

THE INDEPENDENCE WALK

“Bring another round for the table”, Shina yelled, signalling the barman at the other end of the bar. Temi shook her head slightly like girlfriends do when their boyfriends act obnoxiously; it didn’t make a difference because they loved them anyway.

Temilade could excuse him for being loud — it wasn’t uncharacteristic of him — but she could make excuses for him today. Today marked the end of his youth service which meant that he had been formally thrust into Nigeria’s workforce. It wasn’t actually a cause for celebration as Temi herself had been actively searching for a job since finishing her service the year before, to no avail.

But Shina was a petroleum engineer plus the big oil company he’d interned at during his service year had decided to retain him. It was an extra topping on the cake that the pay was high. It wasn’t every day a Nigerian youth landed a job with such ease. Temi really could excuse his loudness.

After spending seven years in the university for what was a five-year course on paper, then spending the first two weeks of his service in the Northern part of the country – thereby worrying his family and making him the main prayer point even though he assured them he was alright – and a year of wearing the white tee and khakis and having people in his area refer to him as ‘Mr Coppa’, Shina was glad to be done. He’d promised himself this week of merriment whenever he became an office man.

The bar was loud and crowded, but the barman had heard Shina because he promptly arrived at their table with chilled bottles of beer.

Shina thumped the barman’s back, laughing heartily, “Good guy! Sharp guy!” He waved his hand around the table, gesturing to his and his girlfriend’s friends celebrating with them.

“Share it round. Share it around. After this round, you’ll bring the bill, make we dey go”

Shina turned to Temilade, his brows raised in question. She nodded silently, grateful. When Temi completed her NYSC the year before, Shina had kept the party going till midnight. She was pleasantly surprised he was willing to call it quits at just nine-thirty.

“Make I bring another round of isi-ewu or goat pepper soup for una?” the barman asked Shina.

“You want make I finish all my money here abi. We don already buy all your canteen finish. Get behind me, Satan!” Shina joked as he gestured toward the bowls of soup they’d consumed that littered the table.

He pushed a bottle to Temilade, “Drink now.”

“You know I don’t like alcohol,” she stated.

He knew she was a hairsbreadth away from being a teetotaler. He always teased her about it. ‘Everyone should drink away their worries’ was Shina’s slogan. He also always goaded her to drink whenever they went out.

“It’s just stout, baby. See, even Feyisara is gulping the Gulder like a man.”

“Feyisara is gulping the gulder like herself.” She rolled her eyes at him. If he teased her about her holier-than-thou attitude to alcohol, then she corrected him about his once-in-a-while sexist statements.

“Amen,” Feyisara, Shina’s best friend’s girlfriend, shouted.

Temilade turned to glare at her because the girl was going through her beers at a flash-like rate. Feyisara drank like a fish and hardly got noticeably drunk or hungover. Her boyfriend, Muyiwa, was like Temi. He nursed his beers like babies and could make one beer last for an entire night out. Anything over two bottles would make him misbehave. Shina had once joked that God had switched Feyisara and Muyiwa’s private parts. A joke that Muyiwa made him pay for.

Thirty minutes later, their party of six was ready to leave. Stella — who had been Shina’s coursemate and had just concluded her NYSC too — stopped them as they made to leave.

“I have to take a video for my snap,” she announced excitedly. The bar was cleverly lit, with just enough light to allow one to see clearly, but dim enough to give off a cosy, sexy ambience. Even though it wasn’t easy to make out faces, their silhouettes made for an aesthetic view. That and the empty bowls and bottles on the table were enough proof of a lit night out.

“We what?!” Shina chanted when Stella started the video.

“We moooove!!” the table chorused in unison, dissolving into laughter afterwards and drawing a few stares.

“Let’s get out of here before they chase us out,” Shina said.

The three couples walked noiselessly to their parked cars save for Shina, who sang tonelessly, “We are going higher. We are going higher. “

His energy was infectious, and they all wound up singing and dancing shamelessly in front of their cars. When they stopped to laugh, Temilade looked over at Shina. This was why she loved him, his ability to make her lose her

self-consciousness at any time and just be, live, laugh, be happy. He caught her staring and pulled her in for a deep kiss. They didn't break apart till Stella loudly cleared her throat.

"That was the third time, guys. Get a room," Stella admonished, feigning seriousness, but there was laughter in her voice. She and her boyfriend Doro, exchanged hugs with Shina and the others.

Shina pumped a fist in the air, "We move!"

