

When the first gunshot pierced through the air of the afternoon market, the short hand on her watch was in-between two and three. Goosebumps rose on her skin with fear in tow, driving through her thighs, through her belly and settling finally between her ribcage. The driver was nowhere to be seen. She told him it did not make sense to find a canteen to eat at this time. She asked him why he didn't eat before leaving the university. He looked at her through the rearview mirror and said something about women and how long they take at the market. She was going with Bamikale to sort out an order error, not buy pepper or argue with an unbothered tailor. He turned up the volume of the radio, only turning down the sound of Hubert Ogunde's singing when he parked in front of the First Bank.

She wove through frantic people and unmoving stalls like the third part of a braid with less strands than the other two, wavering but resolute. There was no way she could reach the car in time. Besides, the shot came from the main street where the bank stood. She kept her eyes focused on the rusty red sign at the end of the road. Bamikale was there sorting out the error. Three hundred French textbooks, not three thousand. Three hundred. Not three thousand. A woman's bath of beans scattered on the muddy ground. The catfish nearby became claustrophobic. A grinding machine was left unattended and a wooden mortar swirled in it like a cockroach being flushed down the toilet. The metal doors of the shops swung close in a harmony that unsettled her. If they had swung in pairs or fours. No. She was close to the book vendor's shop. There is an Apostolic church on this inner market road. The fluorescent lighting inside the blue building glowed brighter against the graying sky, and their hymns seemed louder than they had been the last few Tuesdays she had come to Sanjo's shop. Bamikale beckoned her in and the metal doors swung close like the sound of the elephant in the kindergarten books they just stocked. Batteries in books for babies, alright. The second gunshot or the second one she became aware of ripped through the air. Locked. The bones of her back stiffened her like a rod. Only relaxing when the lock of the sliding glass door clicked into the slot on the wet orange wall. "Water! Water!" she asked, shaking her left foot

away from the rest of her body. “Ohh get me water please”. A dull pain radiated from her wrist when she set her hands on her hips.

The only noise that filled the room-and-parlor apartment this morning was the whirring of the brown Ox ceiling fan. The orange light in the parlor bounced on the rough walls as the fan blades cut through its rays. Bimpe dusted her navy skirt four times as she stood up from the edge of her mattress to slide her feet into her loafers. Slide. No. The shorthand of the clock at the top of the doorway had just landed on seven. “Okay,” she sighed, as she walked into the parlor. She smiled at the mirror as her eyes caught the class photo from six years ago. Teaching history was easy, what has happened has happened. Nothing could come in and disrupt it; it was not like science. As the long hand of the clock approached one, she walked out of her apartment, not leaving the threshold until the spring on the wooden gate had pinged completely.

By seven twelve, she arrived at Imole bus stop. Next to the stop was a canteen that sold akara in the mornings. Every Tuesday and Thursday, she bought four pieces of akara for three hundred naira and every Tuesday and Thursday the woman who sold akara would attempt to convince her to make it five pieces instead, the woman would cajole her with a small loaf of bread. She declined with a meek smile today and placed three one hundred naira notes on the glass counter. The day she paid with two one hundred naira notes and two fifty naira notes, a man jolted her out of her thoughts with a koboko in Mushin traffic. It did not hit her but it did take a lot of saliva to push her heart back down her throat that morning. Mr Lanre’s bus arrived at the stop at seven twenty. She sat in front; next to him. He always reserved that seat for her; it was cleaner than the others and it had a cushion. He probably pitied her, she walked as if she could be carried by the wind. She placed her leather bag on her lap and the nylon bag that contained a small orange cooler and the akara from earlier. If the akara was hot, turning her skin red through the cotton skirt, she never showed it. Pain. No. She simply looked out the window, as the morning air whispered into her ear, strapping her hands over the bags like ropes over a mattress on a family van along the Lagos-Ibadan expressway. By seven

forty-seven, Mr Lanre's bus had arrived at the gate of the university. He drove a campus shuttle so the security allowed him to drive through the gates. By seven fifty-five, Bimpe had reached the bookstore.

