

A Funeral and A Birth

There are moments, pure moments that stand independently in our minds as hallmarks of true vulnerability. The ones where we shared a memory (best buried) with a friend or acquaintance that made us feel truly bare and uncomfortable. These moments, devoid of any social hierarchical plotting, show us the best parts of the human condition. These happenings, frozen in time, bereft of the complexities in which we wrap simplicity are almost perfect, like the feeling when a doodle is started at random and it ends up a masterpiece, or the elation of winning a game amongst friends.

Whether or not the conditions are as perfect as I have described, nostalgia serves the purpose of creating that perfect feeling and tying it to mundane, realistic happenings. They may be moments that lead up to joy, or to suffering, but the one thing they embody is truth. A truth of action, of intention, of expression. We are untethered to politics, to life, to what comes next, and we have transcended the limits of language. We have connected to the heavens and transmitted--- through pure expression--- what we think and feel.

Such an interaction leaves us operating at higher levels of existence, even if it is just for a little period. We have scaled the mountains of misunderstanding and we have planted total comprehension, however ephemeral.

It was not in search of such an interaction that the famously--- amongst family, friends and acquaintances--- introverted Ifeoluwa stepped out into unfamiliar territory, beholden to a handwritten note left by Denrele, his roommate.

He had woken on the morning of his birthday, greeted by a couple of his familiar friends; a Fear of the Future and Loneliness.

Loneliness was a silent chap, and those who communicated without words were the best of companions. The former of the two spoke loudly though, through unfinished tasks, comparison

with acquaintances who had “figured” life out, and of course, the ever-evolving expectations of church brethren and family members. It screeched whenever he visited his mother in their modest 4-bedroom home in Ewupe town, and it bellowed when he went to church with her, in shakes from pastors and deacons past, and in claps on the back and tilts of the head when his old friends asked what he was up to now. It cackled when his mother mentioned how Segun had just completed his masters in Electrical Engineering in Canada or how Tomi had just made his first million from his fashion business. It guffawed incessantly when his father sent him videos of him cradling his sister’s first child. It clapped and danced at every rejection letter, every failed relationship, every moment filled with pain and loss.

And he had been blessed with a lot.

Maybe that was why Fear hung out with him; Ife’s life was comically entertaining and he listened without pause whenever Fear spoke or laughed. He made Fear comfortable and it cherished the comfort that Ife’s anxiety attacks and late-night crying afforded it. One thing he could never fault them for was being there for him. Both of them were dependable and that was something real companions rarely excelled at.

He fulfilled familial obligations, phone in hand, raised to ear, saying amen during those brief slices of respite between motherly prayers and admonishment. Paterfamilias tended towards approving grunts and awkward jokes, and his father ticked both boxes.

Usually, Ife chose to enjoy quiet reflection on his birthdays, answering goodwill messages with a certain degree of nonchalance reserved for all those who chose to associate with him. It was a gift from childhood; a child who saw the world only through books and films kept to such familiar grounds when the world offered something different. Best friends were swashbuckling pirates and CIA-attached protagonists, running through a world of adventure, love and betrayal. The petty squabbles on the school playground failed to stir anything in him, so he had

turned to writing to create ones that did. Never mind that this commitment to doing only what moved him crippled him financially or left him without parent-worthy achievements.

“At least I own a car,” he thought.

As he stared at the note taped to the fridge, he realised that his thirtieth birthday was going to be different. His roommate had taped an address with instructions in his characteristically unreadable scrawl; he had to run errands today. Inconsiderate, but Denrele was bearable compared to all the other roommates he’d had before. He was quiet for the most part, keeping to himself and only making conversations for necessary conversations. He was clean, tidy and meticulous when it came to task delegation and house-managing activities.

From nose-picking Fola to Oversharing Ade, and from Overly-loud Gbolahan to Plans-and-Dreams Wale, he’d endured a lot of bull. He had been roommates with liars, thieves, hygiene-lacking adults and, the worst of them, happy individuals.

