



Where Hard work Is Forbidden

A short story (An entry for Happy Noise Makers)

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LAATU: If only these grasses knew how to leave my loins alone maybe I would say they are not the soldiers I am trying so hard to escape from right now...

As she trekked through the half-burnt grass land hoping to meet the bus again on the north-western stretch leading into the town center, she thought to herself

"...was this a mistake? What if I end up in that hole? What would happen to the children? How will they sleep tonight? What would be said of me? How would society treat me? Will I be able to live with myself outside the hole? Wha_ "

This must be the isolated house they said we would come across before the mosque.

"How did I even come to loose my card, ehn? This crime thing has never been for me. My karma is quick."

Thoughts running through her head made her lips make gestures that resonated with pity, self-disdain and sadness.

A little pass the house in the eastern direction, they came to the old mosque which told an undaunted story of Islam in this part of the world. Immediately after the mosque laid a queer path ahead, a little up a hill, that looked like it has seen ages of persistent use. But could she ask to confirm the route given that none of them speak a language anywhere close to what French sounds like? Could she dare to say 'hi' when she couldn't say much in English too? Could she even dare to be noticed as a foreigner without the *carte d'identite*¹ in her hand? What if one of the soldiers is even here to pray? Silently, she sheltered her fear as she led the other three mothers that decided to come farther north today to trade too. Just when they found the source of the foot path that was nearly hidden by the ashes of harmattan, they were bound north-west once again and this time, eagerly galloping to make it back onto the road to join the rest of the traders in the bus. Just then one of the women spoke to Laatu
1st WOMAN: You are not scared at all, are you?

LAATU: Hmm, sister, now that we are already here do we have the luxury to be scared?

And if our customers did not crave so much for the food stuffs of the Leo market, would we go through all this dilemma?

Since we can't eat our cake and still have it, the money that we chase has led us here because we cannot afford not to want more of it. Or else our families will live in shame and misery.

The other woman in their midst, a much younger woman spoke up

SAFIA: I'm just wondering what will happen to my toddler if I don't make it back home today...

Laatu, delivered of her state of fear turned in an alarmed quick move and paused, looked tenderly at the young lady, grabbing her left hand with her right and said:

LAATU: *Inshallah*², your baby will suck breast again this evening...the breast of a hardworking *waala*³ woman. Don't be afraid, today's bread Allah has given us...He has made smooth our journey back home too. This, I believe.

She kept on to her hand and fastened her loose loin with the other hand while signaling on the rest of the women to be faster as they essayed a run. The fourth woman who had not yet in an attempt to word her grief said almost faintly:

2nd WOMAN: Oi, I never imagined we will be running relays and hundred meters over here when gunned men are on the other side of these bushes. Why is it the

warnings never came with taking short course in race sports?...woi, my knees are bending. They are bending ooo...they are bending.

LAATU: My sister, can we even afford to miss the bus too? Especially when the driver could be held by these gunned men already explaining why some of his seats are already empty before he's arrived at the bus station. This is fairly new to all of us I guess. My warning and counsel tell me one would have to trek for about forty-five to sixty minutes through this isolated community to escape the soldiers and immigration around this region of the border. The bus would be waiting in the next community adjoining this one to the north-west. So, our best shot right now is to move as fast as our limbs can allow. Or else we risk the wrath of all the *carte d'identite* holders on the bus right now. We can't afford to make this journey an impatient one for them and the driver as well.

1st WOMAN: This *carte d'identite* thing *muo ya*⁴, how much can it cost us to get one? While increasing her pace by the minute, Laatu tries to recall how much she had to pay for her lost card when she was registering for one to begin her cross-border trading about seven years ago.

LAATU: *Torr*⁵, when I was to prepare my papers and get the *carte d'identite* then, I gave that my brother that helped me do it about hundred cedis to do everything. But that was seven years ago. So, I cannot tell exactly how much that can be acquired for this year.

2nd WOMAN: If only we had a stable currency will all this be an issue to be contemplating with? But one cedi today is fifty pesewas tomorrow and thirty pesewas next week. No one even knows if they can afford to be legal and go hungry. Hmm, what these so-called leaders of this continent think about no one can tell. And you won't believe they go to the big universities to learn how to run a country. But from what they show us, one cannot help but wonder if they can even run a family successfully.

LAATU: Oh, I say my sister, what is priority and what is not now adays in this country is a matter of how much one can starve her family oo. Or else no business woman or man makes any profit these days. Even we that we sell salt and pepper to the communities, sometimes you cannot afford to eat salt because you would be sweetening away your capital and running the business into muddy grounds.

Had they not understood the nature of their adventure, one would curse all her ancestors for leaving them such fates for inheritance.

They say when there is something to talk about on the way to the farm, you never know you have arrived until you start seeing yesterday's earthed grounds. Lost in their conversation, the group of tired mothers were before their orange bus again without realizing exactly how long it took them to get there.

LAATU: And what is this rotten smell my in-law?

He feigned ignorance.

LAATU: Driver, what is that smelling around this area like a dead rat? Did you not inspect your house before letting us into it? Or because your nose would not be sitting behind here you didn't care enough to rectify?

