he said to her in a low tone.

The Commander pointed to the nearest truck with the barrel of his rifle, and ordered, "Yarinya, tafi!"

Asmau was the first girl to climb onto one of the trucks. Aquamarine trudged toward another trailer that was already fast filling up with girls. The distance was short, but the weariness in her

heart made it seem so far and laborious, like one of her treks to the Gwagwalada Market on one of Auntie Ijeoma's errands. The air was heavy with the smell of gasoline. Aquamarine forced down the urge to throw up. Just before she climbed onto the truck, Grace pinched her left elbow from behind her and whispered in her ear, "We have to find a way to escape, somehow."

"These men are armed," Aquamarine said.

"I know," said Grace. "Just sit at the side of the truck."

Aquamarine nodded. Grace swung onto the truck and edged her way to Gaddo's side where she sat at the corner.

Aquamarine climbed onto the truck and lent Safiya a hand and hoisted her up. Safiya complained that her stomach was rumbling. Gaddo and Grace made room for Safiya and Aquamarine to sit beside them.

It wasn't long before Aquamarine felt the truck rock under her bottom as it bellowed to life. The trailers started crawling. All the buildings that she and the other girls called school were ablaze: the hostel blocks, the classroom blocks, the dining hall, the school store, the post office, the admin block, the kitchen, the laboratories, the guard hut and the outhouse. The fire leapt high, but the baobab tree loomed above it, the black smoke soon knitting with the silhouette of the tree. In the horizon, another dark cloud buzzed away from the smoke, away from their honey, away from their hive, away from their tree. The balding mai guardi's words knocked Aquamarine's head afresh, "... none of the students who went to that market returned."

As the trailers picked up speed and roared through the archway past the School's gates and onto the highway, Aquamarine saw the corpses of the School's two police guards strewn along the path. She was in the first trailer that blazed the trail. The asphalt road flicked out behind the trailer like a narrow black tongue. The trailer was one of those used to transport loads of cattle bound for sale from the northern fields to the southern cattle markets, only this time, the trailer was headed one

hundred and eighty degrees away from the south, packed with girls like sardines in a can. The smell of aged cattle dung and urine and fresh vomit upset Aquamarine's stomach, but she succeeded in keeping from retching. Some other girls were not so successful and spilled vomit on themselves and on those compressed about them, yet no one queried the other about vomiting. While some of the girls were crying-cursing at their abductors and crying-yelling for help from whomsoever might hear them from the thick bushes, some others had resigned themselves to their fate, while yet, some others were praying for the trailers behind to continue to lag so they could jump out of the truck.

They had travelled farther north for what seemed like an hour when the first two girls jumped out of the truck. The third girl who jumped seemed to have broken a bone when she hit the ground, because she shrieked so loud, other girls had to wait for a while before attempting to jump, for fear that the driver and the armed men seated in the passenger seat had heard her. A while later, a couple more girls jumped. Aquamarine watched Grace struggle to her feet and did the same. She urged Safiya and Gaddo to do the same but neither of the girls wanted to move from where they sat. Safiya feared that she might hit her head on the coal tar and crack her skull. Gaddo said that she was frightened she would get squashed underneath the giant tires of the trailer.

"We have to first make an effort to leap, only then can we make something out of where we land," said Aquamarine.

Aquamarine was glad to see Gaddo and Safiya wriggle to their feet at her words.

"The Nigerian soldiers will definitely come and rescue us once our families in town alert them that we have been kidnapped," said Gaddo.

"Those crazy gunmen must have raided the town, too," Grace said. "Why do you think there has been no phone network for any one of us to contact our families? It might take a while before any rescue mission comes for us."

"I am very scared," said Safiya.

Aquamarine wished she could carry Safiya and Gaddo on her back or could whisk them all away to safety by magic. However, she felt compelled to attempt this leap away from captivity whether she died in the process or not. She didn't think she would be able to live with herself if she failed to try. She tiptoed and juttied her chin past the wooden hold of the truck. The air was cool and fresh, and the trees stood like shadowy formless monsters.

"We have to jump now," said Grace.

Aquamarine did a mental check on how far behind the other trailers and the motorcycles lagged. Several motorcycles could easily swoop close by their truck at any moment. The ground resembled a dark abyss. But it was obvious that beyond the vantablack space, there was asphalt, there was sand, and there was hard earth that the tyres of the trailer crawled on. She brushed a hand over the bulge on her stomach and heard the cellophane bag rustle. She watched Grace straddle the edge of the truck and jump. Grace soon disappeared in the shadows of the monstrous trees. Aquamarine once more urged Safiya and Gaddo to join her. Safiya and Gaddo leaned forward and they pressed their foreheads together.

