

I AM NOT THE PERSON I ONCE WAS

I never thought I'd ever contemplate suicide, but my life is such a mess at the moment, and I think this is the only solution to the problem.

My work used to be the thing that kept me going despite the vicissitudes of life, but I don't derive joy from it anymore. All I do is wake up, go to work, go through the motions, and return home at the end of the day. I think it's probably because I am not good at what I do. There was a time when I would have worked my bones off to improve my capabilities to function effectively, but as I grew older, I stopped caring. After all, there is a limit to which hard work can carry you without innate talent.

I probably missed my calling in life. Maybe I would have been better off being an engineer, a pilot, or, perhaps, a scientist. My father, however, wanted me to be a medical doctor. I conjecture that it was because he was a medical doctor and wanted someone to continue running his clinic when he grew old. I didn't have a say in the matter, so off I went to medical school. Before I finished medical school, however, his hospital had become insolvent, and he had moved on to his fifth wife.

I worked hard in medical school. I studied tirelessly and shunned all social activities, but no matter how hard I tried, I could never accomplish the goals I set for myself. There was always someone better than me in the exams, or just as I was about besting others in an exam, something happened to throw a spanner in my wheel. One scenario I will never forget, even if I develop Alzheimer's disease later in life, was during the fifth year of medical school when I was leading my classmates in the grades for a course. I was pretty confident that I would get the prize for that subject during our final year. Unfortunately, at the final exams, I forgot to write my matriculation number on the answer sheets. I didn't realize this until the next day, which was a Saturday, when I woke up from a much-deserved sleep with the sudden realization of my mistake. I reached out to the Exam Officer first thing on Monday morning, but he said there was nothing he could do to help me. Thus, I had to rewrite the exams, and with it, my dream went poof!

My pursuit of academic excellence affected my social life. I lacked beneficial social

competencies for initiating and maintaining relationships with girls. Looking back, I realize if I had committed half the time I spent chasing scholastic finesse to improving my social deficiency, my romantic overtures wouldn't have been rebuffed by Bola, Catherine, Amina, and several other girls. Wuraola's rejection hurt me the most. I pursued her for three years, hoping my tenacity would pay off. Unbeknownst to me, she believed I was too bluenosed, monochromatic, and traditional. I learned about her feelings from someone who knew my best friend. She didn't know I would have died for her or unconditionally given her one of my kidneys if the need arose. When I almost died from complications of a car accident and she never called to find out if I was alive or dead, it dawned on me that I had wasted a significant part of my life on a fruitless endeavour.

A WOMAN SCORNE

The first job I got after leaving medical school was horrible. I worked from morning to evening every day in a hospital that cared little about its workers' mental and physical well-being but was more focused on profit-making and paying us slaves' wages. I took the job after waiting a few months without securing a post in any of the hospitals I applied to. Meanwhile, my classmates had begun jobs in government hospitals and were earning fat salaries.

The work environment was toxic, and the workers carried out their duties with the fear that any minor error would result in their being sacked. It was there that I met Ada. She worked on the dialysis ward, and we frequently came into contact because I was in the nephrology unit. I wouldn't describe her as beautiful, but she wasn't poor aesthetically. She was also smart and was a good dresser. Someone said her father was a very wealthy executive, which was evident in how she changed cars that even the hospital's Chief Executive couldn't afford. I often wondered why she worked in a hospital like ours.

Ada would come to sit with me after we finished our shifts, and we would chat for long periods. Then she would call me on the phone and talk endlessly. Later, she started sending me gifts and inviting me to parties. I obliged because, firstly, I didn't want to appear discourteous and, secondly, I needed to improve my interaction with the female

gender. However, I began to get uncomfortable when she started introducing me to all her friends, her siblings, and eventually her parents. When her dad suggested getting married soon, I freaked out and told her we were just friends. She seemed to understand, or at least I thought she did.

I didn't see her at work the next day. I didn't want things to be awkward between us, so I called her and asked if she was okay. She said she was fine and asked to pick me up after work and take me home to prove that there were no hard feelings. Of course, I enthusiastically agreed.

She came in a 2022 Mercedes Benz GLK. Two guys were seated at the back, and she introduced them as friends. Not suspecting anything, I got in and sat beside her. I lived in Ikeja, so I was surprised when she took the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. She told me she wanted to drop something off at a colleague's place.

When we got to Ibafo, she stopped the car, took out the keys, and walked away. One of the guys at the back brought out an AK-47 and pointed it at me. The other brought out a Swiss Army knife. My heart started to palpitate.

What had I gotten myself into?

BLACKBEARD AND CURLY

Ada's thugs dragged me out of the car and presented me with two options: Leave Lagos tonight and never return, or die. They told me that the ignominy I had brought on Ada by refusing her romantic overtures was enough to send me to the afterlife, but because she was magnanimous and genuinely loved me, she had asked them to provide me with options. I still cared a lot about life at that time. I wanted to be an exemplary physician and all the other Hippocratic hogwash, so I rapidly consented to leave Lagos, and I fled with my tail between my legs. If it were now, I'd have just told them to shoot me and get it over with.

I returned to the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway and tried to wave down any vehicle that would be willing to give me a lift. No one stopped, and I wasn't surprised. Nobody would

dare pick up a stranger at this time of the night. It wasn't because Lagos was filled with unhelpful people, but the ghastly economic and security situation in the country had made many good people mistrustful.

