

## *Stardom Is Not For Us*

Every day, Tega did the same thing. Woke up by four. No shower, no breakfast. Walks through his house quietly so his mother doesn't wake up and make yet another demand. Then he trekked to the junction, down the road so he could catch the truck or van, the one the construction company provided to converge the Nigerian staff to the site. By past five, they had started work. They gave them portions, targets when you work in construction. It was never large enough for people to raise labour law concerns but it was tedious, and many days he felt overused.

The shovelling he didn't mind. But pushing the wheelbarrow filled with stones to be laid on the ground, that, he hated. It made everything all the more tedious. His aunt, his mother's sister who they all called Baby, whom he had lived with in Lagos since he was sixteen, was the one who got him his job. He had just turned thirty-six and had never worked a day in his life. It wasn't that he didn't want to work or he was just being lazy. No one just told him that he needed to, at least not directly.

One day, she had her son- Karo, his cousin, the one who worked as an engineer draft him a résumé and got him a job at the construction company. It was more a favour to herself than it was to him. At some point, she got tired of him living with her and her husband and her granddaughter, Onome, whose mother has lived in Europe for four years now and hadn't returned even for a day.

It wasn't his idea that his mother moved from Warri and lived with him in Lagos. But when she heard that he was working she wouldn't stop calling everyone. His uncle, his mother's youngest brother Uncle Felix, who also lived in Lagos and was a factory worker at a textile company, his aunt, the one he lived with, and anyone else who cared to listen to her. She told them that she would die in Warri and that her leg had gotten worse, and that her stomach

was bad and her face had gotten worse and she felt abandoned and that everything was just rigged against her.

He had just moved into the apartment and needed to buy furniture, nothing too fancy, a mattress here, gas stove there, plates, pots and was saving, but she just wouldn't stop with the demands. Sometimes she said she needed to buy medicine, other times she said she was starving and hadn't eaten for days even though he had only just sent her money for the month. With her, there was always something, like a toddler who had only just learned to walk and just wouldn't quit.

She used to live with her mother, his grandmother who fell for her every trick for attention until she died and she was all alone in Warri.

"But I just sent you money last week," he would protest when she asked for more money. "E don finish," she would bark from her end. "I never chop since yesterday morning. I go die ooh."

Since they moved into his house, a one-bedroom apartment in Ofin, past Igbogbo, in Ikorodu, the suburbs in Lagos, all she had done was eat and talk. Some months she didn't step out of the house and the neighbours wondered if she had gone back. His aunt gave him one of her old chairs. The long one in the parlour where he slept when he lived with her. His mother slept on the bed in the room. She had a bucket in there as well where she peed even though the toilet wasn't far from her bed and the x-ray said that her leg was better.

"You're just being lazy," his aunt would say to his mother in the month when she just moved to Lagos and they still stayed with her. Once, when he was at work and she fell in the bathroom in his aunt's house, his aunt stood over her helping her get back on her feet.

"Help yourself," she said half raising her voice. "You have to help yourself." His mother

would be unmovable. She laid on the bathroom floor sturdy, looking up at her sister. “I no fit,” she would reply almost sobbing. But she never really sobbed. That day she remained on the floor until Uncle Felix came and lifted her up. Sometimes she waited for him to return from work before she got up.

They said old people didn’t lie but his mother lied a lot. Constantly, flippantly. She lied about the big things and the little things, and she was ready to take her lies to her grave. Once, she peed on the floor in the room and before he woke up, she cleaned the pee with her nightdress. But some had rolled out of the room and she hadn’t seen it. When he asked if she had peed on the floor she said she didn’t. “No be me.” Even as the pee rolled into the parlour and her nightdress sat on the floor drenched in pee, she insisted it wasn’t her.

He was going to become a football star. When you grow up in Warri as he did, it was the first thing that came to mind. To grow up and become a footballer.

On Saturdays, all the boys on the streets gathered at the field not too far from where his grandmother smoked fish and played till the sun was out.

He was somewhat of a local champion, and people told him that he could succeed at it if he focused a bit more and played a bit harder, and just gave it more time.

Then, it felt close, he could touch it, the thought of touring the world, playing on a huge field. But now, in his forties, he knew better. That life was not made for people like him. That life, existed only in dreams, for people like him. The chances of an agent or a coach or anyone who could really do anything watch him play was slim. “Football won’t feed your mother,” his aunt would scream when she found out he didn’t go to work in his early days at the construction company.

That day, he brought home a carton of Three Crown liquid tin milk, which the company gave

them monthly. They called it “welfare,” but he felt it was the least they could do. Once, he didn’t bring home the carton of milk and it seemed like all was well for a week. Then, his mother woke up earlier than she used to one morning. Or maybe she hadn’t slept all night.

But that day she sat up in bed, the door flung open, waiting for him to get up for work. Then she called him from the room where she sat. Sometimes, he didn’t answer, but it only made things worse. She would raise her voice, and keep at it, shouting his name until the neighbours woke up to the sound of her voice piercing through the morning, and asked what the problem was.

One of her favourite things to do was report incidents to anyone who cared to listen. “Judging,” as she called it. “One full tin of milk wey den give you for work, where e dey?” she asked him. “Them no give us this month,” he replied. “Why?” she asked. “E don finish for store.”

“When them go give una?” “Them go call us when e don ready.”

She reminded him every day of the milk and when she won’t let it go he went and bought her a roll of powdered Dano milk to assuage her, so he could get a break.

“Welcome my son,” she said when he walked into the room the carton of milk in hand. “E quick you today ooh.” He didn’t respond. He was tired and needed to jump in the shower and then go off to the bar down the road to catch the match and bet on a winning team and then to Club 180 where the girls all shaved and didn’t stand outside. He had gotten the alert from the bank that his salary had hit his account on his way back from work and he would make a good night out of it, just like he had always done.

He rarely ate at home anymore. Only on Sundays when he didn’t have to work and when his mother held him down with talk of having a wife who would take care of her. His

mother never left any food remaining for him or asked him if he had eaten even though she had insisted that the food; rice, beans, yam, cornflakes, and, small gas stove stayed with her in the room close to her bedside, despite his apartment having with a kitchen.

One time, they had a fight about it and he told her that all she knew was her right as a mother and never her duties. “All you are good for is the fucking audacity,” he said to her. A word his aunt’s husband used in the house whenever his cousins had done something wrong. “The audacity,” he will bark in the hallway.

It is hard to explain how he was conceived. He wasn’t a mistake, not in the way that people used the word “mistake” when they got pregnant and weren’t planning to. It was more wilful ignorance than anything else. His aunt said that she had run off with a musician who she danced for in the eighties and they hadn’t seen her for months. When she came back she was pregnant, presumably for the musician. She never did confirm who his father was. She also didn’t seem troubled about how she would take care of him, and so they thought that was taken care of. But they later found out that she hadn’t thought about that either or anything about becoming a mother.

After she had him, she left him with his grandmother and ran off and wasn’t seen until she was pregnant with his sister, who was born epileptic and died when she was only five. His aunt said she was a *malu* – a cow. And that it was only *malus* that didn’t care the way she didn’t. Even when his sister died his mother didn’t return. Nothing just bothered her.

She came back, years later when he was about to start secondary school and she lived with his grandmother until she died years after he had come to Lagos. Now, his mother bathed every day in olive oil which he buys, and she always had a bible by her side. He never saw her really read it but it was occasionally open on her lap.

It was his grandmother who told his aunt to take him back with her to Lagos. She had only come for a few days and didn't plan on going back with him but she pleaded and she agreed, even before she discussed it with her husband. His education in Warri was a piece of shit. His mother held his face to hers when they were leaving the next day and said looking into his eyes. "Na me be your mama. Make you no forget." He held that moment in his heart and recalled it on bad days when his mother was still in Warri. But since she moved in with him, whenever he thought of it, it sounded like her insurance plan. If you become successful don't forget me.

His aunt threw him in a public school close to her house and hoped he turned out well. He didn't bring home a WAEC result. When she asked him what happened he just stood there. "Why are you always on my matter," he murmured loud enough that she could hear walking out.

She enrolled him in a technical college where he studied welding. He also didn't present her with a certificate and then she took him to a man a friend had told her about who had a welding workshop, where he was an apprentice for four years. "He hasn't learned the work," the man would say whenever his aunt called. He told her that the man, his master was wicked and wasn't willing to teach him. Later, he told her that he needed to buy tools, and that she should rent a space for him, and that he was ready to work. She didn't buy him the tools or rent him the space and he never worked.

He sat on his back on his aunt's couch waiting for the weekend when all the boys were home to play football.

He was thirty-eight when his aunt started pestering him to leave her house and start life. "You are a man now," she told him one Sunday morning while she prepared to go to church, and he dusted his boots, readying them for the field. Two years after he started at the construction

company, he wasn't getting ready to move to his own place.

When he got his salary, it finished long before the next one came, and most times he was in debt. He sent his mother some money, he never failed to send her money when he got paid. Then he invested a huge chunk betting on different football matches, hoping to win. Sometimes, he won, mostly out of luck. Other times, he didn't. To be honest, he wasn't really good at it. The rest, he spent on the women of Club 180. And so for most of the month, he had to trek to the junction every morning and join the company's truck or van.

One time, before he started the construction job, he told his aunt's husband, whose clothes he has washed and ironed and whose car he has washed, since he moved in with them years ago, whom they all meant to call "boss" but pronounce it as "bose," that he was being disrespected by his aunt, his wife, and that he needed his assistant to rent an apartment. Bose told him that he first needed to get a job, then he would look into paying his rent. The next day, he didn't wash his car or iron his clothes. When his aunt was cooking, he dropped a bar of soap in the soup. They threw the entire pot of soup away, and when they asked him if he was the one, he denied it.

"Save up or just give me the money to keep for you when your salary comes in," his aunt suggested when he started at the company. He didn't save up and he didn't give her any money. So she told his cousin, her son, who told his manager, who started deducting from his salary, and when the money was done, he gave it to his aunt, who went and paid for the house and brought his mother to Lagos. When he had bought a bed and a gas stove, his mother moved in with him.

On Sunday, like every other Sunday, he got up when it was still dark and dusted his boots, and pulled out his jersey from behind the chair where he left it last week. He will jog to the field,

get there on time for the warm-up and also so he isn't benched by Bolaji. He signed. Just the thought of his name conjured up something in his heart that made him feel weak.

He hated Bolaji and his many touches of sarcasm towards him. Calling him Daddy. Prostrating to greet him. Always trying to bench him. Just being all-around passive-aggressive.

He loved the warm-up exercises. The push-ups, the jogs, the jumps. Bolaji hadn't come yet. Bolaji rarely took part in the warm-ups. He came when the team was being selected and somehow was always made captain.

A G-Wagon, one of the old models but a G-Wagon still, drove past as the warm-up came to a close. It parked close enough that they could see who drove it, but far enough to avoid a short fired hitting it. It was Bolaji. This was the first time he was coming in this car. Bolaji, who worked as an engineer at a telecommunication company, and turned thirty, two years ago, wore a matching Nike jersey and shorts. It was ironed, making him look like he was a model at a Nike commercial and not a regular guy about to play football on a field of sand.

"It's a company car," Tega said. "How can a young boy like that buy this type of car? It's a company car. Ordinary people don't use this type of car," he said as Bolaji walked towards them.

"Daddy you are here today. When will you hang your boots?" Bolaji said. Tega looked at him in silence. Today he didn't prostrate before him. Bolaji was the captain as he used to be and so he got to pick his team. All the boys were chosen, thirteen in each team except him. He just stood there, looking at them. Bolaji had tried to bench him last week, saying that he was too old to play well. And that they should go for "young blood." But the other team wasn't complete and so the boys let him play. Today they were complete and so they didn't let him

play.

“Fools,” he shouted from somewhere inside him. “You allow this small boy to tell you what to do. Fools, all of you.” He stormed off the field angrily.

He dropped by the bar and bet on some games. Then he went to the ATM. At the ATM, he saw a man who looked his age with two young boys, most likely his sons. The boys were hard to manage and they ran around, while their father tried to withdraw money. Then they asked him questions. “Are we buying bread? Did the ATM pay? Can it shock?” Tega just stared at them.

When he got home he threw his boots on the floor in the kitchen. His mother had peed on the floor again, and the house smelt of it. He could hear her calling him but he won't answer. Not today. Today he needed to catch his breath. He went outside and he sat by his door looking up into the sky. Then something unfamiliar happened to him, something hard to recognise. Tears rolled down his eyes. He won't be a football star. He felt like screaming. But that will only confirm his neighbours' suspicions that he was crazy. When the tears stopped, he just sat, staring into the morning, while his mother screamed his name inside.