

Everyday is for the Thief

An Excerpt

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I

One goes to the market to participate in the world. As with all things that concern the world, being in the market requires caution. Always, the market – as the essence of the city – is alive with possibility and with danger. Strangers encounter each other in the world’s infinite variety; vigilance is needed. Everyone is there not merely to buy or sell, but because it is a duty. If you sit in your house, if you refuse to go to market, how would you know of the existence of others? How would you know of your own existence?

When I start speaking Yoruba, the man I’ve been haggling with over some carved masks laughs nervously. ‘Ah oga,’ he says, ‘I didn’t know you knew the language, I took you for an oyinbo, or an Ibo man!’ I’m irritated. What subtle flaws of dress or body language have, again, given me away? This kind of thing didn’t happen when I lived here, when I used to pass through this very market on my way to my exam preparation lessons.

The Tejuosho bus stop is a stone’s throw from where I stand. It is a tangle of traffic – mostly danfos and molues – that one might be tempted to describe as one of the densest spots of human activity in the city, if only there weren’t so many others: Ojuelegba, Ikeja, Oshodi, Isolo, Ketu, Ojota.

‘Well now that you know I’m not a visitor, you will agree to give me a good price, abi?’ He shakes his head, searches for excuses. ‘Oga, times are hard, I am not charging you high.’

He still suspects me of carrying more money than I know what to do with. The masks are beautiful, but the rate he’s asking is exorbitant. I leave his shop and move on. Other vendors call me: ‘Oga, look my side now I go give una good price.’ Others simply call out: ‘oyinbo.’ Young men sit in the interiors of the small stalls on rafia mats or on low stools, their limbs unfurled. They are passing time, waiting for the next thing, in bodies which are designed for activity far more vigorous than this. I move through the warren, which is just like a Moroccan souk. It is cool and overstuffed, delighting in its own tacky variety, and it spills seamlessly into the cavernous indoor shop. Piles of bright plastic buckets line the entrance, and beyond them, the cloth merchants – these ones are women, alhajas – who are swaddled in laces and look out with listless gazes. The hall is not well lit. It is as if the outdoor market is reclaiming for itself what had been designed to be a mall. It was my favourite of all the markets, because of this interior coolness which, nevertheless, refused to be genteel. The only movement here is from the stream of customers and the slow surveillance of the standing fans. The concrete underfoot is curiously soft, as if tempered with use. Then I emerge to sunlight, and the sudden hysteria of car horns and engines. Six roads meet here, and there are no traffic lights. Congestion is the rule and there is rarely any exception. Here, I’m told, is where the boy was killed.

He was 11 years old. He snatched a bag from inside the market, six weeks ago. I know the rest, even before I'm told: I've seen it before. At least, I've seen it in its constituent parts, if never all at once. I watched in fragments and was unimpressed, as children are, by whatever seems to them to be normal. I was still a child when I learned to stitch the various vignettes into a single story. The desperate grab, the cries of thief – an ordinary cry anywhere else, but in a Lagos market, it thins the blood out with fear – the cry taken up by those who never saw the original grab, but who nevertheless believe in its motivating power. It was like the day I was at the garri stall with my mother, when I could have been no more than seven. Cries of thief, thief. Then the chase that arises organically and with frightening swiftness out of the placid texture of the market, a furious wave of men that organises itself into a single living thing. And then the capture of the felon – there is nowhere to run – his denials and, when those inevitably fail, his pleas. He doesn't get far into the pleas before he is pushed – all this I've seen, more than once – kicked, beaten with what never looks like less than personal aggravation. The violence is intimate, interspersed with curses. The stolen purse has, by now, made its way back into the hands of madam, and she has cleared out of the scene. If nothing was stolen, nothing is returned, but the event must run its course.

Someone pushes me out of the way. I am daydreaming at the market, making myself a target. This is pure idiocy. I check my pockets, make sure I still have my wallet on me, and push my way into the crowd that has gathered in the intersection. Traffic is stalled. I have come for this, to see with my own eyes where this thing happened.

The boy – eleven, but he has eaten poorly all his life and looks much younger – is crying. He is trying to explain something. Someone told me to do it, he says, that man over there. He points. It's futile. A wiry man steps forward and slaps him hard. It's not a bag, it turns out; it's a baby he's accused of stealing. Everyone knows that you can use a stolen baby to make money, to literally manufacture cash, in alliance with the unseen powers. An old car tyre – from where? – has been quickly sourced. The boy's clothes are torn off, he is knocked down repeatedly. Space has been created out of the congestion. A gaggle of school girls, in green and white school uniforms, has joined the spectators. And a new twist: in the crowd, there stands a man with a digital camcorder. The single eye of his machine collects the event: this fragile body, which, shed of clothes, is now like a dark sapling whipped about in the wind. The tyre is flung around the boy. He is losing consciousness but revives into panic when he is doused with petrol. From the distance, two traffic officers – the ones they call Yellow Fever – watch. The splashing liquid is lighter than water, it is fragrant, it drips off him, beads in his woolly hair. He glistens. The begging stops. He stops begging and he is not yet lit. And then only the last thing, which is soon supplied. The fire catches with a loud gust, and the crowd gasps and inches back. The boy dances furiously but, hemmed down by the tyre, quickly goes prone, and still. The most vivid moment in the fire's life passes and its colour dulls and fizzles out.

