

OLD TOWN ROAD

The blast knocked him to the ground.

About fifty miles from where the explosion rocked, waves of tremor, so intense, collapsed many buildings on both sides of the famous Old Town Road, located right in the city's heart.

He lay motionless.

Across the road, pounds of steel, crumbling walls, and concrete filled the space where he had walked by only seconds earlier.

The report of the explosion was intense that it seemed soundless, yet so deafening it reverberated miles apart from the blast's epicenter, shattering windows in homes ten miles away.

Even so, the sound of the blast was significant enough to kill hundreds of people on the road, so much so that their remains lay in awkward positions on the curbs, flowerbeds, and burnt asphalt.

Old Town Road was a flurry of activities. Reckoned as the busiest road in the heart of Kaduna city, cars could barely make their way through the throng of pedestrians who competed with motorcyclists and wheelbarrow pushers who charged through the roadside, avoiding market women and their makeshift stalls. Everything was sold at the market, from cheap food condiments to fake wares and mass-production brocade materials.

Along the road were commercial buildings that housed multinational corporate offices, the central mosque, an edifice whose golden dome brightened the sky, the central hospital, banks, grocery stores, coffee shops, and a couple of dilapidated gas stations.

The Old Town Road was easily recognized. So much that it was famed in artworks of foreign museums for its kaleidoscopic color amidst the large and densely packed crowd of traders, commuters, and buildings, as they haggled and bargained over everything.

Thursdays were market days. It was usually full of people, being the market's busiest day of the week. Travelers from adjoining towns and villages went to Old Town Road to shop for the cheapest items and wares they desired.

After the blast that Thursday, what remained of the road was debris from every good sold, shard of broken glasses, burnt carcasses of crammed buses, waiting turns to pick up passengers, and a gaping crater at the side of the road where a vehicle wired with a high-grade bomb once parked.

Everything happened within a short time. Dead men, women, and children. Destroyed goods and stalls. Disorganized roads, corners, and lanes. More. And then, the motionless man who was now pulling himself together again.

Confused by shock, on all fours, he assessed his position; all he could see was thick black smoke, then fierce yellow flames dancing in several charred carcasses of vehicles on the road.

His body felt numb that instant as his right hand tightened into a fist in a bid to regain his senses.

Looking across the road filled with grit, dust, papers, and debris, he saw human body parts. Dismembered body parts were strewn everywhere in a mix of slimy, bloody mess. The sight was gory.

One swollen and hairy masculine leg hung precariously on a blackened streetlight, dangling with the socks and shoes of its misfortunate owner still attached. Another decapitated wrist lost on the road twitched with its fingers clutching air thickened by black smoke.

A panic attack swept over him, causing his body to shake uncontrollably. He soon realized that he must have been roughly 150 meters away from the explosion.

How he survived that beat him.

His eyes ached with a burning sensation while his nose ran like a loose faucet.

"Thank God, I am alive." He was in luck and still couldn't believe it. At that point, it dawned on him that hundreds of people had died, but his heart was still beating.

The sound of running feet accompanied by cries, panic, and wailing followed as many victims soon realized they were still intact.

"Khadija," a wailing mother called out her daughter's name while searching desperately on the sidewalk, where scores of bodies lay lifeless.

"Ibrahim!" another lady screamed atop her voice as she found her partner in a pool of his blood.

"Help! Help me!" This was the voice of a teenage boy whose wrist was bleeding profusely.

One middle-aged man, bloodied and in pain, struggled to escape his car with one arm. Probably still in shock, he didn't realize that his other arm had been shattered by the explosion along with half the car.

There were children and women, old and young, with life snuffed out of them senselessly.

More people were blackened by smoke and dust, some covered in blood, while some hobbled past in awe. No one had a clue what happened and why.

The suffocating smell of cordite and dust rent the air. Then, asphyxiating black smoke descended on the street as more cars went up in flame. Some victims coughed, some sniffed, many cried, and a good number writhed in pain.

The scene was terrifyingly gory.

