

A HATE STORY

Elections come and go, Nigeria remains the same.

This is how it has always been, or so I believed, having only witnessed four presidential elections. But the February 2023 election came and went nowhere. My heart is yet to mend.

On 16th May, 2022, the rain was heavy beyond contemplation as I stood at the Dolphin Estate gate, Lagos. The estate shuttles were nowhere to be found. I should not have been surprised, it was typical that when the heavy rains came, the shuttles could not operate. Like the shuttles, I should have been indoors too, but I had to get to work that day. I could not use the rains as an excuse anymore, Mr. James, my supervisor had warned me twice this month.

I had on the makeshift bright yellow coloured raincoat I bought from a roadside hawker on a similar day I was caught in the rain, but this offered no respite against the gusty wind and vicious rain drops. Pedestrians ran helter-skelter to roofed areas, while cars swooshed by, windshield wipers waving aggressively. I stood at the gate hoping I could get a lift, and of course, cars did not stop, they barely seemed to notice I was even there. I had no idea why I listened to Musa, my compound's security man, when he said, "Madam you be fine girl, you go see who go carry you", and foolishly walked from my gate to the Estate's gate, despite the gathering clouds. As the daring thought of calling Mr. James to inform him that I would not be coming to office crossed my mind, a beat-up Toyota Corolla pulled up in front of me. My guardian angel must have flagged this car on my behalf, since my faith was failing after a few trials, and I was barely making any more attempts at doing so myself.

I jumped into the car, grateful for the good Samaritan. "Thank you, thank you so much", I said repeatedly, as I forcefully slammed the door against the wind. My Good Samaritan was an incredibly handsome man with curly hair and silky beards and he insisted he would drop me at Obalande. The atmosphere in the car was quiet, there was barely any interaction from his part after I entered the car and told him he could drop me anywhere I could get a bus going to Famolo. The silence choked me. Everyone knows I am always talking, and talking fast too. I looked out my window and said, with the intention of him hearing me, "This rain has spoilt my day". He simply answered "It's the season". That

was all I needed for the conversation to start. "Where are you from?" I asked. He did not hide his surprise, but he chose to answer me, "South-West, Nigeria"

What sort of answer was that? But that is who I will later discover this man to be. A man that knew how to avoid questions he did not deem fit to answer. Well, this man did not know me, Oluwafunmilayo Esther Olajide. I always get my answer. "So, you are from the entire South-West, Nigeria?" I asked and his response was a smile. I swear, the only thing on my mind then was how this guy was so handsome. Months later when two of my friends would see him in my house, the awe with which he was looked at was all I needed to know that I was not dreaming the first day I saw him.

I pressed on, undeterred, "But you don't look South-West".

"We have a look?" he mocked. This was irritating because, I am not sure if my people have a look. But you know the people who have a look, northern Nigerians, Fulanis to be precise, and that was all I saw. The fair skin might have been overlooked, but definitely not his curly hair and silky beards, the oval shape of his face and his nose. He was giving me the rich Fulani kid vibes. I could swear that he is from northern Nigerian. "Well, you look Northern Nigerian" I defended myself.

The smile came again, but with his eyes fixed on the windshield as the rain drops pelted. "I get that a lot." he conceded. "I am an Ekiti indigene, but born and lived in Adamawa till age twelve when I relocated to Lagos." We were already approaching Obalande bridge and this man had not told me his name nor asked for my number. I did not know what to ask him anymore to get him to ask for my number. I certainly was not going to give without being asked. That is below me. So, I asked again, "What on earth were you doing in Adamawa till twelve?" He looked at me, and I could tell that he was irritated by my question. "Sorry" I said. I regretted my decision to ask. When we got to Obalande bridge, he stopped the car, and I showered him with thanks and appreciation again. "What street do you live in?" he surprised me by asking. Shocked, I answered with a speed that was faster than my talking pace, "Corporation drive. By the mall". "Okay, have a nice day, see you soon".

I was to be at Aunt Yemi's house that weekend. I visit every weekend to enjoy her Saturday moimoi and freshly made pap, and peppery firewood Sunday jollof rice. The Friday after I met Mr. *Adamawa*, I did not make my way to Surulere. I told myself the traffic from my office in Falomo would be hectic and I just might not survive it. Deep

down in my heart, I knew what I could not survive was missing him in case he came looking for me. After all he said "See you soon". It was not until the next morning that I realized that I did not tell him my house number, I just said "by the mall". *Werey, shey nor be two houses dey by the mall.* I chided myself.

I left for Surulere on Saturday morning. I liked this fine guy, but not enough to miss my Aunt Yemi's Sunday jollof. I returned on Sunday evening to a note. Musa handed it over to me, with a knowing smile, saying "*one man come here come find you, e say make I give you this paper*". The note simply read **"My car is still wet from your rain coat. Call me Femi, and my Fulani look is from my mother, a Kanuri woman. We can be friends?"** A phone number was underneath the write up. I dialed the number immediately. "Hello Funmi". It dawned on me that I did not tell him my name. He told me he got it from my Musa, and he had luck in guessing which of the houses, as the one by the right was a duplex where he always saw Chinese expatriates driving out, and my compound had something like a mini flat at the back. He just told the gateman that he was looking for a chubby light brown skin girl, and my gateman assumed it was me.

