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Dustbins and Dreams

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It's been exactly three months and five days since you left home. Da's chin sink day by day in her palms, deeper and deeper in the trenches of your thoughts. In the kitchen while she cooked. In the bathroom when she bathed your youngest sister, Fati. In the living room when she took a rest from her worries. And in the court when she attended the unending proceedings. Her eyes, pale and blue and moist, would stare at you, like a bright moonlight moving at night. Only that hers did not move.

Fati would always ask where *Ya Chadik* went. She called you *Ya Chadik.* Her tongue needed to ripen before she could get it right, 'Ya Sadik'. But she could sing: "'T' is for tortoise…Tortoise is slow. 'P' is for people. People are fast." Little did she know the tortoise moves faster than your country, not only its people.

You wonder what happened to Zeena. She always visited you in your thudding nightmares, beckoning from afar. A lovely grin played on her glossy lips. Her teeth shone like a summer sun slowly soaring through the summer sky. Only that her glisters did not move.

But just the lips and teeth. That was all that was Zeena's. The face hadn't Zeena's carrot nose. The eyes were Fati's. The wrapper she wore was Daa's. And at the top was Saleh's bald head. Awkward! Dreams are but smithereens of shattered mosaics reglued together, and that is the worst anything could ever be after your country.

You longed to exit this dungeon and run to Zeena, not the bald girl so weird to wear your mother's wrapper. Your heart would burn with her love all day until it melted, drop by drop. Were you home, Daa would say it's your ulcer, and she'd give you two lids of her antacid to take. But now you know it was just the heart that burns, not any heartburn. Then cold, breezy nights would come. And then the weird girl would grace your eerie dreams; of home and family; of freedom and love, love left unloved, of Fati and Daa and Zeena. You'd feel your heart freeze, bit by bit, until its frosty steam rose through your chest, unto your throat, and there it'd come, face to face, with the stinking scents of the over-crowded cell.

You wouldn't have been here had you not run into Zeena the evening you stopped to buy the Super Eagles 2023 AFCON jersey you wore on the day of the

protest. You have always admired it since its release. You were able to get it before the final, your Nigeria versus my Ivory Coast. That night you called me, and just as I predicted, my country won. But you had no idea the jersey would be so dear that when you finally get it you'd wear it for over seven fortnights straight. Not with even a bath.

***

"The best day of the week so far," you sighed as you reached home that evening. First you thought it was the worst, but then meeting Zeena changed everything.

The bike men ruined it at first. The first one said, "It is N150," from the second gate of the State University to Kofar Sarki, the emir's palace. He spoke with a tight face as if you had something to do with the fuel subsidy removal and he recognized your face. You walked away modestly

"*Ku na jin tsoron Allah fa!*" You warned the second one who said, "Biring two handured naira, oga," to fear Allah. He wore a tattered yellow face cap ontop of an oversized bend-down-select suit, the kind the vendors throw to the wind at Kofar Sarki on Fridays. The deal was if one catches up there'd be discount, and he must have caught his before it fell. But it was his exertion to speak English that annoyed you even more. Three lanyards matching his cap ran from his left shoulder and disappeared through the armpits. You never knew there were ranks to *acaba* until then. You felt like strangling him but you reasoned he might be an *achaba* general or a lieutenant. He might, you still reasoned, have a wife and children to feed at home, or perhaps wives and children. But he seemed garrulous, and of the things you baby is keeping your own company.

You climbed without nettling about the price when you stopped the third one. An average old man in his mid-fifties.

"*Nawa ka ke biya*?" He asked how much you pay on a basis. Poor old man. He was tidy and his price tad. His was not a suite. The face cap was not yellow either, but that mattered less. All you had wanted was to leave, and in less than a minute you tapped on his shoulder.

"*Yauwaa*...Bring change," you sighed as you flung a N200 note to his face.

He emptied his left pocket, the one they sorted the big notes from N100 upward, and he looked you in the eye and said he had no change. His voice has the weight of all he carried on his head. He hadn't uttered a word through the short journey unlike other bikemen that should have been broadcasters.

"*Malam lamarin kasar nan sai a hankali!*" They would kick as soon as you climbed on their bike; that the way things are going in this country is uncanny.

And on and on they'd go telling you about things you wouldn't help but wonder how they knew, on and on, until you reached your destination. Nigerian bikemen are funny, Sadik! I miss Nigeria, but don't expect me soon if at all.

