

"Bode!"

The sharp bark came from way below where he was standing, perched precariously on an unfinished staircase with a basin full of plaster on his head. The rag that he'd used to balance the basin on his head stank, and Bode wondered where he'd picked it from.

Bristling with indignation, he kept silent and hoped the foreman would give up his little search.

"I said, *Bode!* Where is that one who thinks he can just arrive on this site whenever he pleases? BODE!" Now he was really angry.

Realising he would lose his job if he didn't step out of hiding and apologise, Bode dropped the plaster on the stair above his and jumped down. "Oga Foreman, I dey here, sir!" he shouted, and watched as the obese man waddled into view; sweat and misplaced rage oozing from every pore.

"Come, young man – who is your father? You think it's my site you'll come and play? You're strolling in here by six a.m., do those who resumed at five have two heads?"

Bode listened with a contrite face, his head hung. But inwardly, he felt relief run through his body like cool water. This was an empty rant; because if Oga Foreman intended to fire him, he would have done it immediately he caught sight of him. Bode knew him too well.

When the five-minute rant was over, the man walked away huffing, but visibly less angry. He had found a suitable receptacle for whatever frustrations had followed him from his house.

Bode, shoulders drooping in a false gesture of sobriety, walked up to the stairs and hauled up the basin of plaster. He would still be late tomorrow, he knew. He worked for an hour every morning as a bus conductor for his cousin; from five a.m. till six. Money was tight, Muniru needed an early morning conductor – and Bode had a girlfriend to maintain.

He knew it was only a matter of time before Oga Foreman fired him; but then there would always be an abundance of construction sites in Lagos. One look at his huge forearms and his height, and he would be hired on the spot.

For now, though, he had to get back to work. He jumped down the stairs again and speed-walked to the huge mixing bowl that sat beside a pile of brown sand. Bending down, he tipped his rusty basin in and scooped some plaster, expertly lifting it and placing it atop his head without spilling a drop.

"Bode! Where's that fool?" he heard someone spit out his name in anger.

Dear God, what sort of a day was this? And how dare another worker think he had a right to address him like that? Anger rose up slowly in Bode, like cement beginning to solidify. He swiftly removed the basin from his head and stood to his full height. Six feet and six inches of pure black muscle, itching for a fight. All the buried frustrations and failures made a surprise appearance in the forefront of his mind, and Bode balled his fists.

The other man was still shouting, his voice steadily moving closer to Bode's side of the building. "Bastard!" he shouted as he finally came face-to-face with Bode. "They said they saw you pick my phone!"

Of course, the man was mistaken, and Bode would never do such a thing – but that didn't matter in the moment because Bode had no intention of listening to what he had to say. His steely fist flew fast and furious into the man's belly, summarily lifting him three inches clear of the ground. As the man doubled over, Bode pulled him up straight and held him by the collar of his faded, raggedy brown polo shirt and stared him in the eyes, daring him to speak another word.

"Are you mad?" Bode breathed through his teeth, sublime fury at the world and its people radiating off him in waves. And then English just didn't cut it anymore. "Abi baba'e ti ya werey ni? Sho fe ku l'oni?"

The man squirmed and Bode saw his veins begin to bulge all around his head, humiliated tears forming in his eyes. "Na that man talk am. He talk say he see as you carry am, say na you thief my phone."

"That man," repeated Bode, without as much as glancing in the direction which the man was pointing. "That man and his family must be mad." Bode let out a hiss, then let go of him and wiped his sweaty forehead, noticing for the first time that a small crowd had gathered to watch the skirmish they thought would happen. In the midst of them was Oga Foreman.

"Young man," he spoke in crisp English. "I don't ever want to *sight* you on this site again."

Bode took in the statement. Sight, site. There was a dry joke somewhere in that alliterative line, and Bode would have pointed it out under normal circumstances. Safe to say, these were no normal circumstances.

