

GOOD PEOPLE WEAR TATTERED CLOTHES

It's 10 p.m. on a cold Tuesday night. My father is sleeping soundly on a couch in the parlour and my mother is in her bedroom, on a phone call with one of her cousins in the village.

“What is wrong with Darasimi?” She says as she walks into the parlour.

She casts a look my way and then to the other side of the room where my father is sleeping.

“I'm listening to you.” She continues, not bothering to reduce her tone.

Her husband, my father, can only be awoken by supernatural sounds. I have seen the man sleep through Christmas Day noise and fireworks.

My mother gestures for me to follow as she walks back into her bedroom. She points at a tray of dirty plates which I immediately carry off to be washed.

I don't enjoy the privileges of being an only son in my house. As an only child, I'm everything to my parents, which is not always a good thing.

I return to the parlour and continue my work while trying to ignore my father's deafening snores.

The rechargeable lamp on the table starts to wane and I have about two hours of battery life left.

I had hoped to complete all my outstanding jobs tonight, but NEPA clearly has other plans.

I'm making good progress, but a battery warning keeps popping up on my screen. The laptop finally shuts down and that's it for the night. My day is over now, at half past midnight.

As I walk to my room, I hear my mother's voice, she is still on the phone. I hug her goodnight and retreat into my bedroom.

The moonlight streams in from the window as I lay on my bed.

"I hope it rains tonight." I whisper and reach for the hand fan on my bedside table.

The sweltering heat makes me toss and turn and my small fan does little to reduce my discomfort as I try to fall asleep.

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My eyes flutter open to see that the light is back. There's complete silence, so it's definitely earlier than 5 a.m. My body is fighting to stay asleep, but this is a priceless opportunity to complete my work. I head to the parlour and continue from where I stopped.

A few hours later, my father walks into the parlour.

I get up to greet him "Good morning sir." I say.

He glances at me and nods.

"Did you sleep at all?" He asks.

"I just woke up to finish my work." I respond.

"Okay o." He says and walks away.

I know he thinks I'm working too hard for no reason, but I can't be bothered right now.

My mother walks in and kisses my head. She looks exhausted, no doubt from talking to her relatives all night.

My phone buzzes but I ignore it. It's too much of a distraction and I need to concentrate. I just have a few more hours.

My father returns a while later, dressed for work.

"Don't forget to buy fuel." He says as he walks out of the house.

"Yes sir." I reply and follow him out the door.

I open the gate and watch my father drive out. A thought comes to my mind.

My father doesn't grow. Maybe he's scared of growth because he chooses to remain the same.

The same job, the same car, the same clothes, it's problematic.

I walk back in to see my mother getting ready to leave as well. She's wearing her white nurse's uniform, sparkling as ever.

"When you're coming back home, help me collect my clothes from Mummy Gladys. Give her three thousand naira." She says.

"Yes ma, have a nice day." I respond.

She waves goodbye and leaves. I can finally concentrate without any distractions.

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The sound of my phone ringing catches my attention. Chike is calling.

"Dayo, where are you? The principal is looking for you." He says.

"I'm coming. I'm coming." I hang up and rush to finish my work.

It's just 7:40 a.m. I can't believe the principal is around this early. She's never around this early.

I sprint to the bathroom and rush out of the house like a bat out of hell.

“I’m on my way.” I say to Chike on the phone as I hop into a bus on the side of the road.

“Guy, she’s raving mad this morning. She called a meeting and everybody is scared.” He responds, increasing my anxiety.

I can see the school in the distance. My muscles tense up, unsure of what is about to happen.

“Good morning Mr. Adeyemi.” Students greet me as I walk past them towards the Admin building.

“Dayo!” I hear someone call out from behind.

It’s Mrs. Saliu, the vice principal. She rushes towards me and grabs my arm.

“She’s been shouting for the past ten minutes. I heard her all the way from my car.” She says, dragging me to the front of the Principal’s office.

“Don’t worry.” She pats me on the back reassuringly. “She won’t yell at us.”

I trust her words. She’s one of the few people who can stand up to the Principal.

We walk in to see many other teachers seated, getting berated by the short, spectacled woman.

“What kind of image are we promoting? What do we expect parents to think when things like this keep happening?” She yells in her contradictory baritone voice.

She glances at Mrs. Saliu and me at the door. “And some of you have made lateness a habit.”

She refrains from attacking us directly and continues her tirade.

I sneak into the assembly of teachers and try to stay out of her sight.

“What happened?” I ask Chike once we step out of the office.

“Some senior students beat up a junior student and the parents want to sue.” He says. “I’m sure it’s Goriola and his gang again.”

Goriola is without exaggeration, the worst student in the entire school. Unfortunately, he gets to do what he likes because his father is a wealthy politician. I remember how terrible he was when I taught his class last year. I can only imagine what kind of evil he will do when he grows up.

I head to the computer lab and settle in for the day. I have four classes today so I organize class notes and get something to eat before my first class arrives.

As the day passes, I hear more details of the assault from students. If their stories are to be believed, Goriola should go to jail for what he did to that child.

