

## Chicken Suya

When the boy woke up, it was because he was cold. It was not the kind of cold he liked - the cold of the morning after the rain, when the breeze danced through the space underneath the door uninvited but welcome. It would flow across the floor to the edge of his mattress and breathe on the back of his neck. On those mornings, he would pull his mother's wrapper a little tighter around himself but leave a leg exposed as if to say to the morning breeze "stop it, I like it."

The cold that woke him up this morning was rude. It set his teeth on edge, and he had started to shiver from his sleep. It was almost the end of February and harmattan should have been gone weeks ago but this year it stayed, uninvited and unwelcome. Along with the dust and the haze, the cold air made sure that when the boy got up off the floor, there would be no pleasure, no small respite to be found before he faced the heat of the day.

He didn't delay. As soon as he was up, the boy picked the bucket from the corner of the room and hurried down the cracked concrete floor of the shared corridor. The room he had emerged from was the entirety of their home. It had one window, one door, a kerosene stove in the corner and one sibling - his sister - who was still curled up on her side of the mattress with her back to the fluorescent light he had let into the room when he opened the door.

She was still there when he came back into the room. "Kenny, ki lo n se e nau? Dide jor". Kehinde didn't answer either the question or the demand that she get up, but he knew she had heard him. It didn't matter, she would get up sooner or later and load an old carton with beef rolls to hawk in the morning traffic. Any other day of the week it would be both of them gisting as they walked to the pedestrian bridge to find spots from where they would venture again and again into the Lagos traffic and to which they would return to hide from the heat or rest their legs when the cars were too fast to chase.

Today, Taye had more important work to do. A week ago, they had been walking back home when his name rang out from a group of men gathered around the rear end of a silver Toyota Highlander from 2006. He ignored it the first time, but then "Tee-Y, eti e di ni?". He genuflected as he approached the group of men, "Egbon e ma binu, mi o mo pe eyin ni". The apology wasn't acknowledged, and Taye kept his head slightly bowed while this 'egbon' told him he had work for him; then told him to come to Ikota Nursery and Primary School the following Friday.

Before he left, Egbon squeezed two thousand naira into his hand and told him to "come early o" and "make I no dey find you". That money had started the day in a trader's brassiere, was collected by a bus conductor then, bent lengthways, handed to a teenager who hung off the Danfo and demanded 'his' due for the use of the Lekki-Epe expressway. Eventually, along with the monies collected from other drivers, it had been held together with a rubber-band and delivered to Egbon's Highlander. Taye

didn't know of the money's origin, nor did he care, for him it meant he and Kehinde were going to eat suya that night. Two thousand naira could only buy four sticks of beef suya but, in their room self-contained accompanied by a bowl of garri, it was ambrosia.

So today, in part motivated by the promise of more, Taye trekked down Addo road and got on a keke to Ikota. Before their mother died, he and Kehinde used to attend this school, but afterwards they couldn't survive by hawking only in the evenings and they couldn't rely on the generosity of neighbors and distant family (who weren't always better off). That was four years ago, now when their former classmates put on their SS1 long sleeves, Taye and Kehinde were learning new ways to survive on their hawking and whatever Taye made from odd jobs while Kehinde learned to make hair.

When Taye got to the school, he didn't see Egbon's Highlander in the compound so he walked to the closest block of classrooms and found, through the empty frames that should have held windows, that he was not alone.

"Tee-Y!"

"Omo iya mi!"

The second boy was about the same age, he too lived in Langbasa in a small apartment he shared with the rest of his family, and they had formed a friendship tempered in many games of five-a-side football. They looked alike enough that they had been mistaken for brothers and were handsome enough that the puff-puff woman at Addo roundabout had declared, separately of course, that she was going to marry them. Taye would mumble something, but Dayo enjoyed the attention and he would declare that he was not available because he was going to marry Tiwa Savage.

"D-1, how now? Shey na Egbon say make you come? No school today?"

"No school today na, tomorrow na election."

Dayo still went to school, in so far as he was enrolled. He skipped classes routinely and had plenty of time to run errands for Egbon. He had started hanging around the guys who fixed phones at the Ajah market when Egbon noticed him. The next day he was running across the street to buy 'Benson'. Then he got promoted to helping Egbon queue for fuel when there was scarcity or withdraw money with whatever card and pin Egbon gave him - none of them bore his name. Eventually, as 'aburo Egbon', Dayo collected money from the boys at the bus stop when Egbon wasn't around. Taye was still only buying cigarettes, beer and condoms or delivering odd messages to people in the neighborhood.

Alone with each other in this classroom, they were just teenagers and it wasn't long before they were roaming the hallways of the primary school, writing nonsense on the boards of the empty classrooms they wandered into. Eventually they found a ball and ended up shirtless

playing one-on-one on in the quadrangle between the classroom blocks. As they played, other people came into the school - boys from the neighborhood, one or two of the guys from the bus stop and even the puff-puff woman from the roundabout.

It was more than two hours later, they were still playing football along with a couple of other boys, when the Highlander finally drove into the school.

*"Heiss, Tee-Y! D-1!"*

The boys ran shoulder to shoulder over to the car, and even that was a race. They unloaded the boxes from Egbon's car and carried them back to the first classroom. Everyone had filed in and some were sitting uncomfortably in seats that were meant to occupy two much smaller human beings. The desks and chairs were a plain brown of whatever hue time and use had left of the lacquer, with an overlay of years of biro markings and short black text which declared that they had been 'DONATED BY: BUILDTHENEXTAFRICA - ONE CHILD, ONE DESK. 2019.'