Bode swivelled to face him, oddly feeling pity for him and how swinelike and pathetic he looked. In response, the man quickly shuffled backwards into the gaggle of workers, fearing that Bode would lunge for him – and give him a monster punch similar to the one he'd planted on his accuser's stomach.

"Five days' wages, or I'm going nowhere." It was a thinly-veiled threat, but well understood.

"Oya, oya, follow me to my office and collect. *Se kia!*" he ordered Bode, desperate to retain the smallest semblance of superiority and order. Nobody was fooled, though.

Bode got his money and left.

"Muniru-Money!"

Bode did not like to think of himself as someone who sucked up to anyone, but certain things had to be done for the sake of survival.

For instance, running to his cousin Muniru to give him a daytime job until he found a new job at another building site. Or perhaps a factory this time, just to spice things up. Who said there was no career diversification in Nigeria's blue-collar sectors?

"Ah-ahn?" began Muniru. "Am I safe?"

Bode laughed in response, bowing his body until he touched a toe in respectful genuflection. "Well done, Egbon Mi."

"I can't remember when last I saw you during the day, oh," Muniru continued without acknowledging the greeting. "Wetin dey happen? Na only for early morning you dey do conductor for me. Abi your money no complete this morning?"

Bode shook his head. "I dey find work."

Muniru stared at him for a second, then shooed away one of the chickens that loved to come roost there at the motor park. "You dey find work keh? Why you no tell me when you see me early this morning?"

"They fired me." Bode felt no need to explain himself, because not only was he a grown man, he was also speaking to his cousin. And family had an obligation to take care of family, no matter how they'd gotten into a bad spot.

"Bode, you know how it is," Muniru mumbled, puffing tiny clouds of cigarette smoke that made his full beard seem more grey than black.

"I don't know anything, Muniru. You be my cousin, nah. You suppose have my back when this kind yawa gas," Bode pleaded. "*Muniru-Money!* Help your boy nah."

Muniru sighed as though Bode and his simple demand were the biggest burdens in the world. But the hailing had soothed his ego sufficiently. "Okay, see. I go follow my drivers talk, see whether any one of them need conductor."

"Muniru-Money!" Bode beamed. "Your boy dey loyal."

"Call me back this evening, you hear?"

Prostrating on the disgusting muddy ground of the motor park, Bode thanked his cousin.

“Sakky.”

“Baaabyyy,” came the reply. It was perhaps one of the things he liked most about her; the way she would drawl the word and somehow make him feel more like a man. She was saying *baby* but he was hearing *my bobo, my man. Olowo ori mi.*

“You’re just waking up?” he asked, bending his neck to hold the phone in place as he crouched to lace up his pair of cheap blue sneakers.

“Yeah, I am,” she yawned. “How are you? Is everything okay, this one that you’re calling me so early?”

“Hmm, yes. I just want to see you. Will you meet me at that pepper-soup place by twelve?” Speaking to her was the only time he used proper English, if it could even be called that.

“Alright, my love.”

The name ‘Sakky’ was short for Nosakhare, a lovely girl from Edo state who Bode had only begun talking to because he was curious as to why she bore a male name. She sold oranges on his street, and Bode had fallen in love with her so suddenly and intensely that he’d kept away for months, scared that she would notice and take advantage of his feelings for her in some way. But Sakky was simply not that kind of girl.

She was the sweetness in his life.

He would have a conductor’s job by tomorrow, but that didn’t mean the hustle had stopped for today. He had some hours before twelve, and he was determined to make the best of them. Trekking the short distance to the nearest market, he went looking for one of the Hausa men that would be willing to hire out a wheelbarrow. On finding one and agreeing on a price, he got to work.

For the next few hours, Bode worked himself to the bone. He’d done many menial jobs in his life, but this was by far his least favourite. The sun beat down on him a little too relentlessly, almost like some sort of punishment. Sweat poured from his pores by the gallon, as he pushed and manoeuvred the rickety little wheelbarrow from market stalls to wherever a customer had parked their vehicle.

