BOOOOM! THE NOVEL

seun odukoya
An explosion destroyed Sunshine bus stop this afternoon, killing at least four people and leaving several more critically injured. This attack is the latest in the escalating terrorism situation in the country. Eye-witnesses claimed not to have seen anything out of the ordinary, apart from a hijab-clad woman nervously carrying a parcel.

Some vehicles caught in the blast radius were damaged; some passengers were injured by flying debris – but the blast wasn't as big as usual.

Several investigations have begun; with the state police commissioner releasing the following statement:

"We are chasing down several leads at the moment and we want to assure the people of this great state to go about business as usual; that all preventive measures are being taken to secure all bus stops and public spaces. This is a cruel and sadistic act of terror that will not go unpunished. We urge anyone to report any suspicious behavior around their neighborhood. You can see things we cannot; go to places we cannot.

We urge you to be our eyes and ears in those places; and together we can make our state safe."

-Lagos State Police Commissioner

Public health services were first responders on the scene; with ambulances from The Orthopedic Hospital Igbobi and LUTH arriving within minutes of the explosion. People who live in the neighborhood were also on scene to help, containing what otherwise could have been a volatile situation. The state governor himself was on hand, speaking with the victims of the attack and conferring with the police on the scene. The First Lady was also there at the side of her husband and talking to the victims of the attack.

Both of them declined to comment, but The First Lady could be seen constantly wiping her eyes of tears and adjusting her glasses. It is easy to see why she is a darling to the people of the state. As of the time of this report no group has claimed responsibility for the bombing; though the notorious Boko Haram group remains the only suspect.
“Yes na! I was there! I saw the whole thing! Did I not take the photograph?”

“Oga calm down. What did you see?”

“I saw this babe – very correct babe o, wearing a hijab. She sat down and was using her foot to shift one package beside her leg like that. Then she and the guy sitting beside her exchanged signals – and he stood up and went to buy credit. When he returned, she now stood up and walked away –”

“Are you saying the girl wasn't there when the bomb exploded?”

“What sort of nonsense question is this one you're asking me? Did I not just say the girl stood up and walked away?”

“But another eye witness said the girl only stood up because she wanted to make it into the bus that just stopped –”

“Look, did I take the picture or not?”

“You did but –”

“Then don't argue with me! I know what I saw, and I am telling you it is that girl that dropped the bomb that killed everybody else. And she escaped! Instead of you to tell the police what I just told you, you're here harassing me as if I did it!”

“I apologize. I'm just trying to get the facts –”

“All of a sudden you want to get the facts. You can't even pronounce the word properly when you ever hardly use it. News dey report facts? Do people want to hear facts?! They want to hear juicy gist and rumors. Why do you think a blogger can buy Banana Island house?”
“Em sir, that is not our concern. We hope you've shared this information with the police?”

“Athink something is strong with you. I should share with the police so that what will happen? Your harassment never reach, abi? I still need to go talk to those guys who will arrest me because I happen to know what happened? E be like say na from my papa village dem send you come, abi? Where are you from sef?”

“Sir, I do not see the relevance of that – “

“Don't come and be blowing grammar here! We understand English too – or is it because I'm mixing my own with pidgin?! That's how I roll, you feel me? I'm not talking to any police! At least, I am not the only eye witness here.”

“I'm sorry you feel that way sir – “

“Sorry for yourself! I'm not interested. Which channel are you from sef?”

“But sir, it's almost as though you knew this bomb blast was going to happen – “

“Wait, slow down right there. What are you suggesting?”

“Nothing; I just think it's odd that you would take a picture of a bus stop, and minutes later the bus stop would explode. I mean – “

“Look, I am a photographer. That's what I do, so when I see an interesting picture I take it. Do I look like a terrorist to you?”

“I apologize sir but terrorists don't look any particular kind of way – “

“Leave sorry for low credit. Tell me fest, una go show dis interview dis night?”
I should not be here.

The cane trembles and wobbles; reminiscent of a baby's first steps, before hitting and standing on a spot. And then it creaks and groans but stands, able to take the weight of its wielder.

The old man's face is lined and seamed – very much like the map it is. It is a face at once given to laughter and sorrow, pleasure and pain, adventure and solitude. It is a face that once stood in defiance of all the odds, raised in challenge to the sun, now bowed by the one thing that demands respect of all but gives it to none;

Time.

The hand holding the cane is lined and cracked in places, worn and gnarled in others. But the strength in it is pretty obvious; the knobby knuckles stand out like sentry outposts guarding a barracks. The skin is shiny brown, spotting wrinkles along the wrist and above it – before disappearing into the hollow of a buba sleeve.

A threadbare sleeve.

The buba is worn and rumpled, thickening the air of unkemptness that lingers around the man. His feet are dusty; his sandals tired and cracked, no longer interested in where they are or what they are doing.