While she ate her Ogi, from the orange cooler, the only noise in the university bookstore was the breakfast show Iya Sewa liked to watch while she cleaned the louvers. The cleaner cut herself once. Cut. No. The contrast of blood on the floors would be quite a sight like. No. She finished with four pieces of akara cut into eight bits each enough for thirty-two spoons even. The chair Kaso made for her squeaked when she rose to go to the director's office. The back support wobbled when you pushed against it, like a loose tooth. She made a mental note to complain to him about it. She was going to give him a piece of her mind. She was going to say "If I should fall down and break my back or if the nail here should scratch me, will you pay my hospital bill?"

The short hand of the clock above the television was in-between eight and nine. She did not like it when Mrs. Olanipekun called for her at odd times. It was disruptive. Did she not get it? Then again the woman was called Perpetua and Bimpe believed she had peculiar problems. She walked past the stationery, and the technical drawing boards, then turned left, past the secondary school English textbooks and went up the stairs. The bookstore was similar to her history class; everything was where it was supposed to be. As she climbed, she saw Sewa sitting between the shelves with an Architecture textbook in her hand. Child. No. Her neck twitched to the left. It was painful when that happened. Maybe the girl likes the pictures she thought to herself and continued up the terrazzo stairs. One, three, five. No.

"And I said it too o, I said it, I said that this cannot be correct when it's not like we live in Benin Republic, I mean-," Bamikale turned her entire body towards the door as she spoke when Bimpe walked into the office. The noise of the television was now met with the humming of the air conditioner in Director's office. Very demanding thing. So loud

in the office, yet if you stand in the parking lot, you will see its rickety frame dripping water, creating a hole on the surface of the parking lot. *Toam. Toam. Toam.*

“Ah Mrs Olayiwola, can you see us like this?, why is Sanjo calling me to confirm thirty thousand- wait-, ” the director peered, over her glasses, at her phone after she said that. Bimpe found it peculiar that the woman never seemed to use them for what they were meant for.

“What am I seeing here, ehen now, three thousand French textbooks,” her chest shook with the rest of her body as she laughed.

“The children in this school have not finished learning English-” she then took off her purple glasses and folded them and set them next to six cans of coca-cola.

“Let us not even get into the issue of Yoruba and now someone somewhere thinks we want three thousand French books, God have mercy on us,” her hands were clasped together and set on top of some white papers.

“I have a meeting with the DSA this afternoon, if not I would have stopped at his shop on my way home, so please ehn, the two of you can take the driver and sort it out, before they close”

“Okay ma,” Bamikale bent at her knees whenever she responded to people, even Kaso the carpenter. The young clerk then carried the director's hand bag and walked with her down the stairs. Bimpe had grown used to Bamikale's eagerness. At first, it reminded her too much of her daughter, she did not like that. The class photo was enough to remind her of what she once had.

Kaso's motorcycle rumbled outside the bookstore when the short hand of the clock was set nicely at one. He walked into the bookstore, in a dull ankara trouser and a blue workshop coat, with the same black polybag with faded silver print that contained his tools. The handle of a saw stuck out of the bag when he held it.

“Kaso”

“Ah mama! I know what you're going to say,” he waved his hands at her and smiled, his silver tooth making an appearance.

“Oh! so you know what I want to say in that case, don’t let me end up in the hospital, please fix this chair,” she stood up and walked towards the stationery counter.

Her eyes focused on Kaso and his bag of tools, wondering if he knew what ambushed her mind when she saw his saw. He didn’t. He would have helped her, probably by listing every herb his grandmother taught him about when he grew up in Ibadan. She then wondered if they ever crossed paths. What would Kaso say if he knew she also grew up in Idi-Arere. If he knew she once had a child like Sewa. If her child had been healed after the slide accident. No. He started singing apala and took the chair into his lap like a hairdresser making cornrows on a child's head. He held nails between his lips like they held pomade on the back of their hands. She slid her feet out of the loafers and closed her eyes in relief at the cold touch of the clean terrazzo floors.

