

HELLFIRE

I - THE LIMPING DRIVER

They say it doesn't matter where you are trying to get to, come to Jibowu and you will find a bus. You will find us early in the morning and late at night, waiting for you in our big buses or cramped cars, depending on what you can afford. I am one of the people waiting for you. I drive every day from Jibowu to Ibadan and back as many times as the roads permit me. On most days it is a two-hour journey, but there are horrible days and the worst I experienced was twenty-one hours. That was the day several tankers exploded. Sometimes, I think it was those hours of strained driving that left me limping and not the polio I had when I was a boy.

After avoiding many deaths in between shaky trailers and deep potholes, this is the place I willingly go to die. They call it Hellfire, but really it is heaven. In the daytime, Hellfire is like any other street in Jibowu. The demons have packed their bags and gone home. The residents of the street who would have spent the entire night praying havoc on us will wake, open their doors and spit, as if to forbid the horrors of the night. Then they would go to work, hoping to one day afford a car simply to splash muddy water on the girls as they drive into the street. As soon as they get children, they would pack out because Hellfire is no place to raise the young.

The drivers in Jibowu come to Hellfire every night our pockets carry a bigger bulge. When we have drank till our piss turns to gin, we stagger there with curses at the tips of our tongues. We curse the government and our wives. Then quietly, we bless the roads for not swallowing us.

When you get to Hellfire, you will see some girls at the entrance of the street. They are the prettiest and priciest. They have big buttocks and their breasts are pouring out of their sheer tops. Run away from those girls; they don't know the work. When you walk further in, you will begin to feel the heat. The girls with bigger bellies, flatter buttocks and tighter clothes that know how to work you are there.

When you find a girl, you will take her into the den, a two-storey building with little rooms and squeaky beds. But first, you will pay Bimbo by the gate, then you will pay the girl in the room.

A new girl has been brought to the furnace. She still drags her clothes down when men approach her. Her name is Joy but I know soon enough, she will be fluent in pidgin and wickedness. They will train her to insult any man that comes close to her, peers at her breasts, bargains and doesn't take her into the den. She will learn to call him useless and impotent, and to raise her voice so other girls avoid him.

I have not been to Jibowu for many weeks now. They say there is something in the air that makes people cough and then kills them. The government closed the roads and sent us home but did not tell us how we were to survive. I had never seen my wife for so many hours in the daylight before. I think she has gotten uglier.

Switch calls me this morning and tells me people want to travel and are willing to pay anything. The government has not opened the roads but we know the roads to pass. I know to pack change and give the armed policemen at every stop.

Evening has come and I walk to Hellfire to find out that it has been extinguished. I see residents of the street who would usually walk briskly past the girls now counting their steps. They are sitting outside their homes, sipping on juice and unafraid to laugh. Their dark curtains aren't drawn together like newlyweds. The den is deserted and Bimbo and her square eyebrows are nowhere to be seen. Switch says he has not seen them since it all began. I think they are still scared of the coughing disease. They forget that white man disease does not kill black man.

The fire in Hellfire does not ignite instantly. It takes a lot of fanning from us. A few of the girls come back because they are hungry but they are strict and only show us their backs. Later, more of the girls show up and if a sneeze or a cough escapes your lips, you will be shamed out of the den. Soon enough, all is forgotten and into the night we burn.

The new girl, Joy, is not so new anymore. She is with the expensive girls at the entrance. She still speaks a few words but she smacks her bubble-gum loud and angry. This is the temperature that I like.

One night, I take her into the den.

II - JOY

Yes. When I was in primary one, and my teacher asked us what we wanted to be when we grew up, I wrote this in my essay.

Yes. When Daddy's death came suddenly and his brothers drove my mum and me out of our home, this is where I wanted to be.

Yes. When my dad's sister, Aunty Nike, convinced my mum to let me come to Lagos, she told her exactly the kind of work she would have me do.

