

“TRY AND EAT”. Feels evergreen.

Growing up was fine. Lagos wasn't London. It wasn't even Tokyo. It reeked of hustle and sweat which was an affirmation of people's hard work. From the bus driver swerving his way round the huge potholes, to the market women calling out to potential customers, to mothers rushing to get their children to school with toddlers strapped to their backs firmly, all I think of is hustle.

I don't ever forget the market which I always passed through to get to school. It was a long, busy road. Always densely-packed. It wasn't the best route to school but I enjoyed the scenery and the smell of food that breezed through your nostrils from every corner. Mother would give me money for an okada ride back home but I would rather use it for some moist, oily akara. Iya Adija calling out to her girls meant my day had started. Her stall was right in the middle of the market, the busiest part. Very strategic, I must say. “No credit, come back tomorrow” was boldly inscribed on the crooked door enclosing her restaurant. Men would scream to get served, sometimes rubbing the bosoms and behinds of her servers. Young, Togolese women would be outside washing dishes and the madam of the shop herself would watch every activity suspiciously and furiously as though she could catch the smart market thieves with her squinting eyes. I would sometimes stop to watch the scene curiously, catching every detail, as though I'd been hired to report for some fancy docuseries. One time, some drama had unfolded in her shop. A man had bought a full plate of rice, beans, ponmo, goat meat and assorted and tried to leave without paying. “*Ole, ole*” filled the air as everyone tried to know who had tried to outsmart the incredulous Iya Adija. That was the first time I had ever witnessed jungle justice. It was not long after the round-faced woman ran to catch up with the lanky thief that some area boys had stormed in with tyres that I'm sure they had also stolen. They attempted to lynch him until a woman with a long deeper-life skirt offered to pay on his behalf. I never thought about sneaking into her shop to steal a piece of *moin-moin* ever since. Once I walked past her stall, I knew I was halfway through the market path.

Mother was a fabric trader; father, well, non-existent. I used to wonder what my father did anywhere he was in the universe. It was confusing why I lived with only one parent but I never asked (or at least, was too young to ask). The walk back home was always much easier because it was with friends. We would chat away, and stop to buy local snacks in every shop while the shop owners scolded us for hitting their wares. One day, a man slapped me while I was walking home. Till today, I don't know what I did to him. He was wearing dirty clothes and he had very thick dreads on his head like someone who was either fighting with his barber or had been mad for twenty years. He dashed at me and landed a hot slap on my face and I continued the walk in shock like I wanted to be in denial of what had happened. No one reacted to the incident, or perhaps no one had seen it. This would become one of the mysteries of my memories of Lagos. I would later write an article on why every Lagosian is mad until proven otherwise. To be frank, I was never good with processing my emotions; I should've probably

raised an alarm. The next time that happened was some years later. I had entered a *danfo* bus to Bariga to deliver some clothes to my mother's customer. "Don't come back without my money, so *gbo mi?*" my mother had rung into my ears. This wasn't the first time I was going to Mummy Divine's house at Ilaje so I confidently entered and waited to shout "*o wa*" at my bus-stop. It was in the top ten the scariest things I had to do as an introverted child and I dreaded it every time. After a few minutes, I started feeling some touching at my back. It was soft but strange and frisky. I thought what I felt were the knees of the person seated behind me. *Danfo* buses are always packed and the drivers try to get as many passengers as possible before starting the trip. I thought it was someone trying to adjust their legs but it became clear to me seconds later as the touching became more violent. He was feeling my bum through my jeans. I looked back abruptly immediately I realised but he stopped and looked stiff away from me. I thought I had been dreaming but this guy was assaulting me in daylight in a bus packed with about thirty people. My reaction? I froze. I felt scared and unsafe. I waited for my bus-stop so I could alight and run far away from him. I still blame myself for not screaming as loud as I could and exposing the dunce. I didn't speak for two days after that unwanted sexual contact but my mother didn't notice because I never spoke anyway. I would come to overcompensate for this day, dashing at anyone who tried to touch me inappropriately even before they did.

My mother was a great cook. She always left me lunch. Rice and beans with fish stew. Yam and egg. Moin-moin and pap. Eba and egusi soup. Sometimes, toasts and sausages but never noodles. It was reserved for breakfast. A ritual which started since I got ill from eating cold, sticky noodles that Mother left me in the stainless cooler always seating on the wooden, centre table. Noodles which had stayed for hours and formed the rectangular shape of my flask scarred me so much I never ate the food for almost ten years. She always made sure I never got hungry, almost like a compensation for not giving me a father or some offence she never cared to admit. The kitchen fast became our bonding place. Although she never compelled me to, I always helped out. We would whisk eggs in flour and sugar while the oil heated in the pan. She would tell me how her day went. Endless stories of customers trying to pay less than half of the original prices of the beautiful fabrics, how the suppliers cheated her and particularly, how her sluggish salesgirl tried to steal from her. I enjoyed them all. My favorite food to make with her was jollof rice. I used to wonder if people actually went to events to celebrate with the hosts or just for the party rice. My mother was huge on talking. She was unapologetically opinionated and liked to pass her message across clearly, repeating every word. "Bolu, turn the mix. Turn it well. Leave no part untouched." I imagined her having issues with my father about any other thing but communication. I was more of a listener. I still am.