I am walking to get lunch when I notice a growing commotion in front of the Admin block. I join other teachers who are dispersing students to return to their classes. At the centre of the drama is a well-dressed man surrounded by armed police officers. Goriola’s father, I presume. He looks displeased as he enters his jeep. His car speeds out of the school with the police convoy in tow.

“Imagine o, his son almost killed somebody and he’s coming here to say rubbish.” One of the teachers, Mrs Obi says.

“Nothing will happen to that boy. His father will make sure of it.” Another teacher comments.
“That’s what money and power can do.”

I am very aware of that sentiment. In this society, it is too much to expect justice to punish the rich. I have had that message drilled into my head by my father all my life. “Know your place and stay out of trouble.”

“Good afternoon Mr. Adeyemi” A student greets. I turn to see Folarin, one of my favourite students.

“Good afternoon Folarin.” I respond “I’ve been in touch with your uncle. He has been giving me work since last week. I even sent some in this morning.”

Folarin nods. “That’s good. He said he likes your work. Maybe he’ll give you a full-time job soon.”

A full-time job? I’m overjoyed at the thought “I would love that. Thank you so much for recommending me.”

“No problem at all. You’re the best computer teacher I know.” He continues “I told him about you last year when you were still a Corper, but he didn’t have any jobs then.” He says.

“God will bless you, Folarin.” I say.

He walks away with the same “no big deal” expression he always has on his face. I am so grateful to this boy, he doesn’t know how much.

As I'm settling into my chair in the computer lab, I get a notification that my last class of the day has been cancelled. Something about an investigation.

This should give me enough time to complete the rest of my freelance work for Folarin's uncle.

"Are you ready?" A voice jolts me out of my intense state of concentration. It's my friend, Sikemi.

"You're here." I check the wall clock opposite me. It's almost closing time.

I close my laptop and tidy my desk.

"I'm ready." I say as I pick up my bag and keys.

I turn off the lights and we step out of the room.

"Did you hear about Goriola?" She asks as I lock up.

"I did." I reply. "Remember that I told you how much of a menace that boy is."

"I honestly can't believe he did that and wasn't arrested!" Sikemi yells angrily.

I look around to make sure no one can hear us. "Calm down. You know his father has ears everywhere."

"I'm not scared of him." She says, brushing off my concern.

I'm not surprised that she isn't. Sikemi's parents are big-money socialites in Lagos. The only reason we're friends is because she and I served together in this school for our National Youth Service last year. I was blessed to be retained, and she *chose* to stay in spite of having much better options. I like her a lot, but there's no point shooting my shot with her.

We enter her car and I immediately recall my father's request.

"Sikemi do you have an empty keg in your car?" I ask.

"I do. Do you want to buy fuel?" She says.

"Yeah. I rushed out this morning and forgot the keg." I feel embarrassed for a moment but I remember that she doesn't care about things like this.

Our conversation shifts to my work with Folarin's uncle. She offers to link me up with her friend who runs a start-up again, but I don't want to ask her for favours like that. I would rather find my success and then maybe, just maybe, have a shot with her.

I alight at the filling station near my house and she drives off. Once I'm done buying fuel, I get my mother's clothes from Mama Gladys and head home.

As I walk into the compound, I see the blue 2004 Toyota Corolla that I know and love. My father is home.

He's in the parlour as usual, sitting in his favourite spot by the window. We exchange basic greetings and he returns his full attention to his phone. My father is the kind of person I would describe as a conspiracy theorist enabler. He doesn't start conspiracies, but he's ready to push every conspiracy theory that exists on the internet. It has gotten so bad that I no longer bother checking his messages on WhatsApp and Facebook.

These days, I am consciously choosing to be the opposite of him. While he is satisfied with his normal life and mediocre job, I am making plans to start my own digital consulting company and build an extraordinary life for myself.

I head into the kitchen to make dinner. I have been the family cook for almost two years now. My mother's health took a nosedive when she had to work back-to-back shifts during the pandemic and she has just never been the same since then. I am very worried about her and cooking for the house is the least I can do to help.

She works day and night shifts as a nurse at the general hospital and spends her free time sorting out family problems. I wish she could just say no to people and stand up for herself.

I remember years ago when she turned down a fully sponsored, year-long training in South Africa because my father made a big fuss about it. It still infuriates me to think that she would have had the opportunity to move to the United States if she had gotten that certification. It could have changed all our lives, but my father was too selfish to allow her to go.

He constantly blames others for his poor financial situation while he pushes away priceless opportunities. I've heard him complain bitterly about his job one day and head out to the same job the next day. I was almost turning out like him too, until I met people who changed my perspective.

I used to think that my family was poor because my parents were good people. They didn't cheat and steal from others like those rich people did. I was wrong. Not only have I met good people who are wealthy, but I know people who have overcome incredible difficulties to succeed.

It is a bitter pill to swallow, but my parents are the way they are largely because of the choices they have made. I don't want to settle like they have. I don't need to be as wealthy as Gorioloa's father, but I have dreams for myself, for my future family, and even for my parents.

That is what motivates me, the vision of my dreams and this reality that I want to change. I want to make it. I have to make it.