

[Home](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Autumn 2007](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)

THE LAST BUS STOP

BY MOLARA WOOD

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Maryam called from the Immigration Detention Centre. Two years to the day you left, Ronke, and now this. They allowed Maryam one phone call and she called me. Not that she could have called anyone else.

Lectures finished at midday, and I'd just returned home when the call came. I had not heard from Maryam for several weeks and didn't think it odd. She'd hooked up with this flash guy on Old Kent Road. I didn't like him but I couldn't say who she should or shouldn't date, especially as I could not pay her school fees or get her visa renewed.

Remember our first meeting in Maryam's old room in the university student halls, Ronke? We chatted for hours, then you stubbed out your cigarette and said, "Your eyebrows, Sade, they're not buzzing."

You set to work with a pair of tweezers, and helped shape my brows from then on. You're gone now, but I have learned to keep the brows buzzing. Your own grooming was impeccable of course. You always wore Christian Dior's Rose de Bois lipstick. It gave the merest hint of pink on brown skin, and blended with barely-there lip-liner for the nude look you favored. I tried that look once myself, but it wasn't quite the same.

"The perfect day for a 'Johnny-Just-Come' to see Oxford Street, Sade!" you said to me on the bus days later. I was with you and Maryam on the top deck of the No. 98 as it turned left at the end of Edgware Road onto Marble Arch. The arch from which the place takes its name stood glorious, facing us from Hyde Park. The arch wore a banner like a proud sash. "May the 4th be with you," it proclaimed. It was the fourth day of May. I did not know why the banner was there, but I said a quiet 'amen' to the prayer of the arch.

"Never let a prayer go without an amen," Mother always said. "You never know, an angel might be flying by." She was also fond of the old adage: Twenty children cannot play together for twenty years. I remembered that, after Maryam's call.

You had beamed as I wished upon the arch back then, flashing your big, capped teeth. "Amazing, Sade, to be in London eight months and not come on Oxford Street!" We laughed that I, born in London, was being shown the city as a newcomer. My parents took me back home as a baby, and now I had returned as any Nigerian fresh off the plane, the Right of Abode visa sticker on my green passport one of the few indicators of British birth.

Places like Oxford Street were shopping precincts to me. Only the most privileged of the

English could afford to live around there, I believed. Then there was you, who had a room in a premium property, a listed building in one of the streets behind Selfridges. Bathroom and kitchen were shared; and how it amazed me, that you paid more rent than some did for five bedroom detached houses in less exclusive parts of London. Or your daddy paid. What with your family so affluent and you having lived prior to London in a sprawling, secluded mansion in Ikoyi, Lagos.

You went to fashion school part-time and the rest of the time, you aspired to big time modeling. You had the height for it, and enough personality for three people. If anyone was going to be a supermodel, it was you.

"Here we are," you said as we alighted from the bus near Marks & Spencer. With you and Maryam, I discovered every nook and cranny of the Oxford Street area. The chemist on South Molton Street where we bought designer lipsticks at knock-down prices; New Bond Street where rich Nigerians visiting London shopped; and the Wigmore Street boutique where they stocked up on expensive, matching shoes and bags. Not-so-rich ones living in London occasionally went for the 'shoe-and-bag' sets too, to accessorize iro-and-buba attires at lavish owambe parties on weekends. To reassure themselves they were doing fine, and to create home away from home.

We snuck through Duke Street on one side of Selfridges to reach your place. Potpourri fragrance hung delicately over the room as we entered. You pulled a cord to draw apart heavy drapes and natural light streamed out the darkness. Maryam plopped herself on the sofa and I sat on what turned out to be a waterbed. I lifted my feet off the thick carpet, relishing the gentle motion.

"Here's an autograph I got from Naomi Campbell during London Fashion Week." You flicked back your Naomiesque shoulder-length hair extensions with the obligatory part in the middle.

"This could be you one of these days." Feet back on the carpet, I leaned towards Maryam to study Naomi's model scrawl.

"And we'll be telling everyone you're our friend, Ronke. Imagine!" Maryam gushed.

