

Fifteen minutes later, Michelin man has checked both my handbag and suitcase. He has emptied my compact powder case; my eye liner, its broken tip, and Revlon lipstick are strewn across the floor. He unfurls crumpled sheets of paper. He scans each sheet like a doctor performing surgery, but they revealed nothing to him.

“What is your telephone number?” His English is better than that of the immigration officer.

I swallowed. I didn't know that. Kunle never covered that with me.

“Madam, this is a stolen passport and we are going to charge you.” His voice is cold steel. “We are going to take a fingerprint and then I shall advise you to tell me what your real name is and how you came by this passport.” Someone comes to the door and says something in rapid Dutch and Mushroom hair walks out. Michelin man types out a document and takes my fingerprints. “We keep you here and wait until I hear from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Now, I go on pause.” When he gets to the door he stops and says, “What you have done, madam is very serious. Very serious.” Then the door clicks behind him.

The officer with hair the colour of the rising sun gets up from his chair and comes to stand beside me. I suddenly notice that he must be the tallest of the three. He also has the blue plastic eyes of a doll. “I am Carl,” he says.

I do not respond.

“You are very beautiful. Beautiful. You are beauty queen in your country?” He rolls his ‘r’s when he speaks.

Silence. The room seems to be closing in on me, its walls coming together to sandwich me between them.

He moves closer and squats so that his lips are close to my ears. A stench of garlic whiffs from his mouth.

“See, Gunter, my colleague, yes?” He makes every sentence sound like a question. “Günter he is *raacist*. He don't like black woman, no? But me, I don't mind. Me, not *raacist*. Yes?” I bite the inside of my cheek. It hurts. He grunts, his breath hot against my ear. “Twenty minutes is all I need. Twenty minutes and you can walk out of here,” he says pulling me close with one fluid movement and pushing me against the table. “If Gunter come back, you are in trouble, no? Big trouble.” He spreads his hands out to show me the expanse of the trouble he thinks I would be in.

“Twenty minutes and you walk out. No?” he pants. He stands behind me, trousers down at his ankles. I imagine I have flown away and perched on the ceiling; watching this blue-eyed man and an African woman. I can feel the hardness of his

manhood against my buttocks. He cups my breasts with his hands and groans as he comes.

“Aah, ooh, *mijn negertje*. Beautiful. Beautiful.” Satisfied, he belts up and tears up the papers with my fingerprints.

“Go. Go before the rest come back. Me, I am not *raacist*. Black and white, we are the same, see? Like chocolate mousse and vanilla mousse. De-fer-re-nt, but same, no?” he gently pushes me out, his blue eyes blazing.

Even though it hurts between my legs and my tear glands are swelling, I thank him.

†††

The pole on my forehead is no longer cool and a light snow shower has started to fall. It looks like someone is sprinkling salt from a huge salt shaker. Antwerp is at its prettiest when it is covered in snow. A pristine whiteness that hides the dog poo and cigarette stubs that litter especially the Schipperskwartier where I live. My house is not too far from De Grote Markt Square and the Cathedral and the souvenir shops and their horde of tourists.

I walk behind a Japanese couple holding hands and giggling. They are young, probably in their teens. They have the confident gait of people in love. My ankles are starting to hurt in my high heeled boots. It feels like they are encircled by ivory anklets, *odu*, the sort Onitsha women wear when their husbands take new titles. Anklets heavy as guilt. My stomach rumbles like the goods train that ferried coal from Enugu to Kanfanchan. I follow them into a restaurant and sit at a table dressed up in white, right beside theirs. If I listen hard enough, I can hear their conversation. But they speak mostly in their language. Later I listen to them *ooing* and *aahing* over their food as they reach the peak of their culinary orgasm. They look satiated. With life. With love. I am body's vendor by day. I am my body's vendor by night. Yet, I cannot buy that type of love. The thought depresses me. I walk out and am swallowed by the anonymity of the city.

LITRO

Chika Unigwe's debut novel, *De Feniks*, was published in 2005 by Meulenhoff and Manteau and was shortlisted for the *Vrouw en Cultuur debuutprijs* for the best first novel by a female writer. In 2003 she was shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Fiction, and in 2004 she won the BBC Short Story Competition and a Commonwealth Short Story Competition award. Visit [www.chikaunigwe.com](http://www.chikaunigwe.com) for more.

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# ANONYMOUS

by Chika Unigwe

Walking anaesthetizes me. I walk. I walk until my head no longer feels like it is stuffed with a nearly bursting balloon. From the restaurants around the central square, I smell spices, vegetables and mussels. I smell Belgian chocolates and waffles; the smell of sex in my nose is replaced. Still my thoughts do not clear. Images leap about in my mind, frenzied, one on top of the other. The ground beneath me swirls and twirls and starts to suck me in. The croissant and coffee I had in the morning reflux up my throat, nearly spilling out. My head turns. I lean against a lamp pole and shut my eyes. The coolness of the pole against my forehead calms me down. I take deep breaths. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

The madness clears and a recurrent memory budes to the fore.