He hated the delusion, the warped worldview that came with happy, bubbly roommates. For him, realism existed in deeply pessimistic moments, those unhappy periods. They inspired thoughts grounded in realistic offerings, as opposed to happiness, which men never question. Deep thoughts come from melancholic periods and they propel progress rooted in rational thought. Happiness inspires emotional reactions, errors, flawed judgements. The only good thing it produces is the pain and pessimism it offers once the house of cards come tumbling down.

That was priceless. Of course, his view on the matter inspired arguments and incidents.

The thing was; with Denrele, it was simpler, incidents were fewer and far in-between, and he only made errors in judgement occasionally.

Too bad it was today of all days.

Originally, he had planned to write a story, a screenplay, something to mark the occasion, but he had no bursts of inspiration.

Nothing.

He could have attributed it to writer's block, but it felt like the ability to string words together had been excised from him; an emptiness answered when he knocked on the doors that produced tales in his mind.

He planned to revisit in the evening.

He sighed, committing the address and instructions to memory, hoping his eyes had done right by him.

Driving down the street, he went over occurrences in his pastime (a symptom of his never-ending journey towards the inky hands of death no doubt), trying to link imperceptible threads, like a police detective on the tails of a corrupt shadow organisation. A grazing of the knee, caps tossed into the air on graduation day, words unspoken, unfinished maths problems. His mind was allowed to run amok, his life and routine, less so. It usually helped him to come up with plots and characters, beginnings, and endings.

Nothing.

Up ahead was the scrawled (he thought) location, and it didn't look the part. For one, it had a quiet sense around it, not like those moments of meditation in the wee hours of the morning, but tense, like a class shushed by a stern teacher, or like prey, paralyzed by the screech of an owl on the prowl. It made him uncomfortable and coming up on the gate (and reading the plaque mounted above the archway), he realised why.

It was a cemetery.

Usually, he would bail; the world was too noisy, but cemeteries were way worse. It contained all the noise that could have been made, and one could imagine the silence as a defiance of all that possibility. What scared him, of course, was the possibility of them deciding to make that noise. A delusional take, but in the world of village people and broken hearts, anything could happen.

He found a place to park, thinking about how to scold his roommate if this was his idea of a practical joke. He hated being teased, for one, it brought him to the forefront of conversations and being the centre of attention for that purpose was tasteless, at least for him. He'd have a gander with the instructions and see what was really going on. Following the pre-set path committed to memory, he strolled and chanced upon an ongoing graveside service. As the pastor uttered words that were of no comfort to the grieving mother, he became still, solemn almost, as he went over the inevitability of death and the compulsory gathering.

Death was a culmination of a life lived, whether careless or with care. It came to all, in that, all hierarchies and wealth fell away, in the closing of the eyes to sleep forever. He considered the happenings, the events leading up to his arrival here, and the bizarreness alone would usually provoke a story, a start at least.

Nothing.

As his thoughts were dealing and ruminating over the concept (and his lack of a story based on that concept), a man walked over to him, from among the sorrowful participants. He was, or better still, had been well-built, a weathered but chiselled face with a prim moustache gracing it which--- despite the sorrow etched deeply into it--- carried a sense of fulfilment and contentment at what life had given, and taken away. He tapped Ife, eyes scanning, trying to prompt a memory, any, of a vague recognition, and he succeeded.

"Ife my boy, wow, it's good to see you after all these years," he said.

Ife, not wanting to sadden this man further on a day like this with questions on how they knew each other, replied, “It is good to see you too sir, though I wish it was under better circumstances.”

There was an awkward pause as they stood in untold grief, Ife’s becoming visible to him as he sorrowed over someone that he was not sure he knew.

“If I may ask sir,” he said, “what happened?”

The man looked at him, eyes piercing, trying to decide whether to speak or not. After what seemed like ages, he said, voice barely above a whisper, “John killed himself.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, it was a—a shock for all of us. He’d had his struggles, but he always found his feet.”

