

If you want to know a dead man simply look in his eyes. They are just like your own eyes: white and translucent. He does not shut them out of the world. He keeps it wide open looking at everything and everyone but barely seeing them.

The first corpse I saw was Boy Chike's lifeless body. I was just seven years-old at the time. We were swimming in our neighbour's evacuated fishpond filled with rainwater when we heard a very loud chilling scream. What happened? Nobody could tell. But we were certain that morning that something tragic had just occurred.

Boy Chike ran out of the fishpond clutching his left leg.

In the twinkle of an eye all the other children that were present grabbed their slippers and began scampering to the safety of their houses. They left him writhing on the wet ground in pains.

I carried him carefully on my back and took him back to his house that Tuesday morning. When I remember this incident, the thing I remember most is the sound of his soft whimpers as he clung tight to my back.

By noon news came to us that Boy Chike's legs had begun swelling. There was no kind of concoction his mother did not mix to avert the already looming tragedy. But by evening the swelling burst open. There was a mix of pus and blood coming out of his leg. You did not need to experience what he was experiencing to tell that Boy Chike was in severe pains. During this period we never left his side.

It lasted for a period of two days, but certainly those were the longest two days of his life. Seeing the sheer hopelessness of my friend, and the fact that there was nothing we could do to pacify him spoilt something in our adolescent hearts that was not meant to be spoilt.

Boy Chike's mother sold pap and *Akara*. She was a popular vendor on Bikiya Graham-Douglas street. The street adjacent to where we lived. Boy Chike was her only son. A cheerful lad with two big teeth tactlessly lodged in front of his mouth.

I remember how as children we did not know much about *adult things* but there were hints and gossip that his mother bore him out of wedlock. But how could we have known what this meant at the time?

We teased him with it during football matches. “Boy Chike, *Wedlock pikin*”, and he would run after us chasing us until we got tired.

But now all those days of chiding had disappeared.

All those memories had become synopsis, quick flashes from a time so distant, as we watched him spread flat on the pavement of their verandah covered in his mother’s yellow wrapper. I noticed he could not blink his eyes.

We begged his mother to allow us sing him his favourite songs but she would not agree.

The medicine man that mixed the concoction for her had instructed her that if Boy Chike was well rested without any kind of disturbances, he would recuperate faster than any of us could imagine. And so we stood quietly by his side watching him and hoping for the best.

Boy Chike died the following evening.

We returned from school, and as usual we trooped in our numbers to his house to go and pay him our comfort visit. At least the day before he used to struggle to breathe and thus give us signs that he could hear us.

There would be soft moans and low groans here and there. But now we noticed that even his laboured breathing had seized entirely.

Obumselu was the first to point it out. He touched his feet and it was frozen stiff. His eyes were wide open. Looking at us. They dared us to tell him one last joke. To chide him for the ringworm on his head, or sing about his repeated last position in class.

What followed was his mother’s sorrowful wailing. I remember how loud it sounded to my childish ears. One by one, we also brought ourselves to tears.

“Boy Chike, *Wedlock pikin!*”, we started singing. This time around more sorrowful than those words have ever felt.

And maybe if the families at St. Lanre Crescent where we lived had access to affordable healthcare or a doctor who would have treated Boy Chike for what we eventually discovered was a puff adder snake’s bite, he would have lived and the weight of these memories would not be choking me now.

But then, even if the government had not forgotten us, even if we were not the discarded bunch of society, the pillars of the earth - like my Christian Religious Studies teacher would console us with - if there was a clinic somewhere around us, how would his mother have afforded his treatment? A good day's business for her was a total of N300 naira profit. This was after she must have laboured with firewood smoke for hours. After the school children and working adults would have departed for the day's work, before she would quietly count her profit and run to my mother at our backyard.

"Abeg," she would plead with my mother, "*Keep this money for me, time to pay Boy Chike school fees don dey reach'*. Or she would say, "Add this one to that our miscellaneous. *Na Boy Chike school uniform money be this.*"

I remember how throughout that day I kept on thinking, who would spend all the monies his mother had been saving for him?

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After Boy Chike's death, the second corpse I saw was the body we found in the gutter at St. Lanre Crescent. The body of a teenage girl. She must have been at least sixteen years-old, but I could not tell. Because at this time too I was still a child.

And since I couldn't ask older family relatives what they thought about the girl, since there would've been the problem of discussing a naked teenage girl in an overwhelmingly religious family, I had no choice but to overlook it.

But every night, I stayed up thinking about this strange teenage girl.

That morning when we found her body, Mrs. Okwunaga-Eze, the woman who owned the pharmacy close to where her body was found, draped the body in a yellow lace cloth in a bid to cover her breasts and privates. But I noticed she left out her long legs in full display. And it bothered me.

This girl had very full hair like the one that grew on my head. I remember touching my hair and wondering if it would look like that if entangled in blood and murky waters too.

We eventually discovered she was the victim of a brutal rape, and two boys, Njideka's estranged brother, Theophilus, and Sam T, were apprehended for the crime.

The women in the streets did not set the news of her death free.

At the time there were no mobile phones with video cameras, so every evidence of how badly brutalized the girl's body was remained only in the minds of those who spotted her with their own eyes. For the rest of those who didn't, she became a legend: a folklore for teenage girls who dared kept late nights.

The Small Girl at Lanre Crescent became her name.

To mothers who had failed in priming their sons and teaching them how dastardly forcefully collecting a girl's sexual consent was, her death became an over-flogged maxim on their loosed lips. "Do you want to wear that skirt? You certainly have forgotten The Small Girl at Lanre Crescent".

Eventually, we learnt that Sam T died in the police custody. We heard he was hung upside down, and beaten daily like the thieves that hung beside Jesus on the cross.

The third time we found a body, we realised that the conversation we had eschewed for long had finally resurfaced, and we must bring ourselves to discuss the elephant in the room.

This time around it was the body of a seventeen years-old boy. I know his age because he was my neighbours's son, Opubo.

Who had a motive to kill Opubo? Certainly no one.

Opubo was an apprentice in Baba Tee's bicycle workshop. A small shop around the corner where we would go to repair our bicycles sometimes for free.

He would leave for work everyday at 6am and return at 10pm, sometimes later than this, leaving with only a school bag and a yellow face cap.

Suddenly, fear began spreading true and wide all over the minds of residents.

Since he was not a girl and by their logic had no cause to fear late nights, the police were not at all helpful in identifying the culprits. And so, while everybody presumed to have known what killed Boy Chike and The Small Girl at Lanre Crescent, Opubo's death was the beginning of unsolved murder mysteries on St. Lanre's Crescent.