The crowd, chattering and sighing, momentarily sated, melts away. The man with the digicam lowers his machine. He, too, disappears. Traffic quickly reconstitutes around the charred pile. The air smells of rubber, meat and exhaust.

In a few days, it will be as though nothing happened. There are those who will copy the tape, it will move around, perhaps provide some grim entertainment for the men in the shops, or in police stations or homes. It will finally be broadcast on the national news, to outrage and in an instant forgetting. I cannot find the will to hunt the tape down, but I hear about it here and there. A wick, nameless, snuffed. And what if he was only 11? A thief is a thief; his master will find another boy, another one without a name. The market has seen everything. It must eat. It does not break its habits.

For my part, I need to find the *danfo* that goes from here to Yaba. It only takes a moment. The conductor's song draws me, to the other side of the pedestrian bridge. The vehicle is newer than most. It has a sticker on its back window: 'God's Time is the Best Time.' And under that another one: 'He's a Fine Guy.' I enter the bus and leave the scene.

II

At times, the absurdity makes one laugh. Other times, the only possible response is a stunned silence. Shortly before I left New York for Lagos there was a plane crash in Nigeria. A Bellview aircraft plying the Lagos–Abuja route went down three minutes after take-off, into forests near the village of Lissa in Ogun State. None of the 117 passengers on board survived. A government inquiry was promised, and there was much public hand wringing and talk about a time of national prayer. While I am in Nigeria two months later, a plane belonging to the Sosoliso airlines goes down on the Abuja–Port Harcourt route. One hundred and six people are killed, and there is a single survivor. The victims include 75 school children returning home for the holidays. Almost all of them are pupils of the Ignatius Loyola Jesuit boarding school. There are harrowing scenes of parents contending over the bodies of children burnt beyond recognition. Many of the parents witness the accident, because it happens on arrival, when the plane overshoots the runway. The fire department has no water, and can only watch as the plane incinerates its passengers. A few days later mothers of the dead children stage a peaceful protest in Lagos. At the march, these mothers, some of whom lost as many as three of their children, are tear-gassed by police, and that is the end of the matter. There is no further protest and there is no redress.

A phrase I hear often in Nigeria is *idea l'a need*. It means: ‘all we need is the general idea or concept.’ People say this in different situations. It is a way of saying: ‘that’s good enough, there’s no need to get bogged down in details.’ I hear it time and again. After the electrician installs an antenna and all we get is unclear reception to one station, CNN, instead of the 30 pristine stations we had been promised, the reaction isn’t that he has done an incomplete job. It is, rather: ‘we’ll make do, after all *idea l'a need*.’ Why bother with sharp reception when you can have snowy reception? And once, driving in town with one of the school drivers, I discover that the latch for the seatbelt is broken. ‘Oh pull it across your chest and sit on the buckle, he says, *idea l'a need*.’ Safety is not the point. The semblance of safety is what we are after.

Around the time the second plane goes down, I am planning a journey to Abuja from Lagos. I think I can take the chance but no one else in the family agrees. I buy the ticket anyway, and fly less than a week after the plane crash. I have great faith in the laws of statistics. But on that flight, I ask myself: when was the last time two commercial flights went down in the same country within six weeks of each other? And if two, why not three. The Nigerian situation is special. There is reasonable cause for fear. Nigeria Airways, the national carrier, went defunct after years of mismanagement. In its stead, foreign airlines ply the lucrative routes between Lagos and Europe. A number of private ventures supply the flights within Nigeria and West Africa. There are several flights each day between Lagos and Abuja. But Africa, which accounts for less than four percent of the world’s air travel, is where more than a quarter of all plane crashes occur. The official inquiries into the Nigeria crashes reveal that many of the private airlines use old planes. Some of these aircraft have been in service for more than 30 years. They are *tokunbo* planes, bought after they have been discarded by European carriers. This is a recipe for disaster in Nigeria’s poor maintenance culture.