Egbon's speech was short, their benefactor needed them. All of them knew that Pastor Ara had been there for them. When the transformer at Addo spoilt, shebi some of them had come to him and he had gone to Pastor, then NEPA came to fix it. That time okada hit one of the boys in the neighborhood, shebi it was Pastor that paid the hospital bill. Not to mention the borehole, or the rice and oil from Christmas. Ehn, now it was time for elections and they must not disgrace Pastor, he must become a senator.

Pastor had campaigned o and he, Egbon, knew for sure Pastor was going to win but that was only part one of the work, this is part two. The bastards in the other party know they can't win so they're going to try to rig it, but we were ready for them. That is why he had obtained boxes of polling sheets, and we were all going to thumb-print.

While he was speaking, Taye and Dayo walked around the classroom distributing the stacks of polling sheets and ink pads. Egbon pulled one of the sheets out and pressed his thumb into a black ink pad then pressed it next to the image of a cross and child - Pastor's party symbol. "See ehn, for everything na so you go press am, no make your hand cross line o. Press am once then you leave am, if e rough or e go cross line you don waste am."

Pastor's assistants spread themselves across a few of the classrooms. An hour later, Taye and Dayo were next to each other in the same classroom, thumb-printing the morning away. A row ahead of them, Ola had stopped. Ola was one of the boys who sometimes delivered money to Dayo instead of Egbon.

"Na wa o!" No one in the classroom paid any attention. He cleared his throat loudly and repeated himself. This second 'na wa' was greeted with a 'kilode?' and it was all the invitation he needed.

"Country hard o". He told them about how there was no light for the past three weeks, and all the extra money he was making from his hustle, he was using to buy black market fuel for the generator at the barbing saloon he owned. Whatever he made in profit went to eating and buying more fuel.

People hissed and nodded as they thumb-printed. The puff-puff woman, her name was Ronke, told how her last born had started to sit by the fire with her because she did not have money for school fees. Lagos State University had increased fees for the first born, so that was where all the money was going. But she had been praying sha, that when he finishes, he will get a good job and then maybe his siblings too will finish school.

"But where are the jobs?" Peter told them he had a B.Sc in computer science and he did not plan to use it to repair phones at the bus stop. He had roamed everywhere with his CV, had borrowed clothes for interviews and not one time had someone told him congratulations and asked him to start. He had started hanging around the market before his boss told him to come and learn work. Ola agreed loudly, he had only gotten to SS2 but even if he had finished shebi there was no job.

They each had a story and Taye listened as they hissed and thumb-printed, thumb-printed and hissed, in their shared agony. Dayo's only contribution was laughter. It was the government, they agreed, if the government was not full of selfish and greedy people there would be enough for everybody. Taye and Dayo went through the rows collecting the completed stacks of sheets and handing out fresh ones. One or two of the lazier people were sitting on their desks now, very invested in the conversation.

"Shey you people know, if all of us agree, and we protest, they can't stand us o, shey you know?" It drove them into a frenzy, they were all tired of it, something had to change. Dayo started to laugh again, louder than their resolve. "So Pastor too na thief abi?" There was a chorus of NOs. Pastor was different, he was one of their own. They knew him, they knew how much he helped them. He always had, even when he used to go by Thunder and was the person the boys brought the dues to at the end of the day. He was not some greedy fat man in power, he was one of their own.

Proving he was not a bastard, Pastor Ara poked his head into the classroom and cut short their protests. He thanked them profusely for coming and told them how much God would bless them for honoring him. He told them Egbon would make sure they had something to take home but that he had brought refreshments. A crate of Malta Guinness and a carton of Gala were carried in while he spoke. The classroom was a gallery of smiles. Taye recognized the old carton and he was smiling too, because it meant he and Kehinde would have a good night.

Egbon eventually came back into the classroom, it was late afternoon and the last forms had been thumb-printed. He handed out envelopes. They all waited until he had left the room before they opened them - ten thousand naira each. Prayers were said for this money that meant school fees, and fuel and something to send to the village. Taye and Dayo were at the back of the classroom again, Taye counted out his ten thousand but Dayo's envelope sat unopened. When Taye rolled up his money preparing to leave, Dayo put an arm on his elbow. "Omo iya, wait small."

Ola had heard and lingered. Dayo didn't appreciate it, "shey you be Tee-Y abi wetin you dey find for here?" Taye was impatient. He had 10k, and he knew Kehinde had sold her entire market for the day. Tonight was suya, then they would keep the rest for rent and her freedom money. Dayo just played with his phone; it was new, the phone, Taye wanted one but could not afford it. Neither could Dayo, but Dayo told him Egbon had given it to him.

After the last person had left, Taye and Dayo loaded up the Highlander for Egbon, the older man was smoking his Benson and leaning against the fender. When they shut the trunk, he reached into his jeans and pulled out an extra two thousand naira. He handed it to Taye and asked him to get home safely, but Dayo kept his hand on Taye's shoulder. "Egbon, Taye go follow us tomorrow".

Egbon looked him over, "Tee-Y, ngbo?" Taye had no idea what tomorrow was but he nodded. Egbon looked away for a second. This was an even shorter speech. The work was not done, there was part 3. Tomorrow, they must defend the work they had done today. They had to help Pastor to make sure nobody went to press hand for the bastards in the other party, and if they cause trouble they must meet trouble.

Taye nodded again. "D-1, give am equipment." Dayo opened the rear door of the SUV and leaned in, when he resurfaced, he was holding a cutlass which he handed to his friend. Taye hesitated, but then Egbon had counted out an extra five thousand naira.

Taye reached for both and prostrated. His chest to the dirt, cutlass in hand, he promised not to disappoint his Egbon. He meant it, Egbon had not disappointed him. He had made seventeen thousand naira and tonight, for the first time in his life, he would be able to say "Aboki, sanu, abeg you get chicken suya? Bring one".