You knew what he was waiting to hear. You knew the changes were in the other pocket he didn't check. So you finally said it, what his ears longed to hear, "*Ba damuwa*... Keep the change." So kind of you.

You saw the smile on his face as he thanked you, "*Nagode,* oga," and zoomed off. The last you branched at Kofar Sarki from the second gate, you paid N70. Your country`s currency needs salvation.

It was when you were about to stop another bike home, after buying the jersey, that you met Zeena. That was where it had all started; your journey towards here.

"And who would go if I didn't?" She assured rhetorically. You cinched you'd also be there, and you go your ways. The echoes of her sweet voice singing "Soli-soli-so-o-o-lidarity fore-e-e-ver..." during the SUG campaign rented your head as the bike man scurried through the rich traffic jam of Cross, the city's central roundabout.

***

You were at the front row of *subhi* prayer the dawn of the day of the protest. The way everyone in the mosque glazed at you made you feel insecure, as if you were naked. Even your father joined the onlookers.

You dressed as if you knew how it was going to end. You put on your Puma Snickers, the one your elder brother got for you upon his return from Cotonou when we completed our studies. I helped him choose that for you.

You carried your placard on which you scribbled **'T-pain must go!'** boldly. You felt you need have something different from the **'#EndBadGovernanceNow!'** that most people would likely have. You always want to stand out from the crowd, so you picked, **"T-pain"**, the new national discourse on social media. 'T' stands for 'trending. 'P' stands for 'pain'. The trending pain in the country must go!

Just when you were stepping out, after convincing Daa that it was only a peaceful protest, your phone rang. You smiled heartily as you saw Zeena's picture appear on the screen.

***

You arrived at early at the Government entrance, where the protest was to take place. The spilling turn-out boosted your confidence and you go about

raising your placard. You hoped someone would snap your picture so you go viral on social media. People were so obsessed with the slang, **T-pain.** 'T' is for Tinumbu. Tinumbu is for pain. The pain is consuming, slowly the masses. T-pain must go!

There were all sorts of children: young children, old children, and older children. You reasoned the young ones were there to quench their curiosities of what a protest looked like, but the older children were supposed to be taking care of back home by their old children. But still, what chased the rat into the fire, you reasoned, must be hotter than the fire.

An old woman-child passed by with her four young children; the youngest on her back and the oldest apparently six or seven years old with a protruding belly. Poor little thing, he must be having kwashiorkor. They held bowls like the *almajiris,* perhaps they were told the governor was coming out of the government house to share food to the protesters, and you wondered if they even knew the governor did not live there.

The woman child kept scratching the ridges of her hair. Her chest, flat from beneath her *buba,* reminded you of Daa's mother, and you wonder what the baby on her back sucks on. But still, you reasoned, she couldn't just close herself in a room and get herself pregnant. And at least, whoever catches snakes for fun should be able to tame them.

Perhaps she might have other old children, or most likely she had not closed herself in a room and gotten pregnant early, but what you have seen is an old woman-child in an older woman-child's skin. 'T' is for *tamowa*. Tamowa is hunger. 'P' is for people. The people are hungry.

The growing bevy of peaceful protesters would now and then break for groups of young and old children trotting, green leaves tucked to the back of their trousers and shirts, raising Russian flags and chanting liberal songs. They think they are Ziks and Balewas and Sardaunas, you thought. Soon you got enough of it all and raised your head to the banners and placards flying.

Remove Oxygen Subsidy Also! One reads.

You felt that was funny. You even giggled softly. But you realized it was not, not at all. It was not funny at all. The face of the old child carrying it looked so innocent, as if he was not corrupt, you thought. You shake your head smilingly as you realized you judge children by their looks.

End bat gobament nawun! Another read.

This child was just growing up. You gazed at him head-toe and toe-head. He was the word 'suffering' in person. 'T' is for tamowa. Tamowa was evident

in him. 'P' is for pocket. Your pocket vibrated. Your lips widened as you who saw it was.

***

"Hello, Zee,"

"Hello, bro!"

"Can you hear me?"

"Hello?"

"*Ba kya ji ne*?"

"Hellooo?"

***

Gunshots wailed from the direction you would have taken home. People were bumping into each other, running for their dared dear lives.

"But all we asked for is food!" A cracky feminine voice cried.

You turned to see who it was, and who had it been but that child who thought they were going to share food. All this woman thinks of is food, you thought, wondering where her children's father was.