Femi's house is at Ibeju-Lekki street, a walk to my compound. Before I dropped my bag, he was already resting on a parked car opposite my gate. I think it was obvious that I liked him, but I was not sure he knew. Whatever this was, my heart was happy with it. Every day talk led to dinners, late night drives, beach outings, and even just sitting in his beat-up corolla parked outside my gate, into the wee hours of the mornings. Needless to say, my ritual visits to Aunt Yemi's became less frequent. Over the course of dates, I got to know more about Femi. Femi's Yoruba was not as fluent as mine, for obvious reasons. Being a child born out of wedlock, he had stayed with his Kanuri mother and her family, so his mother's tongue became his "mother tongue". He picked his Yoruba in bits when he came to Lagos to live with his father and his wife. We exchanged books, Femi was not fond of African literature, but I was, and he loved to listen to me talk about them. He often sat silently and listened to me as I talked about a story. Classical movies were Femi's preference. He would give me a movie acted in the 1980s and I would still love the story.

Femi officially asked me out was when his mother came visiting. He invited me over to come see his mother. Apparently, his stepmother had no problem with her husband's former lover visiting their marital home, I would. He introduced me in kanuri and she warmly smiled at me. Later that night, while he walked me home, I pestered, cajoled and practically bullied him to tell me what he had told his mother. "I am sure you knew what

it meant.” he said sliding his right hand into my left. “So, the question is, am I right to call you my girlfriend?”

That was it. I was smiling like a fool.

Looking back now, I cannot even imagine how Femi allowed a “so-called movement” to ruin what I so strongly believed we had. My argument was simple, it made no sense that a movement, an online movement, that started less than a year should win an election that others had so strategically planned for years. Moreover, I did not see why I should not vote for my own person, my tribesman, after all the South-West had been through in this Nigerian democracy. Who does not know what they did to Awolowo, then Abiola? It would be foolish for us to miss this opportunity. Moreover, the man has a pedigree for goodness sake! Everybody in Nigeria runs to his city for prosperity; the city he built and turned to a world attraction center. Eko remains the most beautiful city in Nigeria, and we do not want to talk about the money it gives to its inhabitants. People come to Lagos, even people of the so-called movement, just to make money, and the money is made. Clean money! But Femi and that his idiot friend Osaru supported the movement. It was nearly impossible to walk or drive past an Election poster without it divulging into a heated argument. So, I vowed never to argue, or even bring up election matters when we were together. Whenever it came up, I smiled and changed the topic, since I was more rooted. So, we scaled through the months leading up to the elections seemingly smoothly. I did not like the silence that I had imposed on myself for peace to reign. However, everywhere else I encountered supporters of the movement, especially on their campaign front, TwitterNg, I was sure to give them a piece of my mind. Femi usually came across my tweets, sent a screenshot of them, with the caption “this was unnecessary”. What was unnecessary about telling these young people the truth? I usually ignored them to protect fragile peace.

Apart from the election, Femi had one time done something that annoyed me to my bones. That night he had asked me to follow him to VGC. As we approached the Toll gate, one of the distinct features of Eko, he said to me, “Nowadays, I always have chills whenever I pass this place”. “Why?” I asked. “The thought of the people that died here that October. I never got over it”. Now, that was surprising. I almost laughed out loud. “Femi please, do you know of anyone that died here or anyone that claims their loved one died here?”. His look was all I needed to know that my question irritated him. It hurt

my heart to see that he was so brainwashed; was it not a group of hoodlums who burnt down the toll gate in the name of a “peaceful protest”?

As the elections approached, the movement was holding marches in every city. It felt very unnecessary and a tactics for intimidation. In all honesty, it made no sense to me that Femi would not want to even vote our tribesman. I confronted him about it, and his defense was that, he as a Nigerian, would vote a Nigerian. *So, it was me who was not Nigerian, because I wanted my kinsman to be president.*

Femi and I never spoke about the issues “his people” had with my candidate. His age, his background, and his “questionable” academic records. Those did not matter to him, all he wanted was a new Nigeria, and he believed my candidate was the old order. Indeed, like his was any better.

On the day the results were announced, I tried to keep my cool, but it was not working. How could we have lost Lagos? “We have certainly given these *foreigners* too much freedom in our city and they have bitten more than they can chew”. That was all I tweeted and I got a call from Femi. Excitedly, I picked up the call. “How could you go that low, Funmi?” The line went dead before I could respond. “Funmi”, he had not called me by name since the night he asked me out. He also did not call me for the next three days. I imagined that he needed time to grieve over the fact that his candidate lost. It never occurred to me that elections were among things couples quarreled about. When I called the next week, he said he had travelled to Yola for a visit, without informing me. I made a mountain out of that, and I was right to do so. *Well, he would return to Lagos, and I would show him a different side of me.*

One evening I ran into him at a supermarket along Ikeja way. My heart leaped for joy because it had been going through series of pain. Staying away from Femi was weakening and draining. I ran to him to throw my arms around him, but his “hello Funmi” came like he was talking to a stranger and jerked me into a violent nightmare. He had been around for two weeks, and had been offered and accepted a job in Uyo he revealed as he pushed his cart to the cashier. “Why am I just finding this out? Did you plan to leave without telling me?” I asked in disbelief. “Well, you know now” he rebutted, handing the cashier a wad of Naira notes.

On the phone with Funke, my elder sister later that night, I bawled out my heart about a love I fought to keep and ending up losing. “Calm down *joor*, and move on. Your values

were not aligned, simple” Funke was that harsh. She went on to tell me about two of her close church members who no longer spoke to her, despite the fact that the pastor had preached on love. They just walk past her every time, and never reply her messages. I did not care about Funke’s lost friendship, I had lost my love. My heart is broken. Femi did this to me. A classic Yoruba demon.

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