

As Told by Someone Else by Mimidoo Ugor (Word count: 2356)

This is how people become legends in stories that are told over and over again. It often begins with one small act, exaggerated by one too many people and suddenly the only existing version of events is the one that puts the subject under a light so bright it cannot be extinguished. It does not matter though, because we love legends, they teach us things about ourselves, about our country, about our history. This legend begins long before you and I were born.

In the early years of post-colonial Nigeria, there was a man. Some may say, a humble man. The man's name was Andropol - weird right? Anyway, Andropol was an interesting man. Anyone who knew him testified to the amount of pride that he had. Not the kind of pride that was condescending. No, this man had the pride that pushed him to do the right thing or at least try to do the right thing always. If you don't know what that means, let me tell you.

One time, one of Andropol's daughters got suspended from school. To be clear, this incident was not her fault. Someone in her class had hissed at the principal. You know how these school administrators are now, they carry respect on their head and redefine the word discipline to the extent sometimes it just becomes plain wickedness.

Anyway, the whole class got suspended because one girl in the class hissed and magically, no one but the principal had heard this. To be honest, it was unclear if everyone knew who had done it and just chose not to snitch or if no one truly heard it. Bottom line is, they all got suspended. *Side note - when the story was narrated the first time, I frankly wished that the girls in Andropol's daughter's class collectively agreed to cover it up, to go down together because that would have been so cool for a bunch of thirteen year-olds in this random all girls boarding school in Jos.*

All the same, everyone got home to tell their parents in hope that they might beg dear principal to let them come back to school. What did Andropol say?

"I will not do it because my daughter should have known better than to put me in a position to have to beg."

In truth, he thought that even if everyone else had children who could get tangled in something that would get them suspended from school, none of his eleven children ought to be one of them. In fact, they ought to know their father better than to put him in that position. Alas, this daughter of his who also happened to be his first daughter, prized jewel and what not had

clearly missed the memo and happened to be in the room where an ill behaved girl hissed at the principal and now she expected him to go and beg the principal.

Andropol did not go to beg.

He said "Begging your principal is an admission of guilt. I will be saying you did this and I have no shame. Besides, if I beg for you now, it is only a matter of time before I am begging a police man or judge for a crime you have committed."

"But I did not commit this offense" was his daughter's defense.

"Yet, you had not done anything to exclude you from the consequences of other people's bad decisions either."

Andropol did not go to beg. It might have been delusion but he was under the impression that his daughter had two choices that were right. The first was to tell on the girl who hissed but this option only worked if his daughter knew who committed the offense. The second was to have established a character so incredible that even if everyone got suspended, the principal would spare her because there simply could be no way she committed the offense or supported those who did. Her failure to establish this character hurt Andropol's pride more than her inability to tell on her classmate and so he would not beg. He did not beg and a few weeks later, the suspension was called off.

For Andropol, this was a signal for all his children, a lesson that they ought to know who their father was, he would not be begging anyone, principal, police officer or otherwise to let them off the hook if they found themselves in circumstances beneath his station.

According to Andropol, if he made it a habit of begging principals, it signaled to his children that one day he would even be willing to beg the police or a judge for a child who had become a criminal but if they could learn that their actions had consequences, they would adjust accordingly.

A man like this might be someone you will say has integrity. Anyway, Nigeria has an eye out for his kind. The kind that will pay no bribe, cower to no one and in true fashion, Nigeria came for Andropol, on a dirt road in Makurdi, Benue State in the form of the Nigerian police.

Now, I know what you are thinking - those scum. And yes, you are right, they have been notorious for as long as they have existed but that is not the point.

Andropol was riding his bicycle on this dirt road one day, minding his business until a checkpoint popped up. A checkpoint that had not been there the many times before he had gone on this road. The policemen flagged him to stop. As if they were well-meaning policemen, they greeted

him 'good afternoon.' Andropol responded respectfully. They asked where he was going, he said home. It should have ended there but it did not.

There are those teachers that consider themselves *disciplinarian*. Some schools at some point even invented the title for those teachers that are quick to find their cane and relentless in hitting other people's children in the name of correcting. People who are strong willed and have encountered disciplinarians often come out with a similar story. One in which the disciplinarian keeps flogging for as long as they refuse to acknowledge the pain of the cane. It is much like a starring contest or an endurance exercise, who will give in first? The disciplinarian who thinks their authority paramount to everything, or the subject of their discipline whose pride will not let them concede?

Because Andropol did not immediately offer any palm greasing effects, the policemen decided to switch tactics, play disciplinarian and start the endurance contest. They asked Andropol whose bicycle he had been riding, he responded that it was his. The policemen then asked that he produce a receipt.

It is actions like these, questions of this nature that make people wonder what the quality of people hired in the Nigerian police force is. To be clear, they are not all bad, not all stupid, not all corrupt but the interactions with the policemen who are, brings to question what the broader community is made of.

