

A Night in Venus

A short story by Arinze Obiezue

Here goes another man. I watch as he slips one leg after the other into his checkered boxers before climbing into his blue ripped jeans. His eyes dart across the crimson-lit room in search of his silk shirt which flew off seconds after he barged into my room while unbuckling his belt. He still doesn't look at me. After they are done with my body, they never look at me because in my face they find their greatest terror staring back at them—an unfiltered reflection of their own true selves.

“Time up, sir!” Neptune announces from outside the room. “Next client is waiting, and Venus needs rest!”

I am so happy to hear Neptune's voice again that a smile almost steals its way onto my tired face. Last week, Aditya had locked Neptune up alongside all the queens in Ward 3 after someone reported that they were planning to escape the Black Hole. But the name of the villa is a metaphor understood only by those trapped in it.

“Sorry, Nep. I'm leaving now. I just need to find my shirt.” Client 119 replies as he raises the edge of the sheets still searching for his damned shirt. I hear Neptune murmur something at the door before walking away.

I'm now tired of being entertained by his apparent blindness. "It's over there." I say, pointing at the dark thing resting on the leather couch in the corner of the room which, a few minutes ago, was not a couch but a support for my flailing legs.

He still doesn't look at me. I watch as he buttons up his tight shirt just enough to let his bulky chest breathe. The same veined hairy chest I drew my fingers across as he pounded into me so violently that it felt like he was digging for rare minerals.

"Take this." He says as he mindlessly flings a wad of cash at me. He thinks his generous tips compensate for his stingy acknowledgement of my presence. He picks up his denim jacket, pulls out his car keys, and heads for the exit. I watch as he shuts the door behind him, pulls his veil of machismo back on, and heads into the night. There goes another liar.

Climbing lazily out of the sheets, I walk across the room, curl into the couch and caress each note and smile as a familiar scent ascends into my nostrils. You see, I like money because, just like me, it gives people the freedom to realise their deepest desires by tearing away their inhibitions. It does for me what I do for these men, and what Aditya continues to do for me.

I am just about to doze off when I hear voices at the door. Neptune is talking with a man whose voice I don't recognise. *Must be a new liar*, I think to myself. I spring up from the couch, and dash into the bathroom to freshen up. I notice they changed the sheets. Aditya doesn't compromise on hygiene, especially because of the kind of work we do.

Stepping out of the bathroom with steam still in my hair and water droplets percolating on my skin, I notice a figure spread out on the bed. As I tiptoe towards the bed, I hear a quiet snore. *Did I really take that long? Aditya will lock me up if she hears of this.* My thoughts are interrupted by my rising libido as the anatomy of this strange man begins to reveal itself. He is lean, but the muscle definition in his arms and legs is sculptural. Even though the light interferes with the colours, I can still see his dark complected skin like mine, but with an even richer glimmer that, I imagine, is a virtue of being out in the sun often. His light t-shirt, khaki shorts, and Nike sneakers give me the impression that he is a college student. They haven't come here since last spring after one of the boys got dragged out by his mother who had caught the gossip that her son was visiting "ungodly places."

"Hey." The college kid whispers. *He is awake.*

"Hey." I whisper back. *Why am I whispering?*

I feel his horny eyes on my skin, scanning every inch of my naked body as if assessing his money's worth. Satisfied with his purchase, he unbuckles his belt, pulls down his shorts, wraps his slender fingers around the length of his throbbing dick, and flashes me a desperate gaze. I descend onto my knees and get straight to work.

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Heaving chests, sweaty skin, and the dense stench of sex. These are the aftermaths of what felt like hours of having this college kid pummel my insides. I am beginning to wonder how many hours he had paid for to be able to stay for so long. I hear his breath begin to decelerate.

“I’m Anthony, and you?” The college kid asks, panting quietly, as he turns to look at me. I am not sure which startles me more: him talking to me, or him looking at me.

“I’m Venus.” I reply in between stutters as I turn to face him. Only now do I see the beauty in his eyes. Loveless sex really does limit our perception of others to see only the evanescent pleasure their genitals offer.

“No, I mean your *real* name.” He insists, looking into my eyes with a piercing earnestness that crumbles my resistance to reveal this part of my identity. *What is it about this boy?*

“The name is Benjamin.” I finally respond in almost a whisper.

