

SOOT.

“There is something in the air”, Kene said, stopping to twitch his nose that I've always thought to be too small for his face. “Are you not smelling it too?” “Kene let us go, we are too late for this one”, I said in a tone that conveyed my impatience. Kene clutched his bag tightly, picked his pace and we hurried to the bus stop.

I always wondered why Lagos was so popular among non-residents. The streets smelled like sun-warmed shit when the sun was out, the gutters overflowed every time it rained bringing greenish-black gunk that reached the calves of seemingly unbothered passersby and everyone seemed to be in a hurry. The pedestrians bumped into you and shoved you aside if you weren't moving in that half-run, half-walk pace, the drivers hurled curses at other motorists for maintaining a sane pace. Put simply, Lagos was a place brimming with insanity and impatience. Yet, I came here anyway. I was sold the dream that Lagos was the place where men shit gold, where the streets are lined with money, You just have to be smart to get to it. I thought I was smart but Lagos swallowed me whole.

The rickety bus coughed to a bumpy stop. “Oga wetin dey happen”, a passenger yelled from behind me, so close that I felt spittle land on the back of my neck. A question that the driver ignored. “Why you go load bus when you know sey e no good?” “Comot na!” The driver threatened, knowing fully well that none of us will. Getting this bus at the peak of rush hour was a luxury all of us fought tooth and nail for, one woman lost her wig trying to enter through the bus' tiny window. “Sister, where are we going?” Kene asked. “You ask too many questions Kene”, I said dismissively. Finally, after an eternity of flimsy wire touching, the bus roared to a start, a scene that caused the passengers to cheer. “Gather your money from back” was the answer the driver gave to his adoring fans.

I'd had it with our landlord. His perversion was tolerable when it was directed to me, squeezing my breasts and slipping dirty fingers moistened with an obscene amount of saliva in me whenever I begged for an extension on the rent but when I heard him calling Kene to his room to pick up the chocolates he claimed to have for him, I knew I had to leave. I never liked the room anyway. It was too close to the poorly built latrine so whenever it rained, my room was flooded with whatever business people had deposited in there but it was either that or homelessness and I could not put Kene out on the streets.

Bamidele called it the ‘New Lagos’. “We are taking back our state, just watch. The grassroots is the foundation of every major movement. It happened in France.” I knew him too well to know he was repeating words he had heard from the radio he carried around to take him seriously. New Lagos was simply a bus park that housed scores if not hundreds of homeless kids. It was a simple transaction, drivers parked their buses there after work, providing temporary, overnight accommodation for the children. The children in return provide security for the buses and of late due to the greed of the drivers, a small stipend. “Welcome oh”, Bamidele said as his unequal limbs tried to keep up with the distance his voice had covered. “Are you sure this is safe?” I asked, riddled with scepticism. “Ahnahn, sheybi I don tell you. You worry too much Caro. Come, let us meet Baba Afija.”

Baba Afija was a dark man with a stocky build that acted no older than ten years old. It was fabled that he broke out from the dreaded league of Agberos to single-handedly create New Lagos from the ground up, causing a rift that lasted for years and left a trail of bodies in every corner of Lagos. "Ekaaro Baba", Bamidele said while gesticulating. "Who you dey greet wey sand no touch your bear bear", he said in a voice that almost sounded like a whimper. Bamidele swiftly fell to his face while singing a pathetic mix of apologies and praises of Baba Afija's battle prowess, an ordeal that lasted for no shorter than five minutes. "E dide jor" he said, after making fun of the inequality of his limbs. "Who be this yellow Pawpaw you carry come?" "Na my sister Baba." "Na every month new sister dey come. How many pikin your Mama born?" This response sent Bamidele into a laughing frenzy. "Baba, na my sister sister be this. Na me train am from small." That bit was true. I met Bamidele when I was nothing but a naive child in Lagos. It was him that got me the house I had previously stayed in, he that told me to allow the landlord to touch my breasts for the first time as an incentive for my incessant late payment. He brought Kene from the village when my father's new wife burnt his fingers with hot coal for drinking garri at our neighbour's house. The poor boy hadn't eaten in days and our neighbour was trying to save him from inevitable death. "No be the same Mama born us but na the same blood dey our veins." Baba Afija turned to me, "One week rent, submit am." I fell to my knees. "Please Sir, I swear to God in heaven, I don't have up to that." "Na because sey you fine oh, and Bamidele dey work very well. Drop this night own make Bamidele show you your bus." "Thank you, Sir, thank you so much, Sir," I said as he waved me off.