She trudged laboriously with the other two children on her both arms. The pot-bellied gripped so tight her wrapper and hijab that was torn by the back. The hijab slumped to her neck, exposing her reddish-brown *cuku*, the kind of hair braids that assembled at a few inches above the nape. Now she scratched between the braids with ease. Her wrapper would soon fall. Don't picture her knee long skirt through the wide opening on the hijab to be brownish-off-white, it was not.

You hadn't come out to ask for food. You wanted the fees of federal universities reduced or, in their terms, subsidized. You wanted the fuel subsidy to be restored if in the beginning there was any subsidy; you wanted the Naira to have some value. You wanted electricity tariff subsidy to be restored. You noticed your father struggle to buy token units; the amount that lasted you a month now lasted for a week, and you'd often go for days without light.

You want many, many more things. Like Zeena reading your mind to save you the stammers of how you feel of her deep beneath your ribs. Like the government realizing the students being compelled to drop out of universities due to T-pain would soon become something else, and something else would only help the society become something else. But you knew barking at the deaf

wouldn't help. It has never helped. You were there just to pass some quality time with Zeena, and perchance dig out your heart at her.

You reached for your phone to retry her number and it was not there. Not the number, the phone. You gasped in angst at the sharp cut on your pocket. Clouds began to gather in your eyes; it would likely rain.

You felt all forms of fear slip off your heart, and you joined in flinging stones at the men in all sorts of uniforms. They pressed the crowd towards the roundabout where Zeena seemingly was when she was trying to reach you through the phone, your stolen phone.

Things tensed up and soon you joined in the chants of "*Mu soja muke so!... Mu soja muke so!...*" You saw a young soldier, barely in his mid-twenties, smile like a child who's patted on the shoulder and praised, "good boy". He calmly pleaded with the gang you joined to stop the stones throwing.

Soon it went beyond all that and the crowd was now being pushed towards the central market roundabout referred to by the city's people as 'cross' or *kuros*. You recalled laughing at your cousin who called it *sha tale-tale.*

"We call it *sha tale-tale*," he shrugged his shoulders to defence.

"Sha-what?" you laughed cheekily. You heard that for the first time. He came from Kano. That is what they call a roundabout. Interesting! Not the name, the people.

You heard the uproars of victory rising from the back of the crowd and you turned to all sorts of children running out of a lodge by the road side with televisions and chairs and bedsheets and mattresses and pillows and curtains and even dustbins. Of all things, dustbins! Shops have been broken. More were being broken. That was when all sorts of uniforms with red badges on their arms and arms began to shoot. Not at the sky, at the children.

You quickly jumped and hid in the gutter, panting heavily as you heard the rattling sounds of metal mingling with the shots in the sky. The door and window frames of the lodge were being exhumed. More shops were being broken. You wondered if those looting dustbins, of all things, even knew what they carried were dustbins. They were those ornamented dustbins that would slightly be mistaken for food flasks if not for their height. Their lid is intact and only opens when one matches foot on a protruded button from underneath. They close automatically after.

The pungent smell of the gutter wafted hard on your nostrils. Nausea. That was how you felt. There were stalks of cigarettes and sachets of liquor

scattered on the maps of dried urine and kola nut spits. A microcosm of your country! That was what the maps formed.

A trace of dried urine formed the map of Borno. Another, sanguine of kolanut spits formed that of Zamfara, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Katsina states blending into each other. The scattered 'killer' stalks of cigar and liquor sachets blocked the remaining parts partially forming Abuja at the centre. You were in front of a cigar kiosk, you realized. You wondered what brought you out in the first place, where the shop owners would start after, and how you would explain you were not among the looters who were now being kicked and thrown into the hungry vans parked in military style.

***

"This sitting is hereby adjourned until..." It was the judge. The date he announced faded in the smacking whacks of his gavel. Another thirteen-year-old collapsed in the jury box. His tummy clenched so tight his back that he fell. His mother swam through the crowd squawking.

"O-o-r-der-r-r..." A shameless voice commanded.

Order? What order?

It's blue how things are in your country, and even dark blue that when children take to the streets to protest over hardship and hunger, they get arrested. And then detained. And then arraigned. And then the endless proceedings be adjourned. Their families would long and long, to welcome them back, to embrace them, until their longings fade and sink, down and down, like the last streaks of orange and purple at dusk.

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