You see, Aditya renames all the queens after they join the villa as a way of protection. “With your new name, no one will ever find you here. You’re safe with me.” She usually says. But why planets? Some of the other queens say that it’s a way of subliminally reinforcing her dominance over us as our matron. The rumour is that with Aditya being a namesake of the Hindu sun god and us being renamed after mere planets, she is insinuating that we are sentenced to spend our days revolving around her orbit bound by her unforgiving centripetal force. I don’t know what to believe anymore.

We are still looking into each other when I feel his sweaty palm glide across my waist and finally latch onto my ceiling-facing buttcheek.

“Benji, can I call you that? How long ‘ve you been here?” He breaks the silence. I like the sound of ‘Benji’ in the deep timbre of his voice.

“Two years.” I reply, shocked at my own words. *That’s how long it’s been?*

“Yo!” He remarks, almost as if he overheard my thoughts. I feel his legs move under the sheets to tangle with mine. *How’re his feet this smooth? Must be a rich kid.*

“Aditya found you too?” He asks, after nesting his legs into mine and pulling me so close that I feel the pubic hair around his crotch prickle my naked belly. *How does he know Aditya?* I want to ask, but I decide to swallow the lump in my throat.

“Yes, and she brought me here...to the villa.” Aditya had found me limping and weeping along the streets of Brick Avenue with no sense of direction. Where my stepfather had inflicted black eyes, bruised joints, and bleeding skin, Aditya replaced with soothing ointments and the opportunity of freedom. But nobody is really free in the Black Hole, I should have known.

“But you’re not like the other queens.” He says matter-of-factly while inspecting my face for a reaction.

His words make my skin crawl. I don't know whether they were intended to make me feel superior or to feel like an outcast.

You see, I am not like the other queens. I am more masculine, more 'macho'. The other queens are more flamboyant—the type that you notice from a mile away in their brightly coloured tops and leg-strangling pants that make you wonder how their dicks fits into such a squeeze. I, on the other hand, simply wear my oversized shirt, baggy grey sweats, and off-white sneakers with a manly gait to go with it. The classic urban male.

I turn my poker face away from his stare, gaze at the ceiling, and exhale breathily. I'm surprised I still have this much air left in my lungs after all the screaming this kid's thrustings got out of me.

“Different? How do you mean?” I ask, feigning naivety.

“Different like...you're more of a man. You get what I mean?” He asks half-rhetorically “The others are more like women with their high-pitched voices and their effeminate mannerisms.” I catch a glimpse of the repugnance on his face and a cold shiver runs down my spine.

“But you're a man!” He smiles. “And I like it. That's why I wanted you.” His hands are in synchrony with his words as he lets go of my buttcheek and grips my waist, pulling my torso closer to his in emphasis of his 'want.'

I know he expects his words to make me feel special or chosen, but they only fill me with disgust. It's now clear that he wanted me, not because of *me* but

because he found in my hole a burial ground for his self-loathe. No wonder he penetrated me so deeply—he was burying himself. With every stroke, the idea of fucking a more masculine queen made him feel less of a queen himself.

Now, I am the one staring. I struggle to suppress the venomous fury that burns my chest, but I must. In our line of work, the client is always right.

“Why did you come to the Black Hole?” I finally ask, irritated by the loud silence. “Apart from the obvious.” I add.

He chuckles, I don't. I notice the crimson light flash a reflection in his eyes as his eyeballs angle in thought.

“I wanted something different. I usually go with my mates to this other villa in Vice Creek that is more hidden. Nobody wants to get caught again, you see.” He pauses. “I also wanted to see what my mother is up to here.”

I pull away from him and sit up, positive that the shock on my face is inconcealable.

“Your mother? Aditya?!?” I am almost yelling as I shoot him a fiery glance. He seems to be enjoying this as he places his forefinger on my lips to quieten me.

“Yes, Aditya.” Anthony says with a mischievous smirk appearing on his chiseled face.

“Does she know that you're...”

“Don’t say it!” He cuts me off. The smirk vanishes.

We both stare into space. Now I no longer wonder how he is able to stay so long in my room. His mother owns the damned Black Hole.

