

chicken bones

Last week it was chicken and rice, no stew. Just the chicken and the rice. Yesterday it was rice- no chicken, no stew. Today it's just the chicken bones.

I tried my best not to sound disrespectful, "Ma, these- these are chicken bones."

"I see bone dishes on TikTok all the time, Maame."

"Yeah, the bones of beef or pork or something. *In a soup* or on bread." She doesn't reply, so I continue, "These are raw. These are raw chicken bones."

"They're seasoned."

"From *last week*."

"They're clean."

She puts the lunch box with bones in my bag and avoids my eyes, "Have they been bullying you? About your lunch?"

I let her change the subject because it would lead to the same place. Dad is gone, and we can't afford anything else. She's going to say sorry and then cry herself to sleep when she thinks I can't hear her.

I don't know whether to tell her the truth, "I don't eat with them." *Because I'm embarrassed*. But it's like she hears it all.

"Oh," She looks away, pursing her lips and blinking too fast, "Even Senam?"

Senam is my girlfriend, "No, I eat with Senam. She's not like that. She knows we're... struggling."

Her shoulders perk at that, "I used to think Senam was a bully, but she's a nice girl."

"She is a little high maintenance," I like talking about Senam, "But she means well."

"Maybe... maybe you can invite her over?"

"Maybe," I say.

chicken bones

"I'd clean, of course, and we can use our nice plates-"

"Maybe."

At lunchtime, I can't bring myself to eat with Senam, so I sit in the back of an old playground to eat the chicken bones. They don't taste bad, just a little hard to chew.

But it's like every crunch mocks me- and all I can hear is the stupid crunch. And sometimes, I bite carelessly, and it pokes inside my cheek. Instead of feeling pain, I just get this overwhelming feeling, like *remember your place*.

"Maame."

I close the lunch box and quickly turn to face Senam, "Senny! What are you- what are you doing here?"

She crosses her arms and peers in my palm, "What are *you* doing, eh? *D3n na wo y3?* Are you cheating on me?"

"What? No!" I laugh, but it comes out like a cough. The chicken bone I didn't realize was in my hand starts to feel heavy, and I put it in my back pocket, "I just..."

I want to tell her that I had chicken bones for lunch, which may be the most humiliating thing I've ever done- with or without an audience. I want to invite her over and let her see that I live in a single-room apartment and sleep on blankets. I want her to comfort me and tell me it's okay, that she doesn't care about all that stuff. But I can't bring myself to say anything because *I care*. I hate that I care.

"Maame? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I was just sad about my math grade."

She perks up a bit, "Ewurad3, Maame, an 87 is *good*," She smacks my arm, and I try to pretend it doesn't hurt, "I got a 43. My mum is gonna kill me. Oh my god, she's *going to kill me*."

chicken bones

I giggle at that, and she smiles in a way that makes her cheeks round out.

"We should run away." She whispers.

I smile at her, "I'd like that."

She pushes me to the ground and straddles my lap. I kiss her; she's soft and smells like cocoa butter and expensive perfume. And I want to enjoy this moment. I'm trying hard to. But the chicken bone is sitting in my pocket, pressing hard against my butt.