"The army will come for us," said Safiya. Gaddo nodded.

Aquamarine wished them good luck even though she thought they were making a mistake by remaining behind. She shook hands with the girls one last time. When their hands slipped away from hers, she didn't like how the thought that they might never see each other again lurked somewhere on her mind. She turned and faced the blackness that the trailer was slicing through and felt as though someone were about to push her into a bottomless pit. She closed her eyes for a moment and mentally pictured her jump. Then she straddled the edge of the truck and jumped at an angle away from it. Mid-air, she tucked in her arms and legs close to her body and landed on her shoulder. She knocked the left side of her head against the asphalt when she rolled for a bit along the road like a ball. The pain that surged through her body immobilized her. She lay still on the coal tar and felt as

though all her limbs had disengaged. She saw the oncoming trailer flashing ten lights instead of two, and knew she had to clear off the road or get crushed or caught. She crept on all fours into the shadows, nestled behind a tree trunk, and listened to the trailers growl past and the motorcycles along with them. When all was quiet again, a wiry hand clutched her left shoulder in the dark. She was about to yell and knock off the hand but then she heard Grace's voice say, "Aquamarine, let's go."

For hours and hours, Aquamarine followed Grace in the dark as they edged their way past trees, bushes, stones, sand, crickets' screeches and the ghostly silence when the crickets took brief breaks from shrilling. The fear of falling into the hands of her abductors for a second time dinged inside Aquamarine's heart, but each footstep she took which shrank the distance between her and her dreams silenced her worries. By sunup the next day, they had reached Gamboru Village, one of Konduga's neighbouring villages. They met Fintirimman, an elderly woman who had only two teeth remaining in her mouth. She lived in the outskirts of the village. They were thankful that Fintirimman offered to host them in her home for some days so they could recuperate, especially since the insurgents had also set parts of Konduga town ablaze on the night of the abduction, and most residents had fled the town.

Five days later, Aquamarine and Grace would sneak to Auntie Ijeoma's house and find it deserted. The neighbours would tell them that the woman had relocated to the south as soon as she heard that the girls had been abducted. The girls would draw pity from the God is Good Motors boss who would let Aquamarine ride in a luxury bus to Enugu without hassling her for the balance of her transport fare, while Grace and her father and brothers would head for their village, Oturkpo, in Benue State, their eyes and ears tuned for the dimmest news about Helen.

Aquamarine would reach Ibiam Way and see her father in his spare parts shop, his smallish yellow ochre form swimming inside his blue and white stripe *adire* cotton shirt. And he would say,

*Your Auntie came and told us that you had been abducted by terrorists. And because of your loss she cancelled all our debts. And she took another distant relative about your age and has relocated to Lagos. And Aquamarine would smile to him and say Thank God I was abducted. And her father would look at her as though when she had jumped off the moving trailer, the crash of her head against the asphalt had ruined the part of her brain that controlled reasoning. And she would smile and quote Boyle's Law and Charles' Law and Newton's Law of Gravitation for him and watch him chew his lower lip while his face turns ashy yellow.*

And she would walk through the door of their red dust coated house and would see her mother seated on the bed they had shared years before; and only the left side of her face would still move when she smiled. And her mother would slowly swing her left arm across Aquamarine's shoulder and carefully tug a right thumb through Aquamarine's in her laps, and slur, *Aqua-nma m, nabata n'ulo — Aqua-my precious, welcome home.*

The Nigerian Armed Forces would team up with forces from America and Britain and Australia and France and international bodies to storm the camps of the terrorists, and rescuing the girls will become a dream, a reality, a dream, a reality, a dream....

And the Federal Government would trail Aquamarine and the other girls who had succeeded in escaping the abduction train and offer them fresh scholarships to the University of America in Nigeria at Yola. And Aquamarine would look forward to reuniting with Grace at the new school after Christmas.

But before Christmas, on some days, the moon would hide behind the dark clouds in the grey-black skies and the stars would refuse to wink; and Aquamarine would smell the abduction afresh as the Ibiam woods shoot up to the heavens like lanky stemmed mushrooms, and she would think about Safiya, and about Gaddo, and about Asmau, and about the other girls and whisper a prayer to the winds on their behalf, and say, *May your dreams lead you home.*