Andropol was thinking these things at that time but did not share. Instead he said, "I don't carry my receipt around."

The policemen asked "How then can we be sure that this is your bicycle? How can we know that it is not a stolen bicycle?" Andropol was confused.

How could a bicycle he rode everyday for many months now suddenly be a stolen bicycle. His confusion lasted less than a minute and he realised this in fact had nothing to do with the bicycle. If he had said "gentlemen, good day" or "keep up the good work" while squeezing a few shillings into their palms, he would be closer to home. Now, he was in the heat of the Benue sun, wondering why he had worn those trousers instead of the shorts and suspenders he initially considered.

People who have encountered the Nigerian police in a similar way to how Andropol was encountering them will tell you that you do not want to show them that you are smart. If you intimidate their intellect, they will show you harm without reason - figuratively and literally. Knowing this, Andropol instead of addressing the fact that they wanted a bribe, asked if someone had lost their bicycle, to which they said 'no'. So he told them that as far as he could tell, the bicycle he was now riding was his, it was the same one he had taken from his home that morning and will be the same one he would ride out the following day. True to type, the

policemen were committed to their game and instead decided they would confiscate Andropol's bicycle. His initial reaction was to ask "why?" and to make all those reasonable arguments that one makes when they believe they are being treated unfairly. It did not matter, they took his bicycle anyway.

Andropol knew he had lost the battle but he had not lost the war. When strange men who claim to be the police, wearing police uniform confiscate an item, what is the guarantee that you would get it back. For something like a bicycle, how would you be able to tell that a bicycle is yours without any unique markers? You would not but Andropol would. Instead of conceding to this disciplinarian, he continued the fight. Andropol took the next available transportation and went to the closest police station to report his *stolen* bicycle.

Being a parent cannot be easy. The people who have raised children or are raising children will tell you that this is no easy task. You can do all you hope is right and fail. Sometimes you do nothing seemingly special and the child turns out great but Andropol was determined that every lesson his children had to learn, they would learn. They would learn because he would live out that example for them. It was this, that motivated him to go to that police station. You cannot teach a child to fight their battles if you run from yours. You cannot teach a child that they can only fight battles for which they are equipped to win except you have taught them how to keep their equipment ready - to always do the right thing.

Andropol was narrating his story to the policemen behind the counter. They handed him one of those fullscap papers to write his statement including when he last saw his bicycle and where. No one except Andropol can tell if the version of the story he told the policemen at the station included or excluded the fact that he had his bicycle confiscated by their colleagues but while he was writing the statement, the policemen he encountered on the road strolled into the police station with his bicycle. Excitedly, he pointed to the bicycle, saying "that is my bicycle!"

Of course, he was asked how he knew it was his bicycle and he pointed out the unique markers, the things about his bicycle that no one else would know except him. The policemen who confiscated his bicycle were perplexed and amused by the whole thing that they humorously released the bicycle. Truly, how could they begin an argument with Andropol in front of their boss? What would they say was the reason they intended to retain possession of a bicycle that was being reported stolen?

That evening, Andropol went home with his bicycle, a battle won, and a mild sense of staisfaction that the Nigerian police could and just might still do the right thing.

Andropol's grandchildren considered him legendary and when they thought of him, it was with fondness for his integrity, his sense of humour and all that goodness. In some ways, it made them think of the Nigerian police as capable of something good. They refused to remember that

Nigeria comes for you any which way. If the police miss you, the failing infrastructure may get you, and if that does not, someone's incompetence might.

When Andropol died, it was because someone somewhere in the walls of a hospital in the same Nigeria failed to properly sterilize surgical equipment that had been used on an HIV/AIDS patient and they had used the same equipment for an operation on his wife.

It was nobody's fault really. It was the early part of the twenty-first century and the AIDS epidemic was a huge conversation in all settings but more than that, it was expensive to treat so it was no surprise that after Andropol caught it from his wife, it claimed his life.

When this happened, Andropol and his wife were in their early seventies, the grandchildren were old enough to make conversation - the perfect time for them to be grandparents and their love was aging like fine wine. His wife who had always been extremely dramatic and hard to please was still willing to make love to him, the husband who always wanted to please so they made love. AIDS was brutal, it came for them hard, Andropol died one night in 2001 in a hospital not too far from that dirt road where the police accosted him and took his bicycle many years before. It was still a dirt road.

Andropol's wife did not succumb to the disease until 2010. Old age is a rough time to be alone. That kind of thing changes you. Not that she had ever been nice to begin with but when Andropol died, the world became darker for her even though the memory of him still brought fondness to his children. Of all the things that his family could say about him, the best is that he always kept his word and it was confirmed when after his death, his youngest granddaughter received a gift he had promised her if she came first in class. He had made this promise to her alone and he did not live to see the results of that school term but after his funeral, one of his children folded some Naira notes into his granddaughter's small palms and said "This is from Baba for coming first in class"

What a legend!