I'm sure if Ama Atta Aidoo was still with us she would agree with me that this bus is ramshackled than 'Progres' that she mentioned in her story about that graduate girl going back home after her university learning. See the way we are even packed here like *titus* sardines.

2nd WOMAN: Oh sister, won't you take it easy on the man?

LAATU: Ah, is your nose immune to the suffering in this part of the bus?

Well, since I can't talk for all, I would just keep my quiet and join all of you watch injustice go uncriticized in this country_ oh, do I not forget we are in Burkina now. Let's all watch the continent fall totally, *koo!*

With her thumb and index fingers clinched to one another, she runs them from the left side of her lips to the right, signaling the close of a loose zip.

As the bus slowly roared towards the bustling heart of Leo, the French speaking lots were as noisy as one could expect on their market day. To some of the new traders, this was a very unfamiliar cacophony. However, Laatu having been here a number of times knew just where she would locate the few that understood her little English and her bag full of native *waalee*⁶. Tailed by Safia, the two passed through several hooves and bents and finally came to a location of the market where fish perfumed the entire atmosphere. Just as she remembers it, Laatu turned to Safia and said to her:

LAATU: This smell made me vomit the first time I came here. Today see me confidently opening my mouth and other holes letting in as much of this aura as my body can handle. Don't worry, you will get used to it soon.

Moments after they arrived at the supplier Laatu has been dealing with for the pass seven or so years, the two were seen conversing in *waalee* and even Safia, who was lost in a bowl of local jollof would giggle every now and then.

After confirming their shipment. The two set for the station back to Wa, Ghana.

After securing seats in another version of a ramshackled bus like the first, they typically did what all market women do:

They climbed into the three-meter tall burning horse and walked up to seats of their liking. Holding a little parcel of fruits her supplier friend gave her, Laatu placed it on the seat that was neither too close to the driver nor too close to the last bench of the bus. She admonished Safia to place hers in the inner seat close to the window just by the seat Laatu chose. Like they have been sisters for too long, Safia asked that they go shopping since the bus is about a number of minutes away from being bound for Wa again. "Why not," Laatu remarked.

Oh, they don't say, but many lament on how cheap it is to afford clothing in Burkina and the nearby border towns in Ghana. Having walked almost to the end of the western side of the blazing market, the two could be seen holding up one pick after the other against the sun as though the sun was the wearer of whatever second-hand dress they picked. Women always seem to have just enough to buy everything some in the market, don't they? How could one coming to shop for supplies for her business back home be the same one buying so much a bale of clothing as though thinking of starting a boutique.

Whatever carried their load back to their carriage, only the two and their maker can tell.

When the bus was enroute, the reality of their illegitimacy to be in these lands invaded them again just as the holy spirit did the men that gathered in the temple; the two were heard speaking tongues of despair and fear.

Just where the line laid between Ghana and Burkina Faso, the immigration officers set to their duties of inspecting and questioning

LAATU: Ei, you would not believe the amount of time it takes to be cleared from just paying your long lost siblings a visit while sharing riches with them. Ah, had the colonizers not come I thought these people and Ghanaians were siblings settled across these plains and so on? Why is it today they were so many barriers between them now? Little hustle too that a citizen wants to do, this country is so against that. *Walahi*⁷, one cannot even be allowed to kill him or herself if one desired.

How can hard work be so forbidden in such a place in the world. One could hardly believe we are the very children on whose forefathers backs great nations of the west were built. Why are we then the very barriers to our own development?

SAFIA: Hmm, when one wants to think of all these things, madness is always exercising with smiles just by your side, waiting to invade you.

Ah, Laatu, I thought this thing they even call AU was planning to do what they called the continental free trade area in Accra? Or I didn't hear the man on the radio well when he was narrating that story?

LAATU: Hmm, my sister, the very workings of the leaders of this continent, we can never know whether they mean to always deceive themselves or us.

Wait oo...what is the officer and the driver still talking about at the back there? Do you see their shadows?

SAFIA: I think the driver is about to settle him for his discretion. One he deserves not. I think he too has a salary that cannot always fuel him back home when he cashes out. Let the driver do what he has to do *shaa*⁸. The sun is almost set anyway. I wonder how this my toddler is faring back home.

LAATU: Don't worry my sister, I told you the Lord does not forget the pure in heart. We can be home before news hour if we continue our journey any minute.

Just like a prophecy, before Laatu could put a full-stop on her sentence, the driver shut his door as though he was attempting to shake the age long dust locked inside its belly.

(...to be continued)

GLOSSARY

1. *Carte d'identite*: The official border pass that allows immigrants into Burkina Faso when traveling from other west African countries of the ECOWAS.
2. *In sha Allah*: An Arabic phrase will means "by the will of Allah (God)"
3. *Waala*: The tribe located in the capital town of the Upper West Region of Ghana. This tribe is situated about a hundred kilometers away from the Burkina Faso border far north.
4. *Muo ya*: A speech jargon/ mannerism in waalee which literally means 'even.'
5. *Torr*: A word in waalee which means 'okay/ alright.'
6. *Waalee*: The native language of the Waala people of the Upper West Region of Ghana.
7. *Walahi*: Ah jargon that is used to emphasize a point.
8. *Shaa*: A jargon word of Nigerian origin.