The last shred of dignity they posses is what holds them together.
The air between the wearer and the worn is heavy with dissonance. There is a discordant tune between the dying threads of the clothes and the almost-regal bearing of the man who wears them. His head is held high; his beard almost perfectly-groomed, his mouth opens to display a set of pearly-white teeth. His nails are neatly cut and trimmed; hands clean and well-kept. In spite of the dry whiteness that throws his skin in sharp relief, it is clear he is a healthy old man.

He stops a small distance from the bench and scrutinizes the people sitting there – searching for space to sit. Sharp eyesight relays information to his brain on the contrary; he sighs and shuffles a few steps forward and into the shade of the overhang.

*I shouldn't be here* repeats itself in a loop in the man's mind, and he fixates on that as he leans his ornately-crafted wooden crane against the shed and reaches into his chest pocket. Slowly but steadily, he pulls out a folded and creased piece of paper.

A watery sheen passes over the sad brown eyes; tears make their way down well-travelled tracks and disperse, commiserating silently with the old man in his familiar grief. They drip patiently; *drip, drip, drip* – onto the paper as he cautiously unfolds it to avoid ripping it along well-worn grooves cut into it by constant unfolding and folding.

A woman's face is unveiled by the wrinkly hands, a woman whose earthy smile could easily rival Joke Silva's. It is a smile that summons more of its kind; even the old man's grief suspends itself in recognition. The smile that lights up his face is a brief one, a glimpse of sunshine through heavy stormy clouds.

It is a smile, nonetheless.
Weary fingers trace the woman's face, following the curve of the lips as though trying to touch something misplaced sometime ago; something elusive. The fingers stop and jump a few inches above the face to trace words, words that announce the worst kind of news.

He is holding his wife's obituary.

The picture used is his favorite of her; she had taken it at the wedding of their son four years before her death, seven years ago. It is his favorite of all of her pictures and he had insisted that it be used. His children hadn't argued.

His children.

A gust of wind blows from somewhere in front of him – he averts his face, but not before some of it gets into his throat and sets him off on a coughing spree. He coughs loud and rough; unfiltered hacking that shakes his entire frame.

When the cough subsides, he removes his hand from his mouth and looks at it.

It is covered in blood.

*I really shouldn't be here*; he thinks again, leaning on his cane and breathing hard. *I would much appreciate dying here now, God. You know nobody will care.*

*Least of all my children.*
He thinks about his children; all six of them.

He dare not lie; in his heart of hearts he knows it's his fault they do not talk to him or worry about him any more – apart from sending his monthly maintenance money to the houseboy who cooks and cleans and isn't much company.
He knows they blame him for the death of their mother even though the medical report stated she died of kidney stones. He knows they hold and will always hold years of abuse, mistreatment and neglect against him.

Reality is, even he holds it against himself.

He looks at her picture again and thinks about when she was alive, how everything was rosy in his world. He thinks about how his children used to complain about the way their mother doted on him; waited on him hand and foot – in short spoiling him irreconcilably. And he remembers how she would smile unperturbed and say; *If I don't spoil him, who should I be spoiling?*

He remembers that – and chokes back a sob. Not because he misses the pampering but because it stabs him in the heart; the realization that he wasn't the best husband to the best kind of wife any man could wish for.

In fact; he hadn't been any kind of husband.

He cheated on her regularly and didn't bother to cover his tracks. In fact he almost showed off his infidelity; and when questioned by his friends he would just shrug and reply; *at least I'm not doing it at the house.*

As though that wasn't bad enough, he would beat her.

He wipes his eyes and closes them in fatigue. But the memories won't stop coming.
He remembers a particularly ugly episode during which he'd had argument with her over some trivial issue. He'd become angry and snapped because she'd defied him, and he slapped her across the face. While she lay on the floor of the living room, holding her mouth in shock, he had opened his toolbox and pulled out a hammer. She'd scrambled to her feet and run to her room, locking the door behind her.

That hadn't stopped him.

He was smashing the lock when his first son came home. Without asking what happened the boy had grabbed him, pushed him against the wall and snatched the hammer away from him. He himself had known what fear was; staring at the son of his loins and wondering if he was going to follow through the murderous intent plain in his eyes. After a few seconds of the silent struggle, the boy had hurled the hammer away and pushed him to his room and locked him in, taking away the key. Then he returned to his mother's door and knocked softly.

*Mum? It's me, mum. Open the door.*

The tears run down the lined face; the hand twitches and falls to his side still holding the picture. The memories; as unforgiving as stormy rain, pound on his shoulders.

“I'm so sorry, so sorry,” old lips mumble inaudibly.

12:15 pm
Sure; I know about boobs. I spent the earlier part of today staring at plenty of them – various shapes, sizes, colors –

Take this set, for example...

He's staring at the girl next to him; sitting while he is standing, at the bus stop stand. He isn't being a gentleman; it's not as if he stood for her to sit. She got there before him – and giving his present position, he wouldn't change seats with her for all the gala in Shoprite.

There is a lot of gala in Shoprite. Guy; this sun dey vex!

He looks around, seeing everything but noticing nothing in particular. The sun is near blinding in its ferocity, covering almost everything with a sheet of white. Squinting, he looks to his left – in the direction the buses are to come from.

There's nothing in sight.