'Onward forever!!' Stella replied, raising her fist and getting into her car.

The remaining two couples were sharing a car. Muyiwa would be driving them since he was the soberest of them all. The ladies poured into the back seats. Shina got in the passenger seat, and they were soon on the road. They had a long drive ahead of them. Shina had chosen a bar a co-worker recommended, located miles from where they lived. Shina loved to try new places. Muyiwa and Feyisara planned to crash with them at their house that night. Shina put the radio on. Soft soul music serenaded the air, lulling Temi to sleep.

She did sleep. It was the jerky jolting of the car and its eventual stop that woke her up. Groggy, she opened an eye,

"Are we home?" she mumbled. She made no move to get up. If she stayed down and played dead, Shina would come to carry her.

"Good evening, officer," she heard Muyiwa say. Officer? She sat up, immediately alert. Beside her, Feyisara was sleeping and snoring lightly. Alcohol made her sleep like the dead.

"Let me see your *paypas*" was the gruff response. A blast of light met her eyes, making her wince and duck her head, avoiding the glare of the officer's flashlight. Since the car belonged to Shina, it was he who turned the overhead light on and began to rummage around for said papers.

"See how this car is smelling. Where are you coming from?" the officer squeezed his nostrils, words dripping with disdain. She could see Muyiwa bristle. He didn't like being spoken to rudely. She stretched a hand and patted his shoulder to placate him since she was seated directly behind him. The policeman noticed it.

"Leave him now. Shey you want to fight me. You think because you dey drive car now you be big man. I go show you pepper today. Get down from this car now now."

Shina intervened, “Officer, no one said anything to you. You asked for papers and I’m searching for them. No one is challenging you.” His voice was firm but polite.

The officer wasn’t appeased. “You think I’m joking? All of you get down now.” He tried to open the doors, but they were locked. That only fueled his anger. He shone his light in their faces again.

“You think say I dey follow una play. Get out of this motor” he shouted, pounding on the side of the car.

“Officer, calm down now!” Muyiwa responded angrily. He turned to Shina, “Guy, where are these papers?”

“Temilade, do you know where my car papers are?” Shina was getting frustrated.

“It’s in the boot,” Temi shouted, remembering suddenly that she had tossed them there the day before.

“You guys come down. Muiyiwa don’t say anything. Unlock the doors, open the boot and come down,” Shina instructed.

Temilade opened the door and stepped into the chilly night air. There was another car stopped in front of theirs that had two officers attending them. She turned to face the officer shining his blue light into her eyes, rubbing her clammy palms together. “See your dress. You be *ashawo*,” he said.

She ignored him, her fear replaced with irritation. She’d worn the wine micro mini bandage dress because Shina had said she should dress ‘sexiliciously’. It was short, but whose business was that but hers?

“I say all of you should get down. Who be that one?” He asked, pointing at Feyisara, who was still soundly asleep and snoring softly.

“That’s my girlfriend. She is sleeping. She’s not feeling fine.” Muiyiwa replied brusquely.

“You’re a liar. This one that is smelling like a brewery. Wake her up or I’ll wake her up for you.”

“I see no reason why we should do that,” Muiyiwa challenged. “He’ll show you the papers and we’ll be on our way. I don’t even know why we’re outside right now.”

In an instant, the officer’s flashlight was replaced with his rifle. “You wan fight me, *oboy*?” he yelled.

“Officer please,” Temi screamed, raising both hands. “Please I’ll wake her.” With her heart pounding so hard she could hear it and her stomach roiling so bad she wanted to throw up, she turned to the window.

“Feyisara, Feyisara!” Even she knew it was an effort in futility. Feyi was dead till noon of the next day.

“I’ve found the papers,” Shina announced, successfully drawing attention to himself.

“Take officer,” he stretched them. But the officer didn’t collect them.

“Who owns those laptops?” The officer asked, peering into his boot. Shit, Shina thought as his heart sank. In his haste, he’d forgotten to shut the boot. The car in front of them had been released and the remaining two officers joined them.

“Ehen, ehen...what is happening here?” one of them, a pot-bellied, bald man asked. The other one was rail thin and his uniform hung limply on him.

“Come see,” the first officer said. Both officers drew close, peering into the boot suspiciously like there was a dead body in there.

“Round them up. They’re yahoo boys. We’ll take them to the station.” the pot-bellied one declared.