My father always called us cursed. He said my mother did nothing but deliver sickly babies for him, with skin as pale as his palm that died before he could name them. This was before Kene's first convulsion shook him so violently, releasing white froth from the side of his mouth that sent our mother tearing at her hair, screaming for help, and eventually running into the speeding bike that left the contents of her head on the red earth. This title followed us like a plague, sticking to us as stubbornly as velcro to its pad. Maybe he was right. How else can you explain the constant lack of silver linings in our dark clouds?

Our bus was brightly coloured like the dozens of others in the park but unlike the others, it was just ours, not shared with other tenants, a perk that came with being invited by Bamidele. Bamidele raised the Kerosene lantern to show us around, a gesture that made no sense as there was nothing to see. It was like every Lagos bus, its bare, rusty floors had had their share of the elements and were worn enough to see the patchy concrete floor of the bus park from inside the bus, its long, wooden benches had no cushioning and of course, its windows were missing glasses and Bamidele offered generously to show us where to get materials to create temporary windows. Kene, that had been yawning continuously, nagged that he wanted to sleep. I picked a bench and judiciously laid out a wrapper on it for him to lay down, placing another as a cover cloth on him before making a bid to leave the bus with Bamidele for the materials. "Sister, I'm scared", he said and I understood. A change of environment is always hard on a child. "I will leave the light for you. Don't touch it oh" I said and he nodded in reply.

In New Lagos, everything was a business opportunity. How else would the residents raise their rent? A boy was renting out insecticides for a fixed stipend, another rented out lanterns and

many other tools necessary for survival in New Lagos in makeshift stalls made of wrappers and sticks. We finally got to the stall where a boy with a shifty gaze sold the materials we needed for the windows. Materials I could swear were obtained illegally. "Net, wood and nylon for Baba Afija." He grumbled in a tone that showed his displeasure in being cheated "Na every day you dey collect for Baba and you no dey pay." "I go lock this store now", Bamidele threatened even when the stall had no doors or windows. "No vex", the boy said while gathering the materials Bamidele asked for.

"Ina! Ina oh!" These screams were closely followed by the hurrying of the residents carrying anything they thought could quench the fire. Bamidele hurried too but there wasn't much he could do with his limbs and I couldn't leave him behind. "Pikin dey inside oh. Make una come na. Pikin dey inside. Ina oh." This statement sent my heart flying out of my chest and my feet in swifter pursuit. It can't be Kene, I was barely gone ten minutes. I ran towards the thick, black smoke, dropping the materials Bamidele had previously sought out for me, abandoning Bamidele's shouts of my name, abandoning the only pair of slippers I owned, slippers that were crudely held together by a rusty pin that pierced my big toe when I walked in the wrong angle. I hadn't prayed since the landlord slipped his penis into my open mouth just before preaching at his church behind our house because I had come to beg him for money to buy drugs for Kene but I prayed as I ran. I prayed to everything in case God was too busy to listen to my prayers. I prayed to the ground to reject Kene since it had accepted my mother, I prayed to the air to remain in his lungs, and I prayed to the wind to lift my feet faster to him but Alas, the poor are silent even to the elements.

"Hold am oh" Baba Afija shouted as I tried to run into the flames but I was like a woman possessed. I kept screaming for Kene and pushing to join him in the bus now engulfed in flames. "He no dey there again, we don carry am comot" the crowd around me chorused. "Where is he? Somebody should answer me, where is he?" I screamed into the face of anyone unfortunate to be close to me and I was pointed to a small, vibrating pile of char and pink skin a few metres beside the bus being eagerly attended to by an old man with unsteady fingers. "Gbigbon" he announced. "Be like sey e catch am as e dey sleep, e come fall for the lantern. I don tell Baba Afija sey make e no dey allow lantern. Fire no good for place wey petrol dey but Baba no go hear, as far as no be woman talk am for him ear as she dey touch him penis." He continued ranting about the many things that made the bus park unsafe as I held Kene, placing my face very close to his slow and raspy breaths that confirmed he wasn't making it through the night. Kene was right, there was something in the air and it was soot and the metallic taste of death.