Sighing, he adjusts his headphones and cradles his backpack closely. He grabs his crotch and thinks about that morning, forgetting boobs for the moment.

He has been despairing, after the first and second lists of his department came out and his name wasn't on either. Frankly, he was tired.

Tired of waking to the same complaints; the same sounds of frustration from his father, his mother's understanding and encouraging coos; tired of listening to his sisters talk about the freedom of waking up whenever they liked, going to sleep whenever they liked with whoever they liked –
Of course; they don't discuss any of the last in his presence but he hears them talk about it when everyone else is supposed to be asleep, giggling like the drunken irresponsible teenagers they are. It infuriates him – especially since they are not exceptionally brilliant or anything. They are just lucky.

Well, all that is about to change.

When Uduak's call came in, boobs were the last thing on his mind. He was thinking about how to ask his dad for money for another JAMB form and wondering how much more money he has to invest in yahoo runs before admitting he just isn't cut out for that life.

Then Uduak's call came in.

Uduak was not given to long speeches; he'd just said to get his 'skinny and annoying' behind to the campus before ten am. He had barely managed to have his bath – as it was he didn't brush his teeth; he just doused himself with water and jumped out of the house.

His legs still feel as though they ran all the way to UNILAG.

“Yaba! Yaba Jibowu Railway!!!!”

He steps aside; watching as few people scramble for the bus. There's an unsettling feeling in his belly as he realizes the bulk of passengers at the bus stop are still seated which probably means they are headed in the same direction he is. His grip tightens on the bag he's backing; he hitches his trousers higher and sighs.

Seems the struggle never ends.

_I been think say fuel scarcity don end ni o. Which kain yawa be dis na?_

Of course, there are no answers to his question. With a sidelong glance, he confirms the girl with the boobs is still sitting.

_She is. Good._
Now certain she is going in the same direction he is, he is determined to get her a seat on a bus if it's the last thing he does. He smirks as he watches her swing her hand, trying to kill a mosquito buzzing around her head.

*Sha don't knock off your Brazilian wig o, baby.*

He allows himself drift again; remembering the look on his friend's face when they saw each other. Uduak had grabbed and hugged him fiercely, squeezing him as though he was the last bit at the bottom of the toothpaste tube. After ninety seconds that seemed to go on forever, he was let go off and he was trying to suck some air into his bruised lungs when *SLAP!* Uduak hit him on the back. Spluttering and coughing, he had staggered away, trying to rub his smarting back as Uduak grabbed his arm, laughing. Together they walked towards what he later realized is the department's notice board.

When they got there, Uduak had stood back and pointed. He followed the finger – and there his name was; on the list for the department, third from the top. It didn't matter if the heading at the top of the list said *provisional admission*; it made no difference to him. He had thrown away his backpack and screamed – ignoring Uduak who was staring at him like he was pregnant or something, all the while telling him to keep it down.

He chuckles now.

What finally quietened him was the appearance of a girl who looked a lot like Victoria Kimani; right down to the protuberances on her chest – stuff that looked like two of the watermelons in Iya Johnson's shop across the street from his parents' house. She'd hugged his friend; and while still leaning against Uduak asked who he was. He averted his eyes from her chest long enough to take the hand she extended towards him; hand that looked like a talon – and shook it briefly. He let it go and continued observing that particular part of her anatomy surreptitiously, only stopping when she turned and started walking away.

He realized she'd said 'goodbye' when Uduak smacked his head.
You no suppose dey look woman like dat; his friend had told him unsmilingly. Dem too plenty – you go look tire.

It didn't take more than a few minutes to convince him his friend was right.

From buka to stadium to lecture theatre to admin block and a place called New Hall – there was an endless sea of girls. They came in all sorts of forms and shapes and sizes; some looking like they were in church, some looking like they were headed to the club. Uduak noticed his roving eyes and laughed.

No worry, your bodi go soon come down.

Uduak most likely knew what he was talking about; being a three-hundred level student, but that didn't slow him down a bit. He kept checking out all the cleavages on display; biting his knuckle, jumping in his excitement and setting Uduak off in laughing fits at intervals. At the admin block, he had been pulled back into reality - literally. Uduak, a frown on his face had hauled on his backpack. He was going to give a brilliant retort – but reconsidered when he saw the look on his friend's face. Gingerly he accepted the form held towards him.

Soberly, he'd refused to look up till he was outside the school gates. Uduak had spoken then;

I bin wan carry you go Creamium, but as you dey look like say na only men dem dey your village I no go wan make you embarrass me more. Uduak patted his back. No worry. You don enter na.

Carrying the backpack gently, he thinks about the contents and wonders what his parents would think. Finally; after three years their son is about to be a university undergraduate. Maybe tonight; mama will make nkowbi.

His friend Uduak comes to mind again; how he is already being introduced to people to help with his admission; make it faster and easier. Of course, some of it comes with some kind of settlement – but at least, he's in. He's grateful.
And of course; it is also something of note that Uduak is quite popular with the campus girls. Yes; Uduak’s usefulness is nowhere near over.