“No she doesn't know, but Neptune does. He helped sneak me in.”

Neptune and Anthony? I think to myself, almost out loud, but I decide not to probe. “Why haven’t you told your mother?” I ask, gazing into oblivion.

“My mother?” He asks in between throaty chuckles. “You think that because she gives you all these perks, she supports any of this? She only keeps you and the other queens here because she makes money off your black holes.”

“You see, Benji...” He continues. “It’s easy for people like my mother to feign support for people like us for as long as it’s in their benefit to do so. I think she’d make a great politician.” We both steal quick glances at each other and begin laughing loudly, snorts and all.

The queens in the other rooms must be wondering what is happening in Room 21, but we don’t care, we keep laughing.

After laughing my lungs into a knot, I barely have enough air to speak.

“Ever wondered why people come to places like this?” I ask while trying to catch my breath.

“Tell me.” he blurts back, also catching his breath.

“I think they come here to find happiness.” I begin. “Outside these walls, they pursue safety and suppress parts of themselves in order to conform to a set mold. But in here, they are able to live freely and dangerously, basking in the fullness of themselves, even if for just a few minutes or hours—depending on how much time their pockets can afford.” I conclude with a feeling of dryness in my throat. I haven’t talked this much, if at all, in such a while.

“Benji, but what about people like you?” Anthony rebutts.

The accusatory tone in his question makes me turn to look at him. I notice his forehead creasing into a frown and his juvenile moustache twitching like he’s about to spit venom.

“You hide behind these walls because you’re scared. Scared of having to give up the hand-me-downs and the security you get from my mother and going out to confront the real world yourself.” He pauses for a breath, then continues. “You’re just like us, only that you find your happiness in the safety that places like this afford you, even when it rips away your very soul. But others like me find our happiness in our ability to oscillate between both ends of our pursuit of safety and happiness in different spaces without selling our souls.”

I sit motionless, still looking at him, with so much to say but choked by the guilt that flushes the words back down my dry throat. *I couldn’t have sold my own soul.*

I turn around, straighten the pillow and lay back down beside him. I don't look at him. This time, he doesn't entangle his legs with mine or grab my buttcheek or pull me close. He just lays quietly drowned by the sound of our pulsing breaths and the loudness of his own thoughts. I think we both feel somewhat apologetic for washing each other's dirty linen so ruthlessly, but we don't apologise. We just lie and breathe.

"Will you be okay here?" Anthony asks as he turns to look at me. I can feel his flaccid crotch crawl up my thigh as he settles into his new posture.

"I don't know." I blurt. *How can he ask me this when he has just challenged my very existence within these walls?*

I watch as he sits up, reaches for his shorts somewhere on the edge of the bed where I had earlier flung it and, from it, pulls out a tiny notebook and a pencil. He tears a page out and starts scribbling something. It's been so long since I heard the sound of lead scraping against the surface of paper. Now, I find its sound weirdly soothing.

"Here." He says as he stretches out his right arm handing me the torn-out page. I am distracted by the muscle definition in his expanded biceps and contracted triceps.

"Benji?" His voice draws my attention back to the piece of paper in his outstretched palm.

I take the paper from his hands and shoot him a look of suspicion before descending my eyes on the black swirly lines of his cursive handwriting. *An address? A phone number?* Before these questions escape my mouth, he seems to have already read my mind because I see him wearing a knowing smile.

“I like you, Benji. Let’s meet up sometime. Outside this place.” He says as he begins to pull up his khaki shorts and slip into his light t-shirt one arm after the other. “We have a lot to talk about.” *Do we?*

I hear footsteps approaching the door and then a voice calls out in almost a whisper. “Tony, hurry up. She’s inspecting Ward 2 now. She’ll be here in Ward 1 any minute.” It’s Neptune.

I sit up and rest my back on the bed’s plush sham as I watch Anthony hurriedly tie his laces, pick up a baseball cap, and sprint for the door. He suddenly stops before he grabs the handle. He turns and flashes me a smile.

“Don’t tell my mother.” He says with a chuckle. I return a smile. He shuts the door behind him and, like Client 119, puts his veil of machismo back on and heads into the night.

There goes another liar seeking to bury his truth in the holes of men too scared to live out theirs. There goes another man.