After about two hours of hiking, I successfully flagged down a heavy goods vehicle transporting farm animals to the Eastern part of the country. But, unfortunately, the driver and his four mates occupied the cabin, leaving no space for a sixth person. Therefore, all my one thousand Naira could fetch me was a spot amid some boxes, sheep, and goats at the back of its 40-foot container.

All through the drive down to Ibadan, I thought about calling the Police to report Ada and her criminal friends, but something one of them said made me hesitate. He told me they had contacts in the Police, and they would come looking for me if I reported them. I wasn't prepared to hand my safety over to the Police. I would be dead or maimed for life before they sent anyone over to investigate, and that's if I wasn't asked to grease someone's palm before my statement was even recorded. Therefore, as the truck ground its way to Ibadan, I nestled relaxedly between 'Blackbeard' and 'Curly', the names I concocted for a goat and a sheep I'd made friends with.

NO ONE KNOWS WHAT TOMORROW HOLDS

I knew precisely what tomorrow would hold. Nothing good. I knew this because I was twenty-five years old and penniless on a couch in my uncle's house at Mokola in Ibadan. And also for the reason that his wife did not seem to like me.

I hadn't seen him in ages, although the last time my father mentioned him, Uncle Lasisi had eight children—that was three years ago. In that time, he had added a ninth, and his wife was again four months pregnant. They lived in a one-bedroom apartment, so six of the children occupied various sleeping positions in the living room. The oldest child had reluctantly relinquished the couch to me, as I was older than him and because his father had given him the evil eye when he had protested initially.

His mother snorted in disapproval the moment she opened the door to allow me in and hadn't said a word to me since then. I called her Aunty Labake, even though she was only

a few years older than me, but traditional correctness required that I do so since she was my uncle's wife. Before I settled on the couch for the night, Uncle Lasisi took me outside the apartment. He told me I could only stay for a short while and that I would have to contribute to my board. He showed me a makeshift bathroom where I could wash Blackbeard's stink off me and lent me some of his clothes to wear. There was no mention of food, and I did not ask, so I went to bed hungry. To this day, I believe that night contributed to the development of the peptic ulcer disease that subsequently became the bane of my life.

I woke up the following day to the noise of clanging pots and pans and Aunty Labake singing an allegorical song about lazy people not getting up early to go and look for employment. I grabbed the clothes I'd washed the previous night off the clothesline and went to queue at the single bathroom that served the whole block of apartments. When I returned after thirty minutes, I found the family sharing a loaf of Agege bread that a friend of the family had brought back as a gift from his sojourn to Lagos. For those who don't know, Agege bread brings as much joy to a poor man as a £50 Amazon gift card would to the average Brit. However, it has recently been finding its way onto the breakfast tables of the rich, as its taste doesn't respect social strata. The sound of the kids slurping their hot tea and munching the buttered bread made my tummy rumble. Aunty Labake smirked as she caught me looking around surreptitiously for my slice. I tarried a bit to see if my pitiful state would evoke her benevolence, but when nothing was forthcoming, I left.

I went around Ibadan searching for clinics requiring locum doctors and finally selected one I could walk to in half an hour from Uncle Lasisi's house. The rate per hour wasn't good, but it'd put something in my pocket while I searched for a place to do my internship. The fact that it was not a considerable distance from my uncle's house also eliminated the need to shell out money for buses or tricycles. I started work immediately.

I should have known that simple cases like malaria or minor viral chest infections would not come my way. Instead, the first patient I saw was a sixteen-year-old girl whom her cousin had impregnated. She had ingested a few too many tablets of Postinor and was

bleeding severely per vaginam. I remembered all the methods of resuscitation we learned in school, which I would have loved to apply, but her social circumstances precluded this. The girl did not have a single Naira on her. I wished I had the money to pay for her, but I also did not have a single Naira to my name. A few of the hospital staff donated some money and put her in a cab to the general hospital. At least there, she would get life-saving treatment. The kindly chief matron told me not to beat myself up over the issue. These kinds of girls turned up at the clinic every month. The clinic, being privately owned, used to expend its resources to treat them and never got paid anything in return. That was why the establishment was now like a derelict mansion.

HOPE

Hope is a dastardly thing. All it does is make you believe in the possibility of a future where things may get better. But things never get better! Even if they did, you were undoubtedly too old and burdened with a pile of regrets, or you were on your way to meeting Angel Azrael. I remember my dad struggling with penury for a long time after his clinic crashed. He always believed things would get better, but then he went and got cancer and died!

Life crept along drunkenly for a while until it was time for me to specialize in a branch of medicine. I wish someone had told me not to enter the Residency Programme for surgery...that I lacked the adroitness to excel. Maybe do something less demanding, like teaching or community welfare, that person should have said. But since my life seemed destined for despair, no one told me, and I was now trapped in a job I no longer enjoyed. Though I wanted to quit, it was all I knew how to do, and it put food on the table.

It started as a niggle, germinated into an idea, and soon became the only drug that could cure this unhappiness that had me in a chokehold. I would finally be happy. So, here I was, standing on the bridge and looking down at the water swirling below. Then I shuddered. Nah, that path wasn't for me. It'd be too painful. Maybe I should try yoga. Some said it was the answer to all life's ills, or at least the start of healing.

Ludicrous!