Yes.

Ju tells me to take myself out of the room immediately I step in. She says I should hold on to any memory that makes me laugh, or think about how quickly it will end, or about the food I will eat later. I think of happy times when my laughter was still familiar but I stop immediately and lock those memories away because when I think about them on nights like this, I end up defiling them.

At first, the men wouldn't see me. Ju tells me she will market me but I have to do more. Say more and show more, she says. Tell them you will take them to highs they've never reached. Tell them they will never recover from a night with you.

"Try my girl na," she would say to her customers.

"For where!" "No be me and you o." "This wan no be ashawo na. Na housegirl be dis." "When you don train am finish, I go try am."

Ju tells me they are all the same. Some are violent. Some are calm. Some would hurl insults at you. Some would ask how you got here. Some would never say a word. Some would talk the entire time. But they are all the same, she says, they just want to shag.

Free yourself, Ju often says. Dem no fit do you anything! Na just preek dey get, nothing wey you no fit handle. Ju asks me to say it too. *I be ashawo*. I say it when I wake up and before I sleep. It becomes my only prayer. Say it, she says. They can't use it to hurt you anymore.

Ju teaches me how to keep customers. If they pay for it, do it. Be ready to fight o. Other girls want your customers, so fight. Your customers want other girls, so fight.

I think in the middle of the fighting, we know that we see ourselves. When our bodies brush against each other and we shove and push, we're silently saying, "I understand," and we forgive each other immediately.

The first night Ju convinces her customer to take me to the den, I singe the back of my brain with his only words; *You don lock door?*

"You never call me in the mornings, Dolapo." my mum says.

When Aunty Nike brought me to Bimbo, she introduced me as Joy. Much later, Ju told me her real name; Adaugo. I wanted to tell her my name but if I did, it would summon Dolapo here, so I told Ju my name is Ayo. I told her Aunty Nike just translated it to English but we both knew I was lying.

"Call me and tell me good morning." my mum continues. "Tell me to have a prosperous day."

She misses Daddy but those are not the words she is saying. I miss him too but I will also not say those words. I do not want to cry this evening because I am already putting on my makeup.

"No one calls anyone in the morning, mummy." I say. "People call when they have sold enough for the day and are content." She is quiet for a while, so I add, "I will try."

I hear her deep breaths and I wonder if the tiny flat she is now living in is compressing her lungs.

"How are you feeling?" I ask her.

"Don't worry about me. Everything is fine. How is work? Hope your Madam is treating you well o?"

"She said I should greet you, and that if we make more sales this week, she will send some things down to you. Rice, beans and some elubo."

"Ah. God will bless her! She will not see shame. Her business will not suffer."

“Amin ma. Amin.”

“Has she said anything about university?” she adds before I cut the call.

“She promised me next year. I'll write WAEC and JAMB and go to LASU here, so after classes I can still help out.” I look at the box under my bed aware that all the money in it cannot even buy me a JAMB form.

My mother's praises for my imaginary Madam erupt again as I line my eyes with a black pencil.

Everyone is afraid. How can we work when we have to be six feet apart? No man is six feet long. But it doesn't even start there. It starts when they say all businesses must close.

“You know person wey get am?” I ask Ju on the phone.

“No o.” she says, frustrated.

“Me too.”

“Dis people no get sense. Our sun hot na! E go kill the thing. We get facemask and sanitizer, make dem do quick open Lagos o.” she hisses.

I survive weeks in my flat doing nothing and living on little but I am content. Soon I realise it is because the voice in my head is back. She tells me she is sorry for leaving but she could not survive there. She says my name slowly as if to find out if I am still her. She begs me never to go back and I promise her not to. I tell her I will go back to school, and Mummy and I will find happiness again. I am hungry, but my body is healing and it gradually responds to my touch. I call my mum in the mornings and we laugh. One day, we cry together.

