

THE WALK HOME

"Everywhere in this town reeks of filth and urine," thought Ajide to herself as she briskly passed the third clothing store that had caught her attention on the bustling street. The storefronts along this street always had identical displays: well-lit entrances with mannequins clad only in second-hand men denim trousers or shorts. Store owners resorted to stuffing the clothing pockets with plastic bags, newspapers, and rocks to prevent them from toppling over. The scarcity of women's clothing stores on this street piqued Ajide's curiosity, but her attention seldom lingered there for long. She reached the end of the street, where a group of motorcycle taxis, known as *Okadas*, had gathered. She rummaged through her bright red handbag for the umpteenth time before she gritted her teeth in resignation and annoyance that she would have to walk to the house, and begrudgingly set out on her trek, resentfully observing the people as they got on *Okadas* and sped by her.

Ajide was fiercely independent and frequently took action before thinking. She had been born with an obstinate "I can do it" mentality, like most middle children, which helped her accomplish her goals but also got her into predicaments like the one she was facing right now.

This was the third time she had had to walk home since she and her family had moved to where she liked to call "their genesis." this evening's reason for walking back home was like the last reason, she didn't have the 200 Naira okada fare to take her from the Isolo bus stop to the house. They had moved to Isolo about two weeks ago and still had tons of boxes unpacked, mainly because there was no space to arrange all their load so some of their belongings remained inside the boxes and because the house was so far away from where she worked, she often just saw it as a place to sleep. She would be up and out the door by 4am and she was always appreciative of the shuttlers transport app for making her commute to work so convenient. She typically got off work late, thanks to her perfectionist boss, and was unable to use the shuttlers app to get home and would return home by 10pm or 11pm. She clicked her tongue in frustration as she pondered this.

Her thoughts shifted as she continued down the road without turning, walking past the broken-down truck that was always parked to the left, until she came to a bank. She considered calling her father to have him send her money so she could withdraw, but she then shook her head against the thought. She had already walked quite a distance, there was no point calling for help now. She muttered to herself, "Just a little more left," as she kicked a discarded Coca-Cola can on her path while keeping her head low. A low head was like an invisibility cloak and Ajide always made sure she had it on whenever she had to walk home because men in the area often came out in larger numbers at night, standing in groups by the gate or drinking in the make-shift bars, loitering and catcalling girls.

Cat calling sounded harmless, but Ajide knew just how dangerous it could get if one of them were to call out and she didn't reply or acknowledge them. The implied adoration would quickly shift to insults and insults could escalate to more sinister acts. She had once been followed by a group of young boys for quite a distance, simply because she hadn't answered when one of them called out "Hey beautiful" and soon it transformed into "you no get yansh, you think you're fine like that?" until they got bored or maybe cause she had been walking too fast for their drunken selves to catch up and then they left her alone. It had been a horrible experience and because things like that were so common here, nobody had bothered to stop the boys from harassing her. It always amazed Ajide how crime had been normalized amongst the lower class. It was almost like the eyes of the spectators were shaming you for being a victim. She kept her head low to avoid eye contact, to remain invisible as she walked with a quickened pace to the house. She couldn't bring herself to call the house, home yet. It all felt surreal, and often, she still felt adrift, as if she had no true home. It was a strange feeling to have a home yet to feel as though she had none, she could never say this out loud because she felt like that would make her seem ungrateful. She would think of her real home in Gbagada where they had spent 17 good years, where she knew every supermarket, bank, suya spot and where her friends lived close by. Yet, with the blink of an eye, she found herself in Isolo—a jarring transition.

If her mother were still alive, she would hate the new house. She would hate the fact that it only had two rooms for starters because that would mean she would have to share a room with Ajide and her sister. A room which was small and cramped enough already with the bed taking up most of the space

and the windows facing a construction site, so it always had to be closed in the afternoons when most of the construction work took place. She would hate the horrible broken-down house that the balcony overlooked and the way when you came out of the house, it was first neighboring house to the left. She would hate that whenever NEPA brought light, the lights would show a bright blue color before we could switch it to the normal whitish yellow color. She would call the lights evil and accuse us of having placed them there to try to kill her. She would hate that for some reason we were the only Yoruba tenants in the house. Her psychosis would convince her that the landlady was being nice to try to seduce Ajide's dad and that would cause fights which would somehow lead to Ajide getting slapped. Ajide remained torn on whether her mother's death was a blessing or a curse. She recalled reading an article titled "How to mourn the mother you never had," and the emotional turmoil it had induced. Memories of her mother left her in a state of emotional emptiness, rendering her unable to unequivocally label her mother's death as a tragedy or relief.

Her attention was drawn from her thoughts and back to the streets when an okada man whipped past her at full speed almost knocking her over. She steadied herself and then looked behind to see the unapologetic Okada man continuing without remorse. She sighed and retrieved a water bottle from her bag, taking a swig of the Jameson she had concealed within before throwing the empty bottle on the floor because over here no one cared if you littered. Some women had their babies defecating in the streets. She knew the last concern on anyone's mind was a plastic bottle on the already filthy streets. The heat from the Jameson caused her to shiver, taking another heavy step to continue her walk, her mind went to her dad and why he had felt so comfortable letting them move back into the trenches.