Another serious part of this problem is corruption. The aviation authority failed to enforce a recommendation that all planes older than 22 years be removed from service. Had that recommendation been followed, the recent disasters might have been averted. As it stands, there is little doubt that substantial bribes have changed hands to keep the old planes flying. On the day of my outbound flight, the government grounds the Sosoliso and Chanchangi airlines. The ban is lifted shortly afterwards. On the day of my return to Lagos all Boeing 737 planes in the country, regardless of airline, are grounded. This leads to long delays at the airport. There is no explanation from Virgin Nigeria when we finally board our flight, six hours late.

Thinking about Nigeria’s situation brings to mind the cargo cults of Melanesia who cleared runways in the forest and constructed “control towers” out of bamboo and rafia in the belief

that these structures, parodies of modern aviation, would bring material blessings from the sky gods. Much like these Pacific islanders, Nigerians do not always have the philosophical equipment to deal with the material goods they are so eager to consume. We fly planes but we do not manufacture aircraft, much less engage in aeronautical research. We use cellphones but we do not make them. But, more importantly, we do not foster the ways of thinking that lead to the development of telephones or jet engines. Part of that philosophical equipment is an attention to details: a refusal to be satisfied with only the broad outlines of a system, an engagement with the creative and scientific spirit behind what one uses.

Abuja, Nigeria's capital city rises out of the Sahel like a modernist apparition. The avenues are clean and broad and the government buildings are imposing, with that soulless, vaguely fascistic air common to capital cities from Washington DC to Brasilia. The National Mosque is a gigantic sci-fi fantasy, like a newly-landed alien mothership. The National Cathedral, a spiky modernist confection, is nearing completion. These houses of worship, in competition with each other for prestige, are two of the most prominent buildings on the city's skyline. The Thai restaurant to which my friends take me for dinner is as tastefully appointed as any I have seen elsewhere in the world. It is also far more expensive than most Nigerians can afford. The bowling alley we go to afterwards has neon lanes, thumping music and fashionable young people. But are these the signs of progress? Yes, partly. Business is booming, there is free enterprise and with it the hope that people might be lifted out of poverty.

But it is as yet a borrowed progress and it is happening in the absence of the ideological commitments that can make it real. The president of the Federation is unable to get away from constant God-talk and in this he is very much like his constituents. President Obasanjo's hobby-horse is the 'image' of the country. He believes that the greatest damage to Nigeria is being done by people who criticise the country. These unpatriotic people are, in his opinion, the ones spoiling the country. He insists that the only real flaw is in the pointing out of flaws. One should only say good things. After all no society can claim perfection.

Although the buildings and roads of the capital city suggest a rational, orderly society, the reality is the opposite. Supernatural explanations are favoured for the most ordinary events. Uncle Tunde told me a story about his father who had passed on a few years ago, a jovial, chain-smoking fellow whom I met twice as a child. For years, the old man never went to bed without having a half-pint bottle of his favourite tonic: the stash of Guinness Stout that he kept hidden under his bed. By all accounts, he was an interesting character. He died peacefully in his sleep, at the impressive age of a 106. But after his death, there were still family members who muttered that someone must have used black magic on him. '*W'on se baba yen pa ni: someone did the old man in.*' Nothing happens for natural reasons. There's a widespread belief in the agency of magic and malefaction. In addition to this animism is the recent epidemic of evangelical Christianity that has seized the country, especially in the south.

Church has become one of the biggest businesses in Nigeria, with branches and ministries springing up like weeds on every street and corner. These Christians are militant, preaching a potent combination of a fear of hellfire and a love of financial prosperity. Many of the most ardent believers are students in the secondary schools and universities. This is the worldview in which prayer is a sufficient solution for plane crashes. Everyone expects a miracle, and those who do not receive theirs are blamed for having insufficient faith. Partly in response to this, and partly from other internal urgings, Islam has also become extreme, particularly in the north. Some of the northern states, such as Zamfara, are de facto theocratic entities in which sharia is the law of the land. Staying opposite the Zamfara State House in Abuja, I could not sleep for the constant wailing emanating from the official mosque in the compound.

Nigeria's disconnection from reality is neatly exemplified in three claims to fame the country has recently received in the world media: Nigeria was declared the most religious country in the world, Nigerians were found to be the world's happiest people, and in *Transparency International's* 2005 assessment, Nigeria was ranked sixth from the bottom out of the 158 countries assessed in the corruption perceptions index. Religion, corruption, happiness. Why, if so religious, so little concern for the ethical life or for human rights? Why, if so happy, such weariness and stifled suffering?

The late Fela Kuti's prophetic song 'Shuffering and Shmiling' still speaks to the situation. This champion of the people was also the fiercest critic of the people. He spoke fearlessly to our absurdities. 'Shuffering and Shmiling' was about how, in Nigeria, there is tremendous cultural pressure to claim that one is happy, even when one is not. *Especially* when one is not. Unhappy people, like grieving mothers at a protest march, are swept aside.