Iyabo Malomo Oladunni, my mother, was a tall woman. She was fleshy in the right places so, I never wondered where I got my physique from. I didn't take after her height though, something I held against my father besides his, you know, non-existence. She had a calm, ever-smiling face that looked like she had never been offended before. It was outlined with two marks on the right side, an act her parents used to compel her soul to stay after leaving them two times. My mother was an embodiment of two Yoruba myths that astonished me. Yoruba people name children either after a prayer or the circumstances of your birth. Taiwo for the first of a set of twins, Kehinde for the second. Ojo and Aina for children born with their umbilical cords twisted around

their necks at birth. Dada for children born with dreadlocks. Ige for one who came out of his mother with his legs first. My mother was *Iyabo* which meant “mother has come again.” It was given to a child born shortly after the death of her grandmother or a matriarch in the family. They believed the woman had been reincarnated. She was also named *Malomo* (meaning don’t go again) because they believed she was an *Abiku* literally translating to “predestined to death.” They call children who die before puberty this because its spirit doesn’t want to stay alive. According to the Yoruba belief, it is reborn into the same family and dies many times because the *Abiku* spirit chased the foetus away from its mother’s womb. In retrospect, I wonder if the children then just had sickle cell and the family didn’t know because of a lack of knowledge.

Mother was soft yet firm. Every time we were at our makeshift dining table (the wooden centre table), she would ask, “are you eating? Try and eat”, even if I was munching away every grain from the plate. The only thing she hated more than food being wasted was food being wasted two days in a row. “Finish your food even if you’re full, you hear? *Jeun omo mi* (eat, my child).” I loved to listen to her voice which was soothing even when she was scolding me. I wonder if I should’ve talked more. I wonder if I should’ve told her about the man who hit me, or the one who assaulted me. She never bothered me. She was happy doing the speaking. I wonder if it would’ve made her happier.

We lived in a “self-contain” apartment down *Akerele* street in New Garage. If there’s anything I remember from my childhood, it’s the community I grew up in. I still dream about it and shout “God forbid” from my sleep. It was a *face-me-I-slap-you* house which is a popular Nigerian house type common to low-to-middle-income families in which the neighbors share facilities such as kitchen, toilet and bathroom. This always ensued in fights that dragged into years of beef between the families. I remember one time *Chinaza*, the compound’s only spinster, had placed noodles on fire, humming the lyrics to “Busy Body” by P-Square. It was not too long that she discovered *Mama Chibuzor*’s son had removed her pot to boil water.

“Who born this monkey banana? Who give you audacity for this compound? As you small so, you don use wickedness resemble your mama!” She gave him a knock on his oblong head and he started crying. His mother jumped out only with a wrapper barely covering her chest. “Who beat you?!” She yelled in a thick Igbo accent. “Na Auntie Chinaza.”

“Ehn Ehn ehn Chinaza, why you go touch my pikin? Everybody know say you be ashewo. No use that your dirty hand touch my pikin again. You hear me so?” Chinaza dashed at the fat woman, landing a slap on her face and they fought till a crowd gathered to separate them. And this was just a regular day in the house I grew up in.

“Good morning, mummy”, I would say in my tiny voice every morning. Weekends meant she wouldn’t go to the shop until 12pm on Saturdays and on Sundays, we stayed home together. Fridays were for *Jumat* prayers that I only went for because of the biscuit and colored *Robo* sweet they shared after prayers for *saara*, some sort of alms giving (Yoruba) Muslims commonly do in hopes of getting something they’re praying for in return. I grew up to consider this concept as selfish but maybe I’m just being harsh. The whole concept of religion is transactional; people

give to expect some favour in return and not just out of their own goodwill. My mother would've been livid finding out about my thought on this. She was not an extremely religious person; she was just comfortable with the transaction that came with it. The supreme being and His powers feared her and she was afraid to question Him—or the status quo that her people had knitted around Him. The mere thought of confusion or questioning was blasphemous and you just had to believe whether or not you understood. I quickly realised the transaction theory that have my people in a chokehold was also largely based on the doctrine of consequences. There are serious punishments for disbelieving or slacking on a religious doctrine. Hence, it is very normal for people to attribute an illwill (say, a loss of job or a child) to God being mad at them—or the devil—rather than the consequences of their own actions or just a coincidence. Maybe I was just also angry with this supreme being for not giving me a father more than I cared to admit. I had my reservations but it made Iyabo very happy so I practised her faith without question even when she upped and converted to Christianity suddenly.

“Good morning, mummy”, I mumbled in my sleepy state as she nudged me to wake up. It was a Saturday and I wanted to get in some more sleep. Afterall, my Aunt Doris in school would give me two strokes of cane if I ever dozed off in class. This particular day, I thought I had finished my chores—or not—and went back to sleep. I woke up to the screams of my mother, “This girl will not kill me. What kind of child is this? Bolu!!!” I knew from the pitch of her voice that I was in trouble. “Why did you not wash the plates while I was away?”

“I’m sorry, Mummy.”

“Sorry for yourself, omo alaigboran!” (stubborn child)

She twisted my ears. I cried even if she didn't hit me. Her voice wasn't so soothing this time. I must have overdone myself with the crying because I soon began to have a headache which degenerated into a fever. My mother felt my temperature hours later and began to panic. She rushed to a pharmacy and brought back a handful of bitter pills. She had already prepared a bowl of goat-meat pepper soup. She said “Try and eat” in her usual manner but I didn't have much appetite this time. “Are you eating? Try and eat. It is very sweet o. I made it just as you like it.” I don't remember her twisting my ears after that day.

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“TRY AND EAT”, a voice said, snapping me out of my thoughts. I turned briskly to see the elderly woman seated beside me. Tears rolled down my powdered cheeks as I gave her a hearty hug. She was surprised but indulged me lovingly. She reminded me of Mother. I was so lost in my reminiscences that I'd left the food the air hostess placed on my tray untouched. I wonder what Mother would've thought about the floral dress I was wearing to Canada.