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Temi comes over at twelve. She brings along the wine and the Kettle Chips I asked her to bring, as well as a packet of cigarettes. She called when she was at the till to ask if I needed a lighter, because the woman who was serving her had asked the same question. I could tell she had the phone in between her shoulder and her chin because I could hear her coat rustling. I said no to the lighter, because we had matches at home, but also because I knew I wouldn't end up smoking, not if my husband would be able to smell it on me.

She was late, I knew she would be. She told me she would get here by eleven but it was eleven forty-five when she called me from the shop. I knew she would be late before that, though, because she always is. It's her thing. She's the only person I let come to anything late. That's what happens when you're best friends. You let things slide. Besides, today we were supposed to have been in another country, acting like we didn't speak English and wearing sunglasses indoors, and it's my fault we're not – something that she

reminded me of when she informed me this morning that she would be coming over. I haven't seen her in almost a month so I can't really justify complaining. So anyway, she arrives at twelve. She gets out of the car mid-story, like she'd started telling it the moment she saw me approaching from the front door and just thought I'd pick up what I'd missed as she told the rest of it. She was talking about someone, I didn't know who.

It was someone who'd been sending her links to cat videos on YouTube. She said she didn't even know people still watched cat videos on YouTube, and I agreed, I thought we'd moved on to TikTok and Instagram for stuff like that. Anyway, she continued, I asked him to stop. I said, When have you ever known me to be a cat person? By then we've moved into the house, hugged, and she's kicked off her shoes at the front door. We go to the kitchen and open the wine, and she does what she usually does, downs one glass first and then slowly sips the next. I don't ask if she is planning to sober up and drive home later because I assume she'll be leaving her car and calling an Uber like she always does.

He said he thought the videos were funny, that I would like them because they're funny videos, that I don't need to like cats in order to enjoy them. I eat the Kettle Chips as she talks, letting them soften a little on my tongue before I chew them because the crunch will get in the way of me hearing what Temi is saying, and she hates repeating herself.

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I know that. I watched the videos, she says. They're quite funny. And since we won't be doing *cómo se dice* I'm seeing him on Tuesday. I have to clarify which person this is. She's seeing a few different guys and she gives them nicknames rather than calling them by their real names. If I tell you their names you'll get attached, she says. There's No Homo, who at dinner complimented a waiter's cufflinks and followed it by saying No Homo and then laughing, by himself, but who Temi finds funny even though she is laughing at him and not with him. Then there's TTM (Talk Too Much), the one who provides sad and lengthy monologues whenever Temi asks him a simple question like Where's your shirt from? or Would you like to share a starter? She only went out with him twice. After things fizzled out she messaged to ask him the name of the restaurant they'd been to and he sent her four paragraphs. So now they text platonically and she sends me the screenshots. Maybe we'll read through the new ones later. There's also Woman, so called because she discovered that's how he referred to her amongst his friends. She was tricked into meeting them on their second date when he invited her to have a picnic in the park but neglected to mention that his friends and family would be there. It was his birthday party.

This one, though, she's not told me about before – or at least I don't remember him. I did, she says when I tell her he doesn't ring a bell. She uses her arm to demonstrate how tall he is (about a foot taller than she is, apparently) and puts her

hand between her legs and knocks her knees together, hops from foot to foot. Oh. It all comes back to me. Desperate For The Loo? Yes! See I knew you'd remember. She swivels the packet of crisps towards herself. Now, I don't think he's boyfriend material, which is a problem, because of course I have the weddings coming up, so I need to keep him within striking distance, you know? I nod, take a large swig of wine and try the wine-tasting thing my husband was showing me on his phone the other day. Speaking of which, Temi says, where's yours?

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I met Temi when I was eleven. We were at the same secondary school, although by Year 10 she'd moved up a year, that's how intelligent she is. We both had the big rucksacks, the fresh braids with no colour because our school was strict about that, even though the white girls who went to the Caribbean on their summer holidays were allowed a single limp braid with coloured thread in it.