“Seize those laptops” the thin one added a little too eagerly. Shina moved to block the first officer when he reached for the laptops. His MacBook Pro was in there and no one was going to manhandle it.

Muyiwa who was a programmer and had been coding on the ride to the bar, also moved to block the boot. His laptop was in there too. The third laptop was Temi’s, she held it to watch movies on the ride.

Temi had never felt more scared in her life. Her heart was beating at a crazy rate and it was absolute fear that kept her standing still when her insides were rattling like a rickety car. The darkness of the night intensified the dread that came with what was happening. There were no cars on the road, and two of her favourite boys in the world were facing off three angry officers. She wanted to tell them it wasn’t worth it but she didn’t want to make matters worse. So she looked on helplessly. She watched the pot-bellied officer shine his light on both boys, taking in Shina’s Rolex, car documents still in his hands, and his Italian shoes. Muyiwa’s uncombed hair, his gold necklace — a gift from Feyisara — his bracelets and Nike slides.

The pot-bellied man nodded once as if he’d just received a message from God.

“They’re yahoo boys,” he repeated. “Monday-” he faced the officer who’d stopped them “arrest them.”

Shina had had enough. “We are not yahoo boys. You stopped us on our way to our house, we were not speeding. You asked us to get out of our car, and we complied. You asked for my car documents, this is it. You have not searched me

or my friend and have not checked my papers but have somehow concluded that we are Yahoo boys. We know our rights and this is bullshit.”

With that, he turned to shut the boot.

The next thing happened in a blur. Temi was certain she had an out-of-body experience. She heard a gunshot. She wasn't even sure which officer fired.

Shina crumpled to the ground like a sack of rice. Feyisara woke up with a bloodcurdling scream. And Muyiwa was shouting, “You shot him, why?” over and over.

Then just like that, she snapped out of her trance. She flew the distance between them — that's how it felt. She didn't see the officers leave, she didn't register Muyiwa saying, “We've got to get him to a hospital.”. She didn't feel Feyisara pulling her. She sat on the road that wasn't tarred in her wine bandage dress and brown strappy heels, whispering. “Shina...Shina,” as her boyfriend bled out in her arms.

Temi woke up with a start. She had awoken at 4:59 and even beat her alarm clock by a minute. But she was in a foul mood. She stood, stretched her legs and walked to the reason she'd woken up wanting to cry.

She had extracted the grainy blown-up picture on her wall from the video they'd taken in the bar on the night tragedy struck. Her friends didn't understand why she chose to frame this photo and why it was what she chose to pay homage to. It was nearly impossible to make out anyone's features. She'd chosen it because she could feel him in that unclear picture, his arms outstretched, his smile larger than life. She could feel his happiness that night, his excitement for the future, for the next phase of his life. And she could remember the last kiss they shared, how much she'd loved him in that moment. And how much of that love she still carried in her now.

In the year since he died, the rate of police brutality in Nigeria had skyrocketed. What had been perpetrated in secret was now carried out in broad daylight. It was the effect of the government's mission to rid the world of the internet fraudsters, “yahoo boys”. It meant that every youth in the country was a suspect and would be treated as such. And fighting back could cost one's life.

It was wild how in a land riddled with poverty, terrorism and other challenges, this was what the government chose to focus their ammunition on. Every day, the list of victims as her boyfriend grew.

She'd watched videos on videos and heard tales upon tales of police beating up people, extorting them, unlawfully detaining them and seizing assets, harassing girls and killing people in cold blood on little more than a hunch and no concrete evidence of wrongdoing. It was now a crime to be perceived as rich to drive flashy cars or to own the latest technology. Male youths were now tagged criminals because of how they chose to dress or wear their hair.

She'd watched all of them and heard them all until she became numb to them. Until she could walk past any armed men, without quaking with anxiety. Until that fear gave way to anger that Nigerians had been forced to live as second-class citizens in their land. Anger that her neighbour had to cut off his dreads, pull off his earrings and wear a wardrobe consisting of only long sleeves to hide his tattoos so he could walk the streets without being harassed. Anger that they snuffed out her light and left her in darkness for no reason. It was the first of October, the country's independence day. They were having a nationwide independence walk, to demand their freedom to breathe, live, work, own assets and dress as they saw fit. They were demanding a revolution.

Temi was joining the walk. She was walking for herself and she was walking for her neighbour, but she was also walking for her boyfriend - her light and the love of her life. And his murder was proof of why this walk was necessary. "We move, Shina. Onward forever," she whispered.