

# 1

July, 2022

I was walking down the hallway to get food for my rumbling stomach when his voice cut through the air from the hallroom to my left, eliciting laughter from the gathered audience. Amid the laughter, his words held my attention, confirming what I already knew deep down. Ebitari was here, speaking in front of me and well, 150 other people, but hey, who's counting? A lot of things had changed, so many things that I should not have recognized him at all. I should have seen him and said, 'Hello, do I know you?'

No longer was he the scrawny 13-year-old boy I once knew. Seated, he appeared to be at least 5ft8", his frame filling out the chair effortlessly. His voice, the same one that had always drawn me in, had transformed, deeper yet still unmistakably Ebitari. Hints of an American accent intertwined with his speech, and every word he uttered resonated with clarity and precision, reflecting careful attention to detail and a desire to be understood.

My hunger now forgotten, I entered the hall, selecting a spot near the entrance to observe him on the stage. Ebitari didn't speak again until the end of the session, as the moderator expertly guided the conversation to its conclusion. Even in silence, you could sense how present he was and how passionate he was about the topic. Leaning toward the others whenever they spoke, he engaged with an intensity that spoke of deep involvement. Laughter erupted from him, genuine and hearty, as if he were conversing with old friends.

The panel discussion revolved around the intersection of art and technology in Africa, but which of these worlds drew him here, I wondered—art or tech?

Curiosity bloomed so brightly in me as questions, who was this man now, what does he do, how different is he I wonder, from the Ebi of my teens?

After the program, the hall buzzed with activity, introductions and re-introductions were made and multiple business cards exchanged hands. Some people gathered by the stage, eager to engage with the speakers and immerse themselves in the dance of forging new ties, or simply put, networking. Amidst the hum of conversation, I remained seated, my thoughts swirling. Should I approach him and introduce myself? My heart quickened as I contemplated the idea.

Would he recognize me after all these years? I traced the curve of his profile with my gaze, studying as he easily weaved through the people, shaking hands, engaging in brief conversations before moving on to the next individual, his smile a constant companion

Another question gnawed at my thoughts: What should I even introduce myself as? Seunara *firigbon*, a name that echoed from the streets of Somolu? Or simply Seunara, an artist whose work now adorned the walls of TAFF—the prestigious African Art Fair?

“Seunara?” No, I couldn't just mention my name and be done. “Seunara.” The sound of my name echoed, but it was someone else calling me. It wasn't the variations of my name and introductions I had been rehearsing in my mind. The someone was Ebitari himself, his voice

carrying across the distance as he walked toward me. His head inclined slightly, as if he couldn't quite believe that it was truly me.

He recognized me. Who would have thought? Certainly not me. "It's you, Seun, right?" he asked, standing right in front of me now.

"Yes, it's me," I replied, rising from my chair so he wouldn't tower over me. My estimation of his height was nearly accurate. Maybe not quite 5ft8, as he stood an inch taller than me, and I'm 5ft8 myself.

He must have taken my silence after that as me not knowing who he was, so with a bashful smile on his face, he started to introduce himself. "Oh, pardon me, my name is Ebitari. We used to..."

"I know," I said.

"Oh," he responded. My brain must have short-circuited or my communication skills must have deserted me. My mouth released words in bits and pieces, while my brain raced in overdrive.

Finally, pulling myself together, I said,

"I'm just so surprised to see you here. How long has it been now?"

"15 years?... My God" he said. "Can I hug you?" he asked, his arms already stretching forth. I didn't even think to say no; I just nodded, moving in for the hug. His infectious energy spread to me, rousing me from the dazed, surprised slumber my body had entered since I first saw him.

"How have you been?" he said. "What a small world. Who would have thought that I would run into you here? Actually, I should have known, considering how obsessed you were with painting and scribbling all over things back then. Although, it wasn't really scribbling after all, was it?"

"How do you know I'm an artist? I could be here to buy art, you know." We had only been standing here for a few minutes, yet it felt longer, and there was nothing on me to indicate my profession.

"I already saw you earlier. I was going to come look for you after I was done with the panel, but here you are."

"You saw me?"

"Well, not you, specifically, but I saw your exhibition within minutes of entering the venue. The art drew me in. It was phenomenal. I looked at the name of the artist and thought it was familiar. And there you were, your picture in the artist's profile."