Temi accidentally bumped into me when we were getting changed after PE, and my deodorant slipped out of my hand and on to the floor. I picked it up and there was hair and some other unknown material stuck to it. It was organic because my mother had recently read about the link between deodorant and cancer somewhere and made my sisters and me throw away our old ones. The organic ones were seven

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pounds each and I knew she'd be angry if I came home and told her it was ruined. Temi grimaced as she peered over my shoulder to see what she'd done. Sorry yeah, she said, maybe just rinse it in the sink and it will come off? Even though it was an idiotic solution (because I was never going to let anything that had touched the floor anywhere near my body again), I appreciated the attempt at one, and said thanks. I was the last to leave the changing room because I wanted to sniff my armpits in peace to see what the damage was and she came back in to look for something just as I was doing it. She laughed and fished a spray deodorant out of her rucksack and held it out to me. It was the first time someone persuaded me to do something I had been told was wrong. Obviously that was the most innocent 'bad' thing I could have done at that age. But when you have the fear of your mother guiding you, there isn't a lot you're willing to do in the first place. After that we very naturally became friends. We ate lunch together, texted each other every day with the little credit we were allowed, studied for tests and exams together, and even our mothers became friends in a way, trading tips for how to talk your way out of a parking ticket and cursing about our fathers in Yoruba when they thought we couldn't understand. There are a few years between my sisters and me, and we have never been close. But Temi and me, we spent a lot of time together during those years, and we've been best friends ever since.

She is probably the only person in my life who has never wanted something from me, only for me.

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I turn to the cupboards to get a bowl and pour half of the Kettle Chips into it. He's where you think he is, I say, and she rolls her eyes. That man is a workaholic, I'm telling you. I did tell you. He never takes a day off. It's always work, work, work. You know you're in a throuple, right? she says. A what? I ask. A throuple, she repeats, annoyed. It's when three people are in a relationship together. In your case, the third person is his job. I've never met anyone who works as much he does. When's the last time he took a day off? What was the point of cancelling our holiday if he was just going to be at work the whole time? I thought you said he wanted you guys to spend more time together? And yet the other day didn't you tell me he's been coming home past eight most days? It's both impressive and terrifying. I thought I worked hard – she scoffs – I thought *you* worked hard to pretend to remain interested in him, but this man, this man is truly something special. How does he expect to make a baby with you if he's never at home? I take a large gulp of my wine and swish it around in my cheeks like it's Listerine. It's a contentious subject, the baby thing. When I told her we were going to start trying for one she thought I was having some kind

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of crisis. Then she disappeared to Lagos for a month and I took that as a sign she didn't want to talk about it any more.

The truth is that I don't want children. Or I have never actively considered the reality of having them. I am not maternal, and am unconvinced that I've witnessed parenting that is good enough to replicate. I can even admit that I'm a little selfish. I like to remain in control, and children – babies – do not allow for that. But over time my husband has convinced me – or I've let him, and a recent (and deeply uncomfortable) conversation with his mother, who is nice but very much believes that the world revolves around her son – that we should at least try for one child. I'd sat across from her in her house and listened to her explain that it is our duty as children to continue the family line, the family name, by building our own and honouring our parents with grandchildren. That my desire to wait was self-serving, and that I should remember that it's not all about me. She used her eyes to guide my gaze towards my husband, then back to herself and said to me, Your parents must have told you this now? I looked again at my husband – who was in silent but clear agreement with his mother – then at my mother-in-law, and nodded slowly. She nodded back, and that was the end of the discussion. Now whenever she sees me, not pregnant, she frowns.

Temi and I used to argue with other people about how children are the worst kind of pollution, that really if we wanted

to help the planet we should kill half of the population, then ourselves, and use the remains as compost for planting trees. That was after watching a strangely intense documentary in Geography, but even though the mass-suicide idea faded away, the no-children sentiment remained – sort of. Yet one brief conversation with my mother-in-law during which I could see my husband daydreaming about holding a baby as I lay sweating in a hospital bed later, I was apparently trying for a baby. I stopped taking birth control. I was swallowing daily vitamins and avoiding drinking coffee. I was weirdly proud of myself for it, even though the period pains I've experienced in the last three months have been more than any human should bear. But amidst all this, my husband got promoted – yay for him and everything – and now he's just never home, ever. It's difficult to have a baby with someone who is never around. I mostly only see him in the middle of the night, when I get up to snack or wee.

This morning we craned our necks over the sink to look as only one line appeared on the test. I went to pick it up and he stopped my hand by holding his in the way. It says you need to wait at least fifteen minutes, he said. I'm aware – it's been almost seven. So then we need to wait the next eight minutes out. You're going to be late, and another line won't show up in eight minutes. He looked at me for a second then looked back to the test, like he was about to miss the miraculous arrival of the line. Why are you so sure? Because

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this is the sixth test I've taken in three months and nothing ever changes after the first three minutes. He pinched at the bottom of his nose and left the room, then I heard the front door open and close. I waited a minute – for him to come back and say he'd left his phone or his car key – and lifted the test and squinted at it. Then I pressed the pedal on the bin, dropped the test inside and washed my hands.