Garba raised himself off the ground but could barely put his weight on his feet. A sharp pain prevented him. It was from a shard of glass embedded in his right ankle. But he had to walk, even if it meant dragging his injured leg along. He knew he had to get away from the horrific scene.

The blinding and hard throbbing pain inside his head started when he dragged his injured leg across the street. He held the back of his head in one hand while the other assisted his dead leg over the bodies that littered the road. He limped on.

Good Samaritans tried to take charge and help the injured who cried for help but lacked the medical tools to administer first aid. Some bad Samaritans, mostly young teenagers, rummaged through the victims' belongings scattered on the road for valuables they could steal.

Garba walked on. Though dazed, he found consolation in being fortunate. He was on his way to deliver groceries to the mother of his only child. The night before, his daughter had been diagnosed with a high fever and admitted to the central hospital on Old Town road at the doctor's insistence. He had hoped to avoid the cost of admission since he didn't have any health insurance for his family. He barely earned enough to feed them since he lost his blue-collar job six months earlier.

On the morning of the explosion, his rickety car did not crank to life despite several tries. He kept turning the key in the ignition and peddling down hard on the clutch and accelerator simultaneously, as if riding a bicycle, in an attempt to rev the engine to life. Without success, he gave up. He opted to jump commercial buses, after all, the hospital was only about twenty minutes away.

The last fight with Aisha, his wife, was the worst since their marriage five years ago. In the past, they would argue and then trade hurtful words about his inability to meet up with the rising cost of staying in the city. They would avoid speaking to

each other for days until she broke. She had to apologize; in his opinion, she was always the cause of the fight.

He blamed her for everything; for losing his job, living in a tenement apartment (face-me-I-face-you) with the worst sort of strangers, and for the bad luck that befell him since they married. She was his nemesis.

Sometimes, she would cry her eyes sore, but his words soon lost their sting. She learned to hurl his words back at him in equal measure.

But this time, he acted differently. He slapped her twice on the cheek. Hot, blinding slaps that left her morose and dazed and angered to pack her bags quickly to nowhere. She had long gone before he returned from the long walk he embarked on to dissipate what was left of his anger.

There, he realized the futility of his long walk. Gradually the anger returned with crippling intensity as soon as he found his small room empty. His wife and daughter had left!

Nothing could appease him. He called her parents, her friends, the imam of their local mosque, and his friends hoping they could hint at her whereabouts. The lack of information for two days wore him out so much that his anger died, and in its place, remorse conquered him.

Her phone lines had been switched off until the night before when he received a call from her that their daughter, Halima, had had a bad fever and had been admitted to the central hospital.

He begged Aisha at the hospital on his knees, pleading shamelessly for forgiveness. They were all he had, he admitted. They both cried, sobbing like abandoned kids after a devastating war, while their daughter slept with the intravenous infusion line tethered to her wrist.

Aisha dried the tears on his face with her wrapper as they shared renewed vows of forgiveness. He promised to be a better man. And he had to make it up to her.

He had gone grocery shopping that morning with the little he had left of the daily wage he earned teaching Arabic lessons to children at the local mosque.

He must make it up to them!

He was a few meters away from the hospital when a blinding flash and bang from the explosion rent the air as if it was intent on shattering the universe by ripping apart every atom. The polythene bag full of fruits, cooked food, and desert he was walking with at the time of the blast was already lost in turmoil. None mattered anymore, so long as he could see his wife and child alive.

As he limped past a few buildings, he could hear the loud screams and cries of victims on the first floor of one building. One body lay halfway across a shattered glass window. The victim must have heard the report from the blast and ran to the windows to look when the walls and windows imploded, killing him instantly.

"Horrible," Garba muttered as the central hospital building came within view. He quickened his pace. He wasn't sure what to expect, but he hoped his wife and daughter were safe.