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It is a Saturday morning at the Brussels National Airport. I have just got off the plane from Nigeria. Swaying like a model, my dreams in the black leather bag slung across my left shoulder, I walk over to the immigration counter on my left: the one with the slower moving line of mainly black people clutching passports in one hand and dragging heavy hand luggage in the other.

“Name?” The immigration officer sounds bored. This is a routine poem that he recites for a living.

“Mary Eze.”

“Address?” He glances at me as he flips through to the page with the visa.

“Baarlestraat 101, Beerse.” The address is easy to remember.

He says something in Dutch.

“I don't speak Flemish. Sorry.” I smile and tuck a stray braid behind my ear.

I hate Mary Eze for having braids in the passport picture. I loathe having my hair braided. I much prefer just having my hair permed.

“French? *Parlez vous Francais?* You speak French?” The voice is authoritative this time.

“No.”

“How. Long. You. Live. Here?” His words come out slow and deliberate. His eyes never leave my face.

“Six years,” I mutter, realizing that my palms are getting clammy.

“Please. Stand. Here. At the side.” He motions for me to move away from the queue so he can attend to the next in line. My passport lies open on his desk. I think of the Nigerian girl, Amina, suffocated in the plane by the *gendarmes*, the Belgian police men escorting her back to Nigeria after her asylum request was turned down. A necklace of sweat forms around my neck; I wipe it off.

Waiting, I recall Kunle assuring me that white men cannot tell the difference between one black woman and another, that I was safe with the passport he had got me. “Sista, nobody go ask you

any question. Oyibo go just look de face, look you, pass you on. Welcome to Belgium!” He had laughed when I asked him how I could convince the authorities I was Mary Eze. Married to a Belgian. Been living in Belgium for so long without speaking the local language.

I transfer my bag to my right shoulder and unbutton my denim jacket. I feel the urge to untie the laces of my canvas shoes.

I never wanted to come here. America was my first choice. “The *lend* of the *Buhraave* end the *Fuhree*.” That was what Ikem called it. He said in America, one became rich simply by wiping old people’s butts. And one could throw abuse at the president’s face and go free. “Not like here, *men*,” he had said. “Call Obasanjo a coconut head to his face and you’ll spend the rest of your days in Kirirkiri maximum prison, being fed nothing but water and stale bread. This country is shitty, *men*. Crap!”

Ikem and I met one Friday night at the *Tastee*’s in Opebi. I was concentrating on the chicken pie I had ordered when a man asked if he could share my table. I almost burst out laughing; Lagos men do not need anyone’s permission to sit wherever they wanted to sit. I stole a look at him as he sat down. Apart from an elongated waist which gave him the look of the etiolated shadow of a much taller man, he was not altogether bad looking. He had ordered *jollof* rice.

“Good choice,” I said.

“Really?” he smiled and that was when I noticed his dimples, my Achilles’ heel. He said he lived in the States and had just come home on vacation.

We talked about Lagos: its frequent power failures and its unbearable heat. We sat at the table long after we had both finished eating. The next day, we went to the new nightclub in Ikoyi, *Cozmic*.

Then we began to see each other everyday, prying into each other’s lives. He told me of his home in Atlanta with its four bedrooms and a garden. He told me of his wide plasma TV, bigger than any I had ever seen at Mega Plaza. “It covers the wall of my TV room, *men!*” His stories fed my hunger for a better life away from the dust of Lagos. From the vicious mosquitoes, from the smell of death and decay which pervaded my father’s one room *face me I face you* apartment where I still lived, cheek by jowl with rats and cockroaches. Three years after graduation, I was

still unable to get a job as my father did not know anyone who knew anyone who knew anyone influential enough.

Ikem was the answer to my prayer. A man I loved who would take me away from the rut my life was falling into. We were going to have three children: two boys with their father’s dimples, deep enough to hold water, and a girl who would be a mini me. We had their names planned. Even chosen the schools they would go to. But then Chinyere appeared. Chinyere with the very thick ankles and the splayed toes that made her look like an elephant with duck feet.

I had heard from a mutual friend that Ikem had asked her to marry him. When I confronted him in his house, he said it was nothing personal, but, one had to “be pragmatic, *men*. I don’t even enjoy sleeping with Chinyere but she is a nurse. And nurses are hot in America, *men*.”

I looked around the room and noticed the framed picture. I picked it up and hurled it at his face; I missed and the frame hit the blue wall behind him, smashing and falling on the floor.