Bamikale arrived from class when the short hand of her watch was at one and the long hand was at six. She told Bimpe on her first day, while they counted erasers, that she was studying history. The day a few of Bamikale’s classmates came to the bookstore, they all stood in one spot and spoke for three hours. Bimpe wondered about the classmates she did teaching practice with and the teachers from the old school. How they all faded away slowly one after the other. The bookstore was not like her history class. The people disappeared and the books always stayed. Bamikale walked up to her and said that the driver said that they should start going to the market now before school children close and there is traffic. Highest two hours abi. When they are coming back they will be against traffic. She slid her feet back into the loafers and then walked out of the bookstore. When she got outside she listened for the *toam, toam, toam* of the air conditioner. In the car, she opened up her orange Oxford notebook and updated her checklist for today to include *toam, toam, toam*. The underside of her pinky was stained in blue ink. Tuesday - door, akara, front seat, ogi, two-two-two-two, four-four, eight, okay then thirty two. Good.

So, why was she locked in a stuffy box that had been turned into a publishing bookstore, bursting at its crevices with books. Who even sold books near clustered catfish and people spitting over bleeding vegetables?. Sanjos's shop had a sunken floor. It was concrete with broken tiles arranged on it in such a careless manner. Like. See. Those three pieces near the stack of New General Mathematics, they could make a triangle or they could have had repeating diamonds. Was balance so hard to provide? All these structured stories are housed in such an asymmetric location. She felt like she was inside a talking drum or the television Iya Sewa was obsessed with. The television in a stupid stupid cage. No. There was no way a foot-step would cover two pieces at a time. It was not fair. It was not fair. What did she miss? Why did Seunfunmi die? No. Her neck was pulled to the left harshly. She winced. Her chest rose and fell like an aged leather shoulder bag. She wondered if Banji knew how she felt now. He always claimed to know how she felt even when she did not show it. Would he come to her? She heard from Mr.Bayo that he lives in Ilaje now. He left her when Seun died. If she died now he would probably drink water and belch, like a cow.

Bamikale held her by her elbows, sliding down a bookshelf with her and finally resting against used history books. If she felt the grit of the cold mud against her calves she did not shake. She closed her eyes. The only noise in the shop was the *siwis siwis* of praying women. And Sanjo, but he was in the printer room, on the phone with his mother. He brought a blue bath and some sachets of pure water to wash Bimpe's feet. That was useless. The careless floor pattern made sure of it. She hated the floor pattern before today, she just did not need to spend so much time with it. Unlike that driver insinuated. She missed Mr.Bayo. God knows why and where the university transferred him to. He was always clean and did things at the top of the hour; and with a smile on his face. Not like this new one that always had a toothpick in his mouth and probably never helped his wife in the market. Thunder. Siren. Ambulance. No. Police. The gunshots ramped up then began to fade away like the *toam toam toam* of the air conditioner before they took light or her thoughts before she touched the cold floor of the bookstore or like Seun's heart beat before she. No.

Bamikale's hands were sweaty. Her fingers were slender and soft. The girl rested her head on Bimpe's shoulder. Her hair smelt like pink oil. One day, the day the angry man launched the koboko at her face, her arms unstrapped themselves to secure her face and her akara fell. Bamikale went to Iya Femi's canteen. The one that stupid driver could have eaten at o. She bought exactly four akara and told Bimpe to do one breathing in breathing out thing. On top of what. What will be better is if she and Kaso go and make black soap, with all the herb mixtures he talked about, and they cut her head open and wash her brain with a local sponge. She has accepted fate. If not she will be handed fables. Maybe she will start buying five akara now. She must look like Mrs. Olanipekun now, laughing, only that she always did all-back and not packing gel. Has her meeting with the DSA not finished by now? Will she not need to pick her children from school? Her phone did not. Her phone. No. She rubbed at the sand grains on her palm and raised her arm, shivering at the sensation. The short hand of her watch swung around the plain white background, moving fast enough, it seemed to taunt the numbers stuck in place. Seun liked merry go rounds. Okay. No. She shook her hand and lifted it closer. It swung around again, without restraint, like the mortar in the grinding machine when it sat between two and three. Like it did in the hospital hall the evening her daughter died.