A few people huddled around a broken water tap gushing uncontrollably right opposite the hospital building. One look at himself and he realized, it was better to clean the dried blood and soot off his body before seeing his wife and daughter. He joined the small crowd. Scooping water from the tap's mouth, he swept his face, dusted off the blackened smoke on his shirt, and thoroughly washed both hands. Satisfied, he headed to the hospital.

He walked past the nurse station at the entrance of the waiting lounge unchallenged, unlike the night before when the nurses asked him a series of questions before he was allowed to see his wife and daughter.

The hallway was full of injured and decapitated victims of the blast. The hospital's emergency ward was overwhelmed with bodies dumped by good Samaritans as they raced back and forth to the scene to rescue and recover more bodies.

The wailing siren of an ambulance complemented the chaotic scenes as everyone ran helter-skelter. He was keen on seeing his family, and the waiting lounge scene wasn't as important.

He walked up the stairs in a flash as though his limping leg was numb. He dashed through the female in-patient ward looking through bemused faces as he searched frantically for Aisha. No one paid attention to him as he walked past their beds.

He found her at the end of the hall, in front of the television, watching the late evening news which featured horrifying scenes from the explosion. She was sobbing uncontrollably as two women tried hard to comfort her.

Aisha had just watched on live television news the remains of her husband, Garba, as it was hurled into a waiting ambulance. He had been declared dead on the scene, his body decapitated. They found his ID card, and the TV screen flashed his name repeatedly as it did the other victims they could identify.

Confused, Garba watched his wife throw herself on the bare floor, crying and clutching her breast. Her consolers were helpless. She cried with so much pain, everyone in the ward felt a tinge of pity.

"I am here, Aisha. I am not dead," Garba rushed to his wife.

For a moment, Aisha stopped to look in his direction. Her eyes blinked rapidly for a moment, but she didn't see him. He tried to touch her face, but his hands only grabbed the void that would soon become his new reality.

"Aisha, I am here. Look at me," He scolded.

No one paid heed. The consolers helped his wife back onto the wooden bench.

"Garba, why have you done this to us? You said you will never leave. Why?" she cried.

"I am here, my love. I am here." Garba heard his own voice trail into despair.

He rushed to the television that was mounted on the wall. He could see everything. He touched the buttons to change the channel, and the TV screen flipped to another station. Amused, he looked down at his open palm. He could touch inanimate objects but not humans.

He looked back at Aisha, who was still crying, and now drawing attention from more in-patients

as her screams stirred the ward.

He walked closer to her. No one could see him. He touched her left earring; it was the closest to her body. He fiddled with it gently while staring into her face, but she didn't flinch.

"I am here, Aisha", he whispered into her ears desperately.

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he suddenly realized he no longer belonged to their world.

Sadness drained through him like a cyclone as it traveled through every cell in his body till it shook the very essence of his being.

How could he die? How? He was a good person. He loved his daughter. He loved his wife. Why has his life been violently taken away from him without a fair chance? Why?

He looked at his wife one last time. The tears that were always there behind his confused eyes trailed down his cheeks, but it wasn't liquid. It was just a feeling that he was unable to describe.

He turned his back to his dearest wife and walked out of the ward, descending the stairwell and into the road where lost souls like his wandered in hopelessness.

"Are you okay, sir?" It was the voice of an elderly man sitting at the corner of the street, dressed in a stately robe, like he didn't belong there.

Garba turned to face the only man who appeared to see him. "Can you see me?"

"Yes, I can, sir. This way, follow me", the old man beckoned.

Biography

My name is Akin Akingbogun. I'm a Nigerian living in Lagos Nigeria. I noticed my passion for writing in high school but I officially started writing in 2019 after a friend from high school rekindled the love I had for writing by reminding me of how phenomenal I wrote in high school. I started a blog in 2019 and I have over 200 stories on the blog.

I also self-published 2 books in 2020 and 2022 respectively and I am currently working on publishing another book in 2023.

I am a graduate of Civil Engineering and I am married and blessed with beautiful children .

I love writing cause I gives me an opportunity to put down my thoughts and feelings and it also gives me the opportunity to share my stories and inspire people.