"Really?" I asked, the only word coming to mind after everything he had just told me.

"Yes, really," he repeated after me.

"I still can't believe you're here," I said, a touch of disbelief in my voice. Seriously, what was wrong with my speech today? I usually am more eloquent.

"I'm done here. Are you preoccupied at the moment? We could grab a bite at the food section. I'm starving,"

"Um, the people waiting to see you?" I protested weakly, looking in their direction. It dawned on me that I hadn't eaten all day, and without looking at the time, I knew it was almost 10pm. Forgetting to eat until my body threatened to give up on me was a bad habit I was still trying to overcome.

"That's alright. I don't think I can endure any more chit-chat today," he said, even though he was, in fact, engaging in 'chit-chat' with me.

## 2

October, 2005

The city that never slept managed to catch a few hours of rest in Somolu. The hum of activity would quiet down around midnight, only to stir again around 4 or sometimes 3 in the morning. From within the walls of our room, the sound of brooms swishing across the ground and water splashing into the gutter would gradually fill the air. The timing of this early morning ritual depended on whose turn it was to sweep the compound for the week. Each household in the compound took its turn, except for Baba Ijo and his family. Naturally, no one expected the landlord to partake in the cleaning duties.

Among us, Mama Michael's schedule was the most demanding. Her food canteen on Kusa Street required her to rise exceptionally early to ensure that she reached her shop on time. When it was Mama Michael's week to sweep, you could expect to hear the rhythmic swishing and scrubbing of brooms as early as 4:30 am. It also meant that her morning devotion had to begin around 4 am.

Everyone in the compound knew that Mama Michael and her children held morning devotion. As early as 4 or 4:30 am, the sound of their prayers would reverberate through the walls. One particular fervent prayer point involved her invoking fire upon her enemies, sentencing them to death by flames. The repetition of '*Die by fire, die by fire*' echoed loudly, almost as if the sheer volume and intensity could elevate her closer to Heaven's gate.

On days when it was Broda Emeka's turn to sweep, the compound remained untouched until around 8 am, which was when he usually woke up. He didn't have a job to rush to, but not because he was jobless, Broda Emeka ran a gaming and sports viewing center just down the street so he had the luxury of time.

By 5 am, the street sprang to life. Those with an 8 am resumption time for work were already bustling about, determined to beat the traffic and arrive on time. It was during this period that children with morning chores, would complete them. For the less fortunate ones who had to fetch water from the borehole down the street, the morning presented the challenge of joining an inevitable and lengthy queue. Being forced to fetch water in the morning before school essentially sealed your fate for lateness. Today, I was bound to be late for school.

Maami had instructed me to fill all our drums with water before she returned from shop the

previous day. However, I had spent most of the day at Ebitari's place, playing till I heard my mother returning home.

Instead of waking up early to secure a spot on the queue that would inevitably be at the tap, I woke up at 6:30am. At this rate, I might as well spend the whole day at the tap. I blame Mama Michael, I don't think they prayed loudly enough; had they been louder, maybe I would have risen in time to avoid being late for school.

At the age of 13, Ebitari was just a year older than me, but we were both in Jss2 at Crown College. We lived in the same compound and while Maami and I squeezed into a single room like every other tenant in the compound, he lived in a room and parlor with his parents and 2 siblings. Luckily for me, Ebi had reserved a spot for me at the tap. Before 7:30, Ebi and I were dressed and ready for school.

I finished first and waited outside the compound for him. When he emerged, he had our green checked shirt uniform tucked neatly into his trousers, but the top button was undone. He carried his schoolbag in one hand and used the other to comb his hair. His face had a subtle sheen of Vaseline, and like most students, he had on two pairs of socks, removing the first one as the day progressed and the first pair grew dirty. I, on the other hand, paid little attention to such details and often wore my uniform for 2 days, as long as it wasn't visibly dirty. A couple of glossy streaks on my skirt betrayed my habit of ironing my uniform while it was damp. What can I say – Ebi was Ebi, and I was me.

“Wow, your uniform is dry today,” Ebi said, chuckling.