I'm not even convinced he still wants kids, I eventually respond to Temi, who has been watching me. Look, sis, she says, leaning over the kitchen counter to touch my arm, you've never wanted them anyway. I say bin the whole thing and get an IUD. I laugh because she does and then she takes her hand away, swallows a large amount of wine, lifts her glass off the counter, stands up. Anyway, baby talk is boring. She walks out of the kitchen and into the hallway, then comes back for the bag of crisps. How's the remodel going?

We've been remodelling the upstairs bathrooms and library for the last year. I don't mean just redecorating, I mean changing the whole shape and structure. They were perfectly fine before – even my mother, who is notoriously judgemental of anything I do that has not required her input, said our home was a 'nice' place. And yet last year my husband decided that he wanted to rip the whole thing apart. He didn't explain why exactly, but he was adamant about it. I tend not to be concerned about these things, and I didn't

think it would take very long. But we've been remodelling the same three rooms for a year now and we've had to use the downstairs bathroom for the entire time. I know I sound spoiled. Oh we have three bathrooms and I have to use the downstairs one, but we have a lot of stairs, and it's a long way to travel for a shower or a poo.

I take Temi upstairs and point at the drawings pinned to the walls in each room, the paint samples dotted around and the Thermos in the corner of one of the bathrooms that has been there for a year because a contractor we tried out left it behind. I lead her into the library where the floor is covered with something like a see-through tarpaulin and it makes an irritating noise as we walk across it to get to the window that's just been installed. You didn't win on the window, huh? Temi asks. I shake my head no and look at it again. It's one large single window that goes across the entire back wall of the library. It's the only thing that my husband has decided on and not changed his mind about in the past year. We actually argued about it – and normally I wouldn't have minded – but the idea of the window was so garish to me, I don't know why anyone would need a whole wall as a window. He said that it was elegant and stylish, and I said it would make the room cold. He said we had heated flooring and I said we shouldn't be spending extra money every month to heat a room that is cold because of a wall-sized window. His response was to smile and say, I don't think

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we're really people who need to be concerned about money, are we? Eventually, I realised that I didn't care enough to press the issue, and let him have it.

Now you need a maid, Temi says as we look below us at the half-done patio. Why? I ask. Because then we would have hot chocolates to warm us in this bloody freezing room.

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Temi wouldn't call herself rich but she is. Her father works for an oil company and her mother is a GP. Then of course her mother's father is one of the largest shareholders at the company where her father works. Her father earned the job he has, though – she made a point of telling me that when she explained that she was not rich, even though she is. The first time I went to her house, the maid, who was white English and wearing one of those black and white uniforms that I haven't seen on anyone else since I watched *Princess Diaries 2*, said 'Hello, Miss' and took my coat at the door and then asked what I wanted to eat and drink. She stood and waited for my answer, but the uniform looked so comical, and the house girls I'd seen in Nigeria wore their own clothes, so I thought it was some kind of weird joke, and eventually Temi answered for both of us. Then there's the actual house – it's big, like big-big. At the time I didn't even know houses like that existed – I do now, because I live in

one – but back then I had to subtly pop my eyes back inside my head and pretend it was perfectly normal.

It wasn't like a show home either, where everything looks like no one lives there and the furniture is being rented by the hour. They had 'family' photos, a disproportionate number of which only featured Temi's two older brothers; there were board games in the living room and a half-finished jigsaw puzzle on one of the long, grand dining tables. They had a fridge with various wedding invitations on it, messages written with those magnet letters no one really has any more. They even had a chalkboard wall where someone had written 'House Shopping List' in a beautiful cursive. Temi showed me her room, with its posters and bookshelves, and clothes all over the floor. She showed me her parents' separate studies, the reading room, and then she took me into the kitchen where the maid had prepared two hot chocolates and grilled cheese sandwiches, each with a small side salad.

I wasn't poor, but I wasn't rich either, and everything about Temi fascinated me. She didn't flaunt her wealth but she never pretended it didn't exist. She didn't care when the other Nigerian girls in our school claimed she wasn't Nigerian enough because she had only been to Nigeria once. We were two of maybe thirty Black girls at a grammar school whose architecture was desperate to communicate that it was teetering on the edge of being private. We were sister to a boys' school which was a stone's throw away across