

MEMOIR OF A LAGOS CONDUCTOR

LAWAL AISHAT

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“Allen, Allen, underbridge!!!” “I no get change o, 500, 1000 no enter”

“Conductor, na ₦1000 Dey my hand o”

“Wetin be all these one, abeg come down for here”

“Why I go come down, no be my bus stop be this”

“You go follow us reach park as you Dey”

“Driver o wa o”

“Striker, no answer am. Dey go park like that”

“Be like say God wan punish you this morning”

“Na you God go punish, your tie like rope wey dem use tie ram. Striker abeg give me 600 for your hand there”

“So, you even get change, *werey*”

“Come down abeg, make you carry your family problem commot. Corporate mad man.”

That’s what a typical morning was for me, Mondays are the worst and I dare not start the day without two sachets of *shekpe*. I turned and opened the notebook beside my thin and worn out bed, I almost forgot to add the ₦100 I was owing Aunty Suliya to my ₦1,050 debt. I don’t like to owe people at all which is ironical considering the long list of people in my notebook that I was owing; Mummy Tayo *Alamala*, Vero with the spicy pepper soup, Paulo my mechanic and random names of people whose faces I can’t remember. I closed my notebook and turned to face the door, the day was still young so I was surprised that Musa wasn’t lying on the wrapper beside me. I was the one with the day job and he, as I liked to call him, the “night man” so we barely had time for long conversations except on Sundays which was our sabbath day. I kept turning on the bed trying to divert my thought from how hungry I felt, I shouldn’t even be awake by this time because I had begged Striker to allow me take the day off to see my sick sister when I really just needed a full day of rest. I gave up on getting any sleep to search for food, I could see the empty container of garri and rice in the corner so I picked my trousers and counted 2,500 to keep in my *kolo* while I took 500 out of the room.

My first stop was mummy Tayo so I could get my usual rice and beans for ₦350 which I intend to add to the list in my room. Tayo was the one in charge today and I knew that my plan was not

going to work, God forbid that spoilt girl sold anything to anyone on credit, acting as if I was a new customer.

“Mummy no Dey around?”

“I’m here, what do you want to buy?” Her response was sharp with no room for small talk.

“Sell my usual for me”

My plan was to go back to the room and save all the energy I could get from my lunch because that was all for the day but in this area, there’s always something going on. There was a commotion outside our compound and as I got nearer I could hear voices repeating “Ole, thief” with people forming a circle around what I could guess to be the victim. I made my way through the crowd to see a boy no younger than 15 with bruises on his face looking terrified and I almost felt pity but I had to focus on the fact that he was a thief. I was about to enter my room when I saw Musa running towards me, he looked happy with himself as he pushed me into the room and locked the door behind us. He started with the story of the thief who tried to break into one of the tenant’s room, apparently, Musa had been the one to catch him which explains his excitement. Halfway into his story, I was in my head thinking about how it could have been our room; my *kolo*; my life savings. I zoned back into the conversation and kept yawning as a signal for him to wrap up his story, instead he moved to telling me why he was up early like I cared. My eyes wandered back to the empty containers in the corner but I decided against bringing it up because I had no money to contribute, at least not now. I was finally able to sleep when Musa got a call from a distant relative who seemed ready to talk all day long.

As a yearly tradition, everyone in my area would come together to celebrate our community which to some, was completely pointless but who cared as long as there was food and *Fuji*. I was excited and grateful to Musa that he had spoken to some of the people in charge to shift the event to Sunday instead of the usual Friday; more sales for Musa and enjoyment for me. We were lucky to have people who willingly donated packs of drinks, mostly alcohol, bags of rice, yam flour, ingredients for different meals and most importantly, our community leaders who always provided two big cows for the occasion. While the women who couldn’t afford to buy things contributed their cooking skills, men like Musa and I did all the heavy lifting; getting firewood, setting up the canopy, arranging the drinks in the usual blue drums and whatever menial tasks we

deemed fit. The children mostly helped with washing the plates and serving the adults who in turn squeezed few naira notes into their palms, but not me, I always served myself.

I was contemplating how I would gather enough money for the Ankara and not starve myself when I heard an argument from the passengers at the back seat. I didn't mind the argument because lately my passengers have not given me any troubles which I kind of miss. It is only in Lagos that two strangers will be at each other's throats because one was looking at another in a "rude manner", I didn't even try to interfere and neither did the other passengers till they both got down at the same place probably to continue what they started or go their separate ways. "Striker, abeg I wan follow you talk" I said as I joined him at the front seat. We were now at the park having our mid-afternoon rest before we go back on the road ahead of rush hour. Striker had settled comfortably with steaming hot Jollof and plantain, I would have gotten a plate but I couldn't afford to buy or owe anyone at this point, and I figured it was the best time to ask for his assistance.

"Wetin happen this time" he said with a mouthful of rice.

"I just... you fit help... I need make you..."

I had to take a deep breath because he was no longer listening to me and I didn't want to make him angry before asking for his help. Once I mustered the strength to ask for extra money, he looked in my direction and continued with his food, thinking only God knows what. It was the last time I asked him for favour, not because I didn't want to but because he died two weeks later.