“I will do three jobs. I will clean. I will scrub. I will wipe octogenarian butts. I will find something. I have a degree for heaven’s sake!” I wailed.

“Baby,” he said, his tone amused, “a B.A in Linguistics won’t guarantee you a well-paying job in the States, *men*. Baby, understand. Life in *Yankee* is hard, *men* and with a working nurse by your side, your life is made easier. You will always have a place in my heart. I will always love you.” He laid a broad palm on my shoulder. I shook it off.

“You money-loving son-of-a bitch!” I hurled at him. I cursed him and his children to come. They would have their mother’s thick ankles and stagger on three feet. I cried until snot clogged my nose. “I will make it to America,” I promised him, wiping snot with the back of my hand. I had every intention of making that come true.

Three weeks later, I was at Randle Avenue meeting Kunle, a man whose contacts a former classmate of mine, Ngozi, had given me. She said he was one of the few people in Lagos who could get me an American visa through the backstreets of Surulere.

Ngozi, with a B.Sc. degree in Microbiology, worked for Kunle on a commission basis. For every customer she got him, she got 10 percent. “The pay is good, I can’t complain,” she sighed

when I asked her if she did not want to leave the country. “I searched for a job for an entire year. I thank God, I finally got this one. It pays my siblings’ school fees and keeps me dressed. Those who want to leave, let them go. Me, I will stay on,” she concluded.

There was no way I could stay on in Nigeria. I had to go to America, make loads of money and build a proper house for my parents. A house where they would not have to share a bathroom with five different families. And my mother would have her own kitchen to preside over rather than worry every day that one of the other women who used the communal kitchen had stolen some of her palm oil or pinched some salt. I did not care how hard I had to work to achieve that. “Me, I want to check out. I’m tired of this place,” I told her. “*Ike aguwugo m*.”

“An American visa costs 500 thousand Naira,” Kunle said, picking his tooth with a splinter from a chewing stick.

“I don’t have half a million naira, sir” I said. My voice came out squeaky. Like a plastic toy. I was aware of the silence in the closed room, a silence broken only by the humming of the air conditioner behind the lanky man swivelling on a chair.

Five hundred thousand naira was beyond me. I could not lay my hands on such an amount even in my dreams.

He did a 360 degree turn on his chair and removed the stick from his mouth. He placed it on the table and clasped his palms together, as if he were saying a prayer. Resting his chin on the tip of his fingers, he barked, “America is not de only abroad, you know.” Smiling and showing off a gold tooth that glittered like a promise, he continued. “Dere are other places, you know.”

“Like where? London?” I asked.

“No. No. Not London. Dat road don close. De immigration people dere don wise up. Spain. Belgium. Italy. All dese ones I can get you for 200,000. Everybody wan go America. But you can make money in any *abroad*. Anywhere is better dan dis our godforsaken country.” He picked up the splint again and began to pry something loose from a lower tooth.

I knew nothing about Spain. Italy had the mafia. And all the second hand cars that congested Lagos roads came from Belgium. That gave it an edge over the rest. It made it seem somehow familiar and confirmed for me that it must be a rich country.

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I come back to my senses when an officer taps me on the shoulder. “Follow me, madam.”

He has the build of the Michelin man in the TV advertisement: small head, a huge middle and very skinny legs. The rings around his stomach do not wobble as he walks; he has a cast iron stomach.

He enters a small room with three tables, a desktop PC on each table and a fax machine. There, two men in police uniforms are sitting at desks. He takes me to the desk by the other door and sits me down opposite him.

“So, what is your name?” he asks, his face plain as cardboard.

“Mary Eze.”

He pulls a drawer and brings out a big magnifying glass.

“Real name?” he asks again, holding my passport open; he brings it close to his face, his left eye shut, peering through his magnifying glass with the other eye, all the while muttering under his breath, “Real name?”

“That’s my real name.” I answered, twisting the copper bangles on my left wrist.

He sighs and drops both passport and magnifying glass on the desk. He stretches out a podgy arm and reaches across his table for a thermos flask and a mug. I watch him fill the mug with coffee and close his right hand around it. His hand looks like a well fed baby’s; dimpled at the base. He takes a sip.

“I ask you again. What’s your name?”

“Mary Eze,” I repeat, hardly opening my mouth for fear that if I did I would surely cry.

“I will have to check your luggage, madam,” he says lifting himself off his chair. My suitcase is beside me. The other two policemen, one with hair the colour of the rising sun and the other with brown hair the shape of a mushroom, already have their eyes on the suitcase.

Michelin man pulls on a glove, opens the suitcase and dig in with his gloved hand. I know he will find nothing incriminating; Kunle warned me against taking any documents that would reveal my real identity. Yet, the tightening around my ankles worsens. When he lifts a pair of my red knickers and swings them over his head, the three of them laugh.