"Well, it doesn't look like it will happen anytime soon, not while I remain here anyway." You kicked off your six-inch heels. Light bounced off a dainty silver ring on a pedicured toe. "Things are just not moving as I'd hoped. They tell you: sorry, not the look we want."

"Why?"

"Difficult to say."

"Would it be easier if you were white?"

"Oh, definitely. I could compete for lucrative contracts with the big labels. But they're mostly closed off -- wrong 'look'. So you're struggling for catwalk space and the odd magazine shoot; don't even think about being the cover-girl."

"So you're constantly told: 'wrong look'?" Maryam went to the corner pedestal to boil the kettle for chamomile tea.

"Don't get me wrong; I do understand, to some extent. I mean, you have these fashion houses who have promoted a certain look and lifestyle for decades; and it may not be entirely easy to suddenly project all that onto a dark face. You see why, sometimes."

"Doesn't make it any easier for you though."

"No, it doesn't. Look at Naomi, still the only black girl from here to make it that big."

"Well, from what I've read in the British press, they can't stand Naomi." I took a biscuit and pushed the selection your way but you declined. I could never tell who watched her weight the more, you or Maryam. You jogged to Regent's Park and back every morning. Maryam never missed weekly gym sessions. Walking was all the exercise I ever got, but you two never picked on my fuller, size fourteen figure. "I know Naomi brings much of it on herself," I added, "but I begin to suspect they love to hate her a bit much."

"But good old Naomi, she keeps going, and I intend to do the same. Things should be easier in America, especially since the Berlin wall's gone, and I can travel with ease in the West with my Russian passport."

I knew your parents met as students in Moscow in the late sixties. A framed photograph of them with their baby in the snow of Gorky Park sat on the dressing table. While the cold war lasted, you were a black youngster with a 'red menace' nationality. Now that you felt Nigerian, our passport had become burdensome at Western airports, thanks to the perception that we are a nation of fraudsters and criminals. You became a Russian of convenience.

"I have model friends who aren't doing badly in New York." You looked at the greying sky outside the window. "Yeah, I think that's where I'm headed. America. The Last Bus Stop."

I turned to Maryam who had sunk into the sofa, holding her mug close as though for warmth. We were thinking the same thing: we would soon be losing our friend to America. God's own country. The Last Bus Stop for many of our generation who, once they got there, never seemed to think there was anywhere left to go -- or return.

Naomi's autograph lay beside me on the bed. I closed the notebook and gave it back. You stuffed it in your Fendi bag, a wistful aspect to your high cheek-boned face. Silence lingered as you rifled through your collection of vinyls. We had embraced CDs long before, but not you, Ronke. You stuck to your vinyls.

"How about some music?" You held up a record.

Maryam pulled a face and shrugged, surprised at your choice. Moonlight Sonata wafted over our doubts. I must have heard the piece before, but now I truly heard it. It was like being back in a mother's womb; like melody in a vast, amniotic sea. I missed home. But in that room with you and Maryam and Beethoven, I felt comforted.

R'n'B and Rap were the thing for our crowd. There was the occasional King Sunny Ade or Ebenezer Obey pushed into the cassette player when we wanted Juju to remind us of home, of music our parents played. Or Fela Anikulapo-Kuti when we needed Afrobeat to stir us into believing our generation mattered, that we had the power to change things back in our country. Fela certainly made us feel it, though we had secretly given up the faith.

I left your room that day with my musical world grown more expansive. I had thought until then that classical music was white man's incomprehensible noise. That was the great thing about being around you, Ronke. The confidence that the world was wide, lush and inviting and you had your place in it, a sure footing that could not slip. Back in Lagos, Maryam and I would never move in the same circles as you. We'd probably never meet your kind -- rich and privileged with the world yours for the taking, able to enjoy Beethoven if you chose. But in London we were your best friends. Remember how, when irritated by those Nigerians we considered beneath us, we'd smirk, "London is a leveler"? When it came to leveling Nigerians, London was indiscriminate. It leveled either way, up or down the social ladder. Maryam and I didn't mind that

London leveled us up with you, Ronke.