The excitement started with Musa, his high-pitched singing in the bathroom woke me up and before I knew it, I joined him in singing- more like repeating the same line- "come and see what the lord has done for me". The only other occasions that got people excited in this area were weddings and naming ceremonies but today was different, the excitement was shared by everyone- old and young, rich and people like I- and it would last until tomorrow. Musa went over to the arrange the canopies and chairs while I went to the women's section to see what I could assist with. The aroma was the first thing that hit me before I saw the women around huge pots, stirring, peeling, washing, mixing and sweating. I moved closer to mummy Tayo who was stirring a pot of Jollof sauce, she added more onions ring to the mix, seasoning cubes and salt before placing stirring and the bottom of the spoon on her palm to taste. She nodded in approval

before stirring the mix again, she moved to rinse her hand when one of the children almost bumped into her and she immediately smacked him at the back. That was the thing about this area, every child belonged not just to the mother but the community, nobody would question why mummy Tayo hit the boy, he had done something bad. Immediately Mummy Tayo saw me, she clapped her hands like she had been expecting my arrival. "*Baba oko mi*, come and help me carry this bucket of water" she said as she pointed towards the other extreme of the compound. Some of the women were bent over big bowls of cow meat, cleaning it before it is properly seasoned, boiled and fried, I was eager for the frying to start so I could taste a piece or two before the main party started. The Jollof was poured into two big coolers, the fried meat which had passed my taste test was in a separate brown cooler, wraps of swallow from pounded yam, semo, fufu to the king of swallow, Amala were wrapped in a big clothe before being placed in another separate cooler. There were about 12 coolers of food which fit into the truck but I would have to come back to move the drinks to the venue.

The excitement lasted well into the night and was to end with a masquerade parade, chosen men hidden under layers of different fabrics or straw like materials running around in circles. Their masks were carved from wood, some scarier than the other. The one that struck me the most had horns attached to his mask with no eyes carved into it, its fabric was made from straw but in different colours and almost like it was sewn in a rush. This masquerade didn't move with the rest, it advanced towards the crowd to scare off children and some women, the men stood their ground and enjoyed the parade which got a standing ovation. Soon enough, everybody began to run helter-skelter and I joined without waiting to find out what was happening. By the time I got to the room, I found Musa arranging bowls of food from the party which we were both going to survive on for the rest of the week. He had left the parade earlier to hustle for extra plates of food and was unaware of the commotion that had happened, he served a plate of white rice and sauce which we both enjoyed. Before we both went to bed, we had a long conversation where we mocked our neighbours, complained of the price increase of rice, laughed about how we begged the tailor to manage other people's material so we could sew our own outfit since we could only afford 2 yards of material. In that moment we felt like brothers and I was grateful for Musa, we were not too close but we always had each other's back.

Since Striker was no longer around, I was to take over the bus and find a new conductor. It was a sort of upgrade for me and I made sure to tell my mother the next time she called, she showed her excitement through lengthy prayers, the kind where saying amen was more of courtesy than interest. The thought in my head on the first day was that I would be making more money, enough to upgrade my room and send to my mother. I wasn't speeding, I wasn't distracted but I lost control of the bus, I tried to step on the brakes but my entire body had gone stiff and my chest tightened. This wasn't a coincidence, I had simply overlooked Paulo's suspicious movements at the park; helping me check the engine of the bus for free, giving me his plate of food under the guise that he was full, asking me personal questions while offering free *ogogoro*. Paulo had never hidden that he was jealous of me and I didn't really care for that except when he constantly tried to poison Striker's mind against me, that was the only time I physically fought with someone at the park but we made up soon enough or so I thought.

My first street fight was when I was twelve and I wish I could say I won but I was beaten beyond recognition. The second time, my mother had to keep me indoors for over a week and when I healed from the injuries, she made sure to beat me till I accused her of being a witch. I never repeated that statement neither did I get myself involved in any street fight till I moved to Lagos where I couldn't survive without proving that I wasn't to be messed with. As a child, I never knew what the word "enough" meant and this wasn't because I never paid attention in class, my father was the S.I unit of deadbeat while my mother tried to make ends meet from her tailoring business. On the nights my father came home, I felt pity for my mother who did her best to avoid him but apparently, a cold meal could trigger a drunk man. My mother tried to shield me from the numerous scars she got from my father but I knew more than I was supposed to and I despised my father. I also had my share of scars from my father, a deep black mark on my chest from one of the many alcohol bottles he threw at me. The time he spent away from us, with his other family, was when my mother and I had fun together, helping her in the kitchen while hinting at gossips in the village; the lady two houses away who was yet to get married because of her sharp mouth, the teacher who asked market women for foodstuff but never paid, following her to the market just to see my crush who she taunted me about. I can't forget one morning where it rained cat and dogs and I stubbornly decided to play under the rain, my mother came to carry me back in but I ended up making her run with me. We both laughed about it as we ate the

hot *Ogi* and *Akara* she had prepared earlier. It was memories like this that comforted me when I became the son who never had the time to call, the son who was ashamed of his failures.

Not my mother or Musa would ever know how I left this world, at least not my own version. They would hear the news at dawn, my mother would mourn the only family she had built and break the news to people in our hometown who would either grieve with her or shame her for choosing a deadbeat husband and useless son who never came home.

GLOSSARY

Werey: Someone who is acting irrationally or crazy

Shekpe: Nigerian slang meaning alcohol

Alamala: A person who sells Amala; a staple Nigerian swallow made out of yam flour

Kolo: A traditional piggybank often made out of wood

Fuji: A Yoruba musical genre

Baba Oko Mi: Literally translates to “My husband’s father” but can be used to praise someone

Ogogoro: A west African alcoholic drink, usually brewed locally

Akara: A fried Nigerian snack made out of beans

Ogi: A Nigerian porridge usually made from guinea corn