“It's like you want to chop beating abi, better let's go”

Maami's eyes were bloodshot and it looked like she had been crying. Her arrival from the shop at 2:30 pm was unexpected, and I distinctly remember my heart racing as I caught sight of her, fearing that I might be in trouble. I wasn't supposed to be back from school until 4 pm, but I also didn't anticipate Maami returning before 7 pm at the earliest. Ignoring the neighbors, she marched directly to our room. Once inside, she headed straight to the bed, lying down with an air of exhaustion, and instructed me to go outside and play.

As the afternoon turned to evening, the darkness outside matched the growing heaviness within me. When I finally reentered the room, hours later, I found Maami still lying on the bed in the same position as before.

But it wasn't until the following day that I learned what had drained the life from my mother's eyes and what would soon come crashing into my own world as well.

My mother's shop had been consumed by a devastating fire at the market. The flames had erupted in the dead of night, mercilessly destroying nearly a quarter of the market and a lot of people's lives and businesses in the process. The cause of the fire remained a mystery, drawing various speculations. Some believed it was triggered by an electrical spark, while others said it had to be arson. Attributing it to the motives of a politician or a wealthy individual seeking to erect new shopping complexes in its place. The fact was that nobody knew what happened and so there was nobody to blame, you just had to cut your losses and move on.

One afternoon after school, I stepped into our room to find out that our TV, Maami's bedframe, most of our sizeable appliances, and the meager furniture we possessed had all vanished. The room now stood stripped bare, an eerie emptiness hanging in the air, as though we were in the process of moving.

Maami's absence was a prelude to her return, a return that confirmed what I had sensed. "*Oko mi*, pack all your things inside that *ghana must go* bag," she said, gesturing towards the bag resting in the corner. "We're going to Ibadan."

"Ibadan? Why?"

"Why? What do you mean by 'why'? We're going to Daddy Jide's house. That's where we'll be living now," she said matter-of-factly. "Remember how you enjoyed your holidays there? Last time we went, you even said you didn't want to come back. *Sho ranti?*" I remembered, even though I was just 8 years old at the time and hadn't been to Daddy Jide's place for 4 years. But the decision was made and there was nothing I could do about it.

### 3

July, 2022

As we entered the food section, the vibrant buzz of The African Art Fair enveloped us. The air was a medley of tantalizing aromas from various stalls. Settling on Chinese food, we approached a nearby stall. Ebitari's eyes swept over the menu, his brows furrowing slightly as he deliberated

his options. Eventually, he placed an order for Sweet and Sour Chicken, while I opted for Vegetable Fried Rice.

As our orders were prepared and packed, and we waited, Ebitari leaned against the nearby counter and turned to me. His eyes lit up with a spark of curiosity, "So artist, huh? How'd that happen? I can take a guess, but tell me."

"A bit of drawing here, painting there, influential commissions, and boom," I explained, using my hands to mimic the sound of something taking off.

"Really, that's all you're going to – oh, thank you." Our food was handed over by the vendor, and Ebitari swiftly collected our orders and settled the payment before I even had a chance to offer my card. With a smooth motion, he then handed my food to me, deftly navigating around a white couple who were also heading towards the food stand. "That's all you're going to say?" he said, a playful smile dancing on his lips.

We wandered aimlessly, walking out of the food area and finding ourselves in the now mostly empty seating area. Umbrella shades provided respite from the sun that was now absent, and the location was far from the bustling crowd. As we sat down, I noticed Ebitari's eyes taking in the surroundings, with a mix of awe and familiarity. "The energy here is incredible. I didn't realize how much I missed Lagos until today."

"You haven't been here?" I asked though I had already deduced as much. His accent was a clear giveaway. Yet, this was Lagos, acquiring accents was a matter of practice and will and had nothing to do with travel.

"No, not for years, but c'mon, you first."

We settled down to eat, and as we did, I told him the cliffs note version of my career which ended up being long anyway. When I gauged the time again, it was a few minutes past midnight. "Ebi," the familiar nickname rolled off my tongue more naturally now, "I have to get going," I said, a conflicted mixture of reluctance and exhaustion tugging at me. My body was protesting, demanding the sleep it had been deprived of.

He walked me to my car, and as we bid farewell, we exchanged contact information. "See you around?" He asked.

"See you around," I responded, slowly pulling away from the curb. I glimpsed him in my side mirror, his figure gradually receding as I ventured back into the night and he watched me go.