Aunty Nike calls me and tells me to lock myself inside. After all, she needs the milk so she must protect the cow. When it is quiet and the dark shadows play on my walls, my mind suggests ways I can thank Aunty Nike and Daddy's brothers for what they did to us. I practise my dance steps, slow and sweet, and I bend my back low as I *komole* to the colourful sounds I imagine they will make as they whimper.

Weeks later, Aunty Nike calls me again. “Isn't there something you can do?” she asks. I know she has missed the sound of her phone chiming as soon as I send her money every week.

I hear my stomach rumble more often and I want to be strong and never return until Ju calls me. “You dey fear?” she asks.

I wait.

“See eh. I get home service parole o. E get hotel wey dey operate low-key too. Forget Hellfire first. Money dey outside.”

And so I come outside.

A man rushes into Hellfire. He is walking fast, looking for someone. He is wearing Daddy’s favourite kaftan, the one with the green and orange swirling patterns. When he sees me, he stops.

“What are you doing here?” he asks in Yoruba, in a voice just like Daddy’s.

I want to explain everything to him but as soon as I open my mouth, he catches on fire. He is burning slowly, screaming and rolling on the floor. Everyone moves back but I move closer. I see his tribal marks, his bald head and his dark lips, just like Daddy’s.

He screams, “Dolapo! Dolapo! I am on fire! Can’t you see that I am on fire?”

Ju tries to pull me back but I wriggle out of her grasp.

“Dolapo mi!” he bellows in between his tears. “When you burn here, I burn there!”

I kneel beside him and hug him. I feel my skin painfully erasing but I do not scream. I wake up soaked in sweat with tears running down my face.

There is no grand welcome in Hellfire. The day you come back, we hug you and ask what took you so long to return. Later in the night, we are back to biting our faces off to mark our territories. Ju and I came back on a night like that after Bimbo called Ju and told her that she had already found the girls that would take our spots.

Ju still says I need to speak more but I disagree. I tell Ju that talking has never changed anything. I am tempted to tell her about all the talking my mother and I did, and how much we cried and begged but I don't. Instead, I tell her that the girls all saw what I did to Angelina. They saw how I let her go when she took two of my customers in one night, and how the next day I poured cameroun pepper in my purse, held her down and emptied it in her eyes.

The voice in my head has disappeared and I have gotten accustomed to the silence again. At least I have Ju whose mouth cannot be turned off. She is telling me of the man who promised to marry her once he returns from America when the limping driver approaches us. He smells of alcohol and has lost his left thumb.

I take him into the den.

Ju assured me that Hellfire is safe and it rarely happens. She says the den is strong to protect us. She tells me that if anything like that happens, I must scream. She says she will come and break the door - but I didn't scream.

It was time for my payment and he threw a five hundred naira note at me and tried to leave. I stood by the door, held his trouser and asked him to pay what he owed.

His eyes grew big. "All dis small small ashawo wey no sabi anything. Comot for here!"

I didn't move, so he pulled me to the ground with punches to my head and my stomach. Then he unzipped his trouser again.

I did not come to Hellfire for the rest of the week. I also didn't tell Ju. I stayed in my flat out of town and played Daddy's favourite Fuji songs that I had downloaded from the internet. "Exclusive from 9jasounds.com." it would say at the start and end of every song. Ju left me seven missed calls.

On Sunday, the day I turned eighteen, I put on long trousers and entered a bus to Jibowu. I walked to every park, scanning. I did not find the limping driver until midday when the sun had made me a shade darker.

"Iwo Road, Ibadan!" he was shouting. He was flapping the ends of his red polo shirt up and down to cool himself. I waited until the car was full to see him drive off.

It is Monday and the night breeze is kind to us. I am standing with Ju at the entrance of Hellfire and she is talking about the car that got burnt last night with the limping driver in it. I chew on my bubble-gum, pushing air through the elastic material until it forms a big, white ball on my face, then I make it pop.