“Yeah, I understand, of course.”

At this point, he wiped a tear off his face, and put up a smile, saying, “He’d be happy you came through. He was never popular, but he mentioned to us countless times that you were always nice to him.”

“Yeah, everyone deserves that.”

“I know he might have gotten on your nerves a lot of times, with the stories and the long rants about obscure films from the Golden Age of Hollywood, but he was really fond of you.”

“Yeah.”

At this point, Ife was beginning to get scared, because he had no memory of a writer-cinephile friend. If he did have one, his life would have been a lot easier. Who was this person he couldn’t remember?

The man continued to speak.

“I remember the first time he came to us, talking about his mental space, my wife waved him off, told him that he would feel better if he just connected to Jesus. He tried that, but I felt like we could have just listened to him too. We were never stay-home parents, as I’m sure he had told you countless times, since you were the best of friends then.”

Ife replied, uncomfortable, “Yeah, he might have mentioned it once or twice.”

The man scratched his moustache, then said, “I don’t want you to think less of us, we felt we were providing, and we thought that was enough. Well, apparently not.”

“Yeah.”

Ife looked at the small group still crowded around the dug grave, looking over the faces.

No recognition.

“Hey, how did you find us though? We didn’t know that any of his friends knew what had happened, and we didn’t send out any announcements yet.”

Ife paused, a little lost on how to handle this line of questioning, the randomness of an address held down by a Donald Duck bottle opener.

“Um, the address was given to me by my roommate.”

“Oh, this roommate knew my boy. Why is he not here with you?”

“I’m not sure sir. I think he’s on his way.”

The man steeled himself, looking towards the skies, then wiping his tears.

“Well, let’s go look at him one more time before he goes down into the ground.”

“Oh, no sir, that’ll be imposing on this moment for your family.”

“Nonsense, you’re basically family. You were there for him when he needed it.”

With that, the man put a strong arm on Ife’s back, leading him towards the coffin.

As he looked at the solemn, crying faces all around the hole in the ground, he wondered at the randomness of a dry-cleaning address leading him to the burial of a friend he didn’t know he had. Maybe the address was wrong, but still, he felt something was at work here. A sort of butterfly effect, a number skewed in the action of putting down, effective to change the course to a physical collective of grief. He put his mind through vague connections; a coffee spill on a shirt, warranting a change, that led to a five-minute delay, which effectively condemned a driver to death by collision. A collision only created by a clumsy hand, which was created by a hangover bleeding through into the morning, pushing through the previous night’s bad decisions. Another came to him; a chance entry into a roadside supermarket, happening because of a forgotten toothbrush, and an encounter with a friend from a church retreat camp from twenty years before. They were all valid happenings, even though they were powered by choices, choices made, and choices left behind.

Ife tried to put all of this vagueness together, to string together the words that’d give them life; a beautiful delivery of black inscriptions on bare, white paper.

Nothing answered the pitch he gave; this marriage of mind and the offspring of trees.

The coffin was lowered, and the cry of a mother reached the heavens, the service over, a child gone, all ties to the physical severed.

As the procession walked back, Ife, baffled by his failing memory, shamefully asked the man to see a recent picture of his “friend.”

“Hmm, I almost forgot you hadn’t seen in a while. Of course, let me search my picture folder for one of those.”

Ife waited, awkwardly, until the picture was found.

“Ah yes, look at him at one of his writer seminars with a large smile on his face, yeah?”

Ife could not answer, as the picture staring back at him was one of himself. He looked at the man, incredulous to the realities the pixels offered in service of his eyes. The man stared back, his proud smile bearing no pranks or deceptions. So, he turned away from him and he walked away without acknowledgement, quickly, oblivious to the man calling for him, confused. As he willed his legs to navigate the way back to his car, he finally realised--- on the day of his thirtieth birthday--- why he, Olutayo-Olaoye Ifeoluwa John couldn’t write anymore.