They came to watch the rich bury themselves. Kola weaved between them on his way to the bank. Traders with hands on their waists and over their eyes, away but aware of their varied wares, the bus and cab drivers at the parks waiting for rush hour. People and more people moved to take in the women, their geles in bloom like wildflowers, the men holding matching filas like unofficial invites, hats they could not wear inside the church. The wake-keepings on Thursdays were just minor inconveniences and sources of traffic, the burials on Fridays the main event, as he was finding out. Saturdays were for weddings and prominent surnames, Sundays for stringing camels through the needle's eye. But Friday was for stopping traffic in Marina, for talking drums and white agbadas, for press cameras. It felt a cruel observation to make.

Kola had not been at his semi-permanent job long, so he clearly remembered the first time he saw the church. Surrounded by skyscrapers and matchbox bureaucratic buildings, logos and acronyms on one side and 1000 Naira parking on the other, and there at the traffic light: the church. Grey against the blue sky, dwarfed by its neighbours yet haughty in its righteous modesty. It was too far west to be Catholic, so he dismissed it as Anglican because that was what his grandmother was. 'Old Lagos' after all, but not as old as it would like to be, Gothic European in its pretension. It's four face tower clock, wrong only some of the time. The tinted windows hint at the stained-glass salvation inside. Who went to church here? This part of Lagos with the old street names and palm trees that rustle in the ocean breeze. Colonial past and former capital secrets. Tiwalade was Anglican and certainly rich enough.

He thought of her in her Sunday best, next to her twin little brothers in the pews, naughtily sneaking off replies to him during the sermon. Kola had not heard from her in two weeks and was now unsure what to do with his weekends. During the week his job title was vague enough to leave him with disparate responsibilities. On any given day he could be an email-drafter, copy-maker, receptionist-flirter or more generally the resident young person, the 'boy'.

Today his oga had sent him rushing to the bank, called him aside in tones both hushed and conspiratorial and secreted him a stack from a pile he kept locked away. The money had a post-it with a name and *440267822* on it, no further instructions. Kola asked no questions; he could tell that his boss liked this.

The sun was omnipresent. It felt like the inside of a bulb. Kola noticed he and the police escorts were the only people in black. They appeared much more comfortable than he felt, exchanging fives over AK-47s, developed friendships over their lucrative detail, seeing each other at the same parties and funerals. Soldiers also filled the streets for the high-ranking government officials. A big person must have died. Kola watched them climb down from their Hiluxes.

Some cars develop their own associations, the old Peugeot 505 and the civil service of his and his father's youth, bankers and their Avensises, and now a beat-up Hilux always seemed to scream uniform. Kola questioned what they were here for, before it dawned on him, they were protecting them from us. It did not matter that he was close enough to see the rot. The rolled-up windows even when the Air Conditioning did not work, second mortgages for celebrations such as these. He was outside the church; they needed guns for people like him.

Despite this proximity, Kola always held a 'look don't touch' relationship with wealth. Deep down he knew Tiwalade was not for him. She liked how he never forgot, that way she would not have to play the bitch and remind him. And it was fine, he held no illusions in any way. At least not anymore, not upon forgiving his parents for being poor. Although he could never tell them that. It would break their mutual deception, where they acted like they weren't and Kola, like he'd never noticed.

They bought into the American dream exported through Cosby sweaters and Urkel glasses, that you get what you deserve and a chance at this "more". And he was glad to have avoided that particular tradition of carefully whispering one's optimism, of "Olorun ti gbo adura wa," of striving. Kola damned it instead with a shrug. It made it easier to make the decisions. Like leave his job when he lost the will to pretend, or stay. Like sleep with the receptionist because she was willing and was there. *440267822.*

The soldier's name-tag read Nduaka. He had suddenly appeared in Kola's way, halting him. The procession was starting. The casket was coming. The final pomp and circumstance. He had halted Kola mid-repetition. Kola worried about his brain turning to mush, his body going soft, so he made the mundane challenging. Timing himself when he made copies, using the stairs, memorising account numbers. *440267822*. There was enough time to skip across to the

welcomed air conditioning of the bank and its dull fluorescent headache. His oga had said, “now-now.” Kola tapped his pocket lightly. Was he tipping off the pickpockets? He fondled them all like he was looking for something, anything. His window to escape was closing and he was face to face with Nduaka the soldier. It was a lived-in, handsome face. A sort of anti-hero Sidney Poitier. Yet from this face, you could not doubt his ability for cruelty. That familiar steel that kept Kola in his place.

Nduaka cared very much about his appearance, his uniform just that little bit more pressed, his boots cracked from years of polish had a dull shine that Kola could see the sun in. It made the spot of shaving cream on his jaw appear like a stain. Although Nduaka did not seem easily embarrassed, Kola was sure he would be mortified to know it was there. *440267822*.

The stack felt heavier against his leg, and he still could not stop from touching the bulge. Suddenly he appreciated the men in uniform. He maintained his ground at the head of the crowd, feeling the swell trying to swallow him whole. Some just wanted a better view of the show, of the clergy who moved for the sake of their robes, never to crease or drag; a reminder of how they were to live. They wanted to see the casket, the overfed grandchildren flown in just for this, the rich. But he had to remain close to the men with guns, stare directly into Nduaka’s hardened face with the shaving cream stain. Kola was surprised at the tell-tale darkened circle in the centre of his forehead. It spoke of repeated bows to Mecca. An Igbo Muslim? He was intrigued by this Eastern soldier with the faith of the North, or of the local neighbourhood. Muddled prayers oozing through revival speakers. Nduaka noticed him staring and fixed his blinking yellowed eyes on him. Kola averted his gaze. *440267822*.

A flash of yellow was all Kola caught a hint of, enough for him to step back into the crowd.

Nduaka was left to absorb the blow alone. He crumbled at Kola’s feet. Kola heard but never saw, the coming together of flesh and metal, churning engine and unbraced body. The grunt emerged deep from the soldier’s throat reeking of not just pain but surprise. A genuine surprise. And for a second, Kola thought of making a break for the other side. Quick, before the procession resumed from its curious pause. But the idea of being implicated kept him rooted. It would have been impolite anyway.

The crowd was circling, rushing to see if Nduaka was dead. A confusion of uniforms hurried to their comrade. They enclosed him, clarifying and verifying in loud voices what exactly just happened. Why? Kola was not sure. For posterity? Or to establish culpability as the sense of righteous justice swelled?

“What happened?”

“O ma se o. Such a pity. Is he even still alive?”

“What happened? Ki lo sele?”

“Na Kekenapep. All these stupid tricycles trying to play smart. It saw everybody waiting, but no o, he is too clever. The stupid driver now didn’t see this man. Instead of him going small-small. He was still speeding.”

The man saying this was looking to Kola for verification, he had been the closest after all. Kola stammered out that he hadn’t seen anything. The man’s version was currently being disseminated to those at the back as fact, no reason to doubt it. He had other witnesses and the offending kekenapep was still there. Its windshield caved in and frescoed, sprinkled with the soldier’s blood. Its chassis ominously dented and its front wheel up Nduaka’s leg, engine still purring. As for the driver, he had gotten out of there, taking off on foot almost as soon as he made contact, before anyone could process. This Kola had seen. Escaping with his life if not his livelihood.

“It is not right to leave him like this. Ko da rara,” said the woman who appeared at Kola’s elbow leaning into him. He instinctively placed his hand over the stack.

“Jesus Christ, this is why you pray before you leave your house. Just like that, Jesu.”

“Would someone turn the thing off?”

“This isn’t right at all. Where is the bastard driver?”

“Someone turn it off. My God.”

“He ran away,” Kola said absentmindedly. There was blood coming mostly from the soldier’s awkwardly placed right leg. Nduaka could not be dead. It was too anticlimactic. Was that the soldier’s prayer, a mundane death? But still, not this, not with the spot on his chin. Should he wipe it of? Polished boots, clean uniform, shaved chin. Yes, that was the thing to do.

“In what direction?”

The asker of the pointed question was wearing a uniform that Kola could not place and looking right at him. He fumbled out a pardon.

“In what direction? Which way did he run?”

Kola wondered if he should say. He did not want to get involved.

“That way,” he pointed under the bridge, towards CMS, towards the rising cranes with the Chinese lettering, because fuck him. The officer’s counterpart, also in the mystery uniform, turned off the keke, appeasing the woman. Suddenly over the sound of the crowd, Kola heard snatches of the organ from behind the church’s closed doors, the clattering of feet rising in song. The uniformed man’s second marshalled the keke away like it was under arrest. Tensions were building over what the next course of action should be. Was he dead? Should they move the body? Somebody should check if he was breathing. Who should they call, the ambulance or the morgue? Kola needed to get away. His boss had said, “now-now.” *440267822. 440267822*.