The job got more tedious as rush hour approached, and cars with crazy drivers kept whizzing dangerously past. Avoiding these cars, crossing roads safely and managing to keep the foodstuffs

balanced (albeit precariously) was almost too much for Bode to handle. It was like the combination of heat and adrenaline was somehow driving him crazy.

But the money had to be made somehow.

“Wheelbarrow!” someone called.

He whipped his head around to figure out where the call had come from, and then saw an old lady in a plain mustard kaftan. She was standing in front of the stall of the *mai-doyas*; the men who sold yam from Abuja.

Groaning inwardly, he pushed his wheelbarrow towards her. Yams were the absolute heaviest thing to transport, and he considered charging her a bit higher than the normal price – then decided against it. She was, after all, an elderly lady.

“Well done, Madam.”

She raised a palm in acknowledgement of his greeting, then pointed at a heap of six yams that the seller had put aside for her. “Please carry this for me. My car is on that side,” she gestured.

He heaved the yams onto the tray of the wheelbarrow, then began to push it. Thus began his worst tak for the day, which was somehow more strenuous and tasking than lugging a basin of plaster up the stairs of an uncompleted building. Dodging traffic required much more deftness, speed and intelligence than he was used to – but there was no giving up.

He eventually got to the other side of the road, and then the elderly lady pressed a button on her key to unlock the car. The sleek boot of the car lifted itself, and Bode bent and began to place the yams inside, one after the other.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said. Then she motioned for him to shut the boot, which he did. She then walked around to the other side of the car to get in, and grabbed a purse from inside.

“My son, I don’t have change oh,” she said to him. By this, she meant that she had no smaller unit of currency that would instantly satisfy her bill without the need to receive change from him.

“I fit find change, Madam,” he said. “Just give me the money, I go find change.”

“Sorry, okoh mi,” she said softly as she climbed frailly into the driver’s seat, her eyes glinting wickedly with the knowledge that she would get away with this – as no one would dare rough up an old woman for cheating. “I’ve finished my money in the market.”

Sitting quietly in the pepper-soup place waiting for Sakky, he hung his head and thought about his disaster of a day.

He'd gotten yelled at, beaten a man, gotten fired, been given a crappy job and had to feign gratitude for it, worked at the most difficult job in existence – then gotten swindled by an old woman.

But in all truth, this sort of day was not uncommon for him. Bode had been born and bred in poverty, and so most of his life had been that way; *hard*. Like many others of his social class, he'd graduated from secondary school with average grades, but bright hopes that were quickly crushed by the reality of his station in life. Love had been the only bright spot in his life.

As if on cue, Love walked into the pepper-soup shop in the form of Sakky. He heard her voice before he saw her; as he sat with his back facing the doorway. "Mama Rosaline! How family?" Her clear, silvery voice rang through the air confidently, and Bode immediately felt his tense muscles relax.

"Ah, Nosakhare, fine girl. How body?" the lady called back, with a smile in her voice.

Bode sensed her drawing closer and closer to where he was seated. He didn't turn back, but he knew because she always smelled like an oddly attractive combination of orange and whatever fruity body spray she was wearing at the moment. Today, it was vanilla.

The sickly sweet scent enveloped him as she bent and hugged him from behind, leaning down to kiss the top of his head. "*Baabyyy*. It's like you've had a rough day," she murmured, still holding him from behind.

For the few seconds that they stayed that way, it seemed to Bode that all his problems were trivial and insignificant. His cares melted away, and the heaviness he constantly wore like a straitjacket was replaced by the love of the woman who was wrapped around him, just murmuring sweet-nothings in his ear and bringing one very big patch of sweetness into an otherwise bitter life.

She straightened herself and went to sit opposite him, a big silly smile stretched across her face, just for him. As Bode drank in the sight of her yellow dress, neat cornrows and flawless coffee skin, he forgot to breathe for two seconds.

If this was what it meant to be a fool in love, then he never wanted to be wise again.