Looking back, I see it was all that time in your company that got Maryam thinking about becoming a model. It also fueled her dreams of escape to America, The Last Bus Stop.

Maryam was too short to be a model of course but carried herself like one. She was forced to take a break from university, unable to afford the fees. Money from home had dried up. Her widowed mother's fabric retailing business in Lagos was badly hit by a ban on imported textiles; then armed robbers swept the shop clean of expensive laces, voiles and jacquards. Maryam's student work permit ran out with her study visa, so she could not continue work as a part-time beauty consultant with her new, illegal immigrant status. She did the odd job where they were not too fussy about papers; and kept close to her beloved haunts by hanging with you. Now you are gone, and tomorrow I will not attend lectures. I must go to Maryam, you see.

I remember the day you left for New York, Ronke. We saw you off to Gatwick Airport. When it was time to go through the passengers' only gates, you wrapped us in what you liked to call "major hugs."

Maryam sobbed on the Gatwick Express back to Victoria Station and I pushed tissues into her hands, embarrassed at the sneaky glances from other passengers. I realized then that Maryam was crying more for herself than for you. She hadn't found a way to escape her predicament as you had just done. When the sniffing stopped, Maryam slipped on the Gianfranco Ferre sunglasses you gave her. She looked a bit like the model she wanted to be then, but a monologue ensued.

"I hate phoning home now, what's the use? Mum can hardly feed my brothers, let alone find the foreign exchange to support me here."

I only listened, one arm round her shoulders.

"No use calling for money... Mum just cries and cries till my credit runs out. Last time I phoned she begged me to come back home. But, go home to what, Sade, tell me; go home to what? Go back a failure, a university drop-out. Go back with my head bowed when my contemporaries in Lagos have done better with their lives? No. I can't go back... I can't go back. Not just now."

Maryam eventually dozed off. Grateful for the lull, I looked at the English landscape rolling past the train window, thoughts turning to myself. Here I was in this country where I told anyone who cared to listen that I was British. I had my birth certificate after all, proving I was born in St Mary's Hospital in Paddington. You know how we always have to prove our right to be in this country. I was British, only I didn't feel it. But I had you and Maryam. You understood. As long as I had you two, I was fine.

Now on the lone sofa in my living room, I dial your US number. How to say it, Ronke? That Maryam was caught attempting to board a flight to America with a forged passport and is to be deported back to Nigeria? That the dodgy boyfriend took every penny she had left to facilitate her last dash for The Last Bus Stop? If Kate Moss could make it as a model without a great height, who was to say Maryam couldn't? And if she couldn't be a model in America, she could be other things, couldn't she? Ronke was there, was she not? Maryam blurted it all out to me when I saw her at the Immigration Detention Centre today. Now, I must in turn blurt it all out to you. You, Ronke, who started Maryam's dream rolling.

I hear the phone ringing from across the waters. The receiver feels moist next to my cheek as I wait for an answer. I think back to the day you left, the last time all three of us were together.

Maryam came out of your embrace with a pained face. "Remember," you told her gently, "if it's

not possible here, it may be possible elsewhere, okay?" Then you had to go. Bal À Versailles trailed softly in your wake. "It's very old," you once said of your perfume, "not a lot of people have it."

We watched you pass through the barriers, the tallest person in sight. From the other side, you turned and gave a last wave, smiling. Our own Naomi, gone to try your luck elsewhere. Even now I think of you when I hear Moonlight Sonata.

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Molar Wood won the inaugural John La Rose Memorial Short Story Competition (2008); and received a Highly Commended Story Award from the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association in 2007. A former arts columnist for *The Lagos Guardian*, her essays, reviews and short fiction have appeared in publications including: *Sable Litmag*, *In Posse Review*, *Drumvoices Revue*, *Humanitas*, *Chimurenga*, *Farafina*, *Per Contra* and in the book series, *African Literature Today (ALT)*. Work is forthcoming in several anthologies. She lives and works in Lagos, Nigeria.