Ajide was 6 years old when they lived in Mushin, 11 when they moved to Gbagada and now at the age of 21, she was back in Mushin. Her father had called it Isolo, maybe so Ajide and her sister wouldn't revolt against the move because surely, he had to have known that they would have never agreed to this, she bitterly thought to herself. Ajide's attempt to drown her sorrows with the half-bottle of Jameson proved futile, leaving her feeling utterly hollow. Upon sighting the GT bank building, she breathed a sigh of relief, realizing she had completed more than half of her journey home. She finally reached the old English bakery and proceeded to make a left turn into the street leading to her house. As another okada man sped past her she wondered "what's the worst that could happen if I the okada hit me and I died?" This was what walking on this road did to Ajide. It made her hate life.

Walking into the gates of the estate, Ajide saw a man peeing into a gutter by the side and her irritation began to swell up again.

"Grown ass men who continue peeing in the gutters simply because they can easily whip out their manhood should be beaten at this point." She muttered under her breath.

Ajide couldn't count the number of unwanted male private parts she had seen in her life at the young age of 21.

Finally at the gate of the house, she called her brother to help open the inner gates as they annoyingly could not be pushed open from outside.

"How far?" He said to her in his usual easy-going manner while he shut the gate behind her as she walked in. Her brother always had the best energy, and almost always a sort of blank expression. She could never quite tell whether he was happy, sad or just didn't care. She considered him to be the most emotionally mature of her siblings.

"I'm exhausted" she said, waiting for him to fasten the padlock back on the gate.

He laughed and said, "stay strong" and then they walked towards the house together.

Her dad was on the balcony watching her come in and as she saw him, a little bit of hate pushed up her throat.

The hate of you know I'm struggling and you're not helping.

The hate of why would you make us move here?

The hate of why did you marry a woman who had psychosis?

The hate of why did you even give birth to me?

She took a deep breath and pushed down these thoughts. Ajide had always been good at burying her emotions. She worked hard to rationalize everything because that was helped get through every day. She had to remind herself that in spite of all her negative thoughts, she had made it home safe and that regardless of how she felt towards her father, she owed him respect. This had been ingrained in her by society and by her father since childhood. She knew better than to think she could behave otherwise simply because she was depressed and possibly suicidal.

“Good evening daddy” She called out as she reached under the balcony then walked into the house.

“Hmm, welcome.” He said. The tone of his voice often made all her anger subside. She could tell he too was sad to see her suffer or in a way just sad in general. Though he was a stubborn Nigerian man, he had truly loved his wife, Ajide’s mother. He loved her so much that in spite of everything he had never brought in another woman, which is bare minimum but what was bare minimum when it came to a Lagos man? thought Ajide to herself. She had long since accepted, maybe just for her own sake, that her father had loved her mother, the best way he knew how. He had always hoped that she would return to him from the thick haze of her faded reality but that never happened and now she was gone. Ajide would think about this fact and all her anger transform into sadness. For Ajide, love equated to pain and sorrow, an emotion entailing the shared experiences of loved ones. Love, to her, meant vulnerability, a potential for being shattered. Time and time again. She loved her father more than anything else in the whole world, which meant often times than not, she was shattered time and time again.

“How was your day?” He asked as she stepped on the final stairs into the house. His knowing eyes letting her know that he knew she had walked or that she was depressed. Ajide’s father had always spoken against walking home. “Take an uber or a bus or the okada.” He would suggest but he was never the one who had to pay for it. He so easily forgot that they had fallen from grace to grass, and things were not the same as they had been when they lived in Gbagada.

‘It was good.’ Ajide said smiling, even though a little more than five seconds ago she had deeply considered letting an Okada man take her life. Ajide had long learned how to put a smile on her face despite whatever she may have been feeling. The world did not revolve around her and she did not want to make her father upset so the smile would always be plastered on her face and as she did every time she had a horrible no-good day, she would smile with her dad and make small talk as if she had had an enjoyable day, grab some rice and stew or whatever was available to eat. Today there was nothing, so she got bread and coke then she went into her room and shut the door. She would put the speakers on and play some music and then head into the warm shower just to let the water pour down her neck, her shoulders, careful to avoid the water touching her neat braids that she would have packed into a bun before entering the shower. Sometimes she would cry because that helped her breath in ways that she never quite understood and then when she was done, she felt great. A brand-new optimistic girl. Like the hot water had burnt away all the pain, shame and embarrassment that she had felt during the day. She got dressed into her oversized pink top that had in bold print “Unicorn” and settled on her bed to finish eating the rest of her bread and coke dinner. Luckily, Ajide got full very fast all the time, so this dinner was very satisfying. She burped as she dropped the now empty coke bottle into the trash bag and settled herself into her bed.

“Tomorrow will be a great day.” she said to herself as she wrapped herself in her blanket and slept off.