“He is alive! Jesus Christ, he is alive,” the lady screamed. Still gripping Kola in her shock. He could not escape without shaking her off. But she was right, Nduaka was alive. His eyes fluttered open, blinking away the questions. He focused on the woman screaming like he had resurrected, sweating in her too-small skirt suit. Finally, he resumed on Kola and it flashed in his eyes if Kola had pushed him. Kola needed to get the fuck out of here but the crowd had only thickened. Car horns were blaring, gone from being halted by the uniforms to being halted by the sheer mass of people. The line of backed up cars now snaking up to the express. The keke driver must have escaped into a bus heading into Costain already if he was smart, dissolving further into the nooks and crannies of the mainland.

The lady’s voice shrill in his ear, “Someone should call a doctor.”

But the people were dispersing finally, the dwindling contingent more focused on the funeral stragglers sneaking their way into the church. But this woman, still holding on, called out for somebody, anybody to make a call. This woman with her kind face coated in too much make-up, her paunch from many children, who reeked of paracetamol sweats. She was still pretty.

“Where is your phone? Call the rapid response. Do something. It is not right to just have him like this.”

Her urgency drew attention to Kola. Even Nduaka, grimacing in pain, looked up at him. Oh God.

“Why don’t you do it,” he wanted to ask her. “No,” he said instead. “I don’t have my phone.” She let go of his hand. Her attention elsewhere, on another young man who had answered the call-already on the phone with more authorities. She did not know, she might suspect but she did not know.

Nduaka did know, seen Kola hastily fondle his other pocket when she looked away, checking for his phone now that he was reminded of it. Nduaka saw it catch the light. Kola saw him notice. This again froze him to the spot. They stared at each other with their shared truth. Kola did not know what to do with the realisation that he was a coward, selfish and solipsistic. He did know he was relieved to be rid of another delusion of himself. It washed over him, this sudden acceptance of his limitations. To be aware for the first time what kind of man he was innately, even if disappointing. Kola did not know what would happen with Nduaka, only that he did not want to participate, that this was not his fault and he did not care. He was trying to hear back from Tiwalade, trying to go to the bank and then home, trying not to despise his job, trying to change proximity into reality. It did make it easier knowing someone had called. He considered his loss of escape punishment enough.

Nduaka knew it too. The disgust in his eyes alerted Kola that they had not reached the same conclusions, that he did not care for his self-awareness. Nduaka’s leg might be broken, he might have died. He had nothing but contempt for the man who now stood over him. Kola felt he had let him down in a more fundamental way, crossed a line that forever would define him in the soldier’s

eyes. He attempted to mumble out some form of apology. He hated disappointing people, perhaps part of this cowardice. But Nduaka did not acknowledge his contrition and turned his face away instead. Kola did not mind, Nduaka was simply the man in a story he could tell. 'The time a Keke almost killed me' or 'When I almost died'. One he already could not wait to relay to Tiwalade over cocktails in yet another hotel bar. They would play footsy and discuss all the reasons they could never work, if she ever did call.

He pulled his phone out, did this make for a good enough icebreaker? Maybe martyr Nduaka? He would like that. View it as more representative of himself, before his name and face would fade, just like Kola's guilt. Leaving the bare bones for Kola's realisations. Already he felt their reverberations abating. At once profound and shallow. Trite in its familiarity like the burials on Fridays and ultimately undermined by this.

The men in uniform were returning with the driver, dragging him by his trousers as he begged, apparently that had been more pertinent. His pleas fell on deaf ears and Kola felt more pity for him than he did for Nduaka. A coward's bond or guilt for ratting him out, he turned away from those questions, from the scene. The man had wasted his head start and he did not intend to do the same. Heading to the bank, he tried to get Nduaka's attention one last time. To tell him he missed a spot, to apologise? Who knew? But Nduaka was steadfast, his neck stiffened towards the man who had run him over instead. Kola shrugged a general sorry before being on his way. He was a coward but never impolite. Walking past the church where the soldier's oga was still inside, busy, unaware, bidding farewell to whoever, Kola patted his pockets down and faced the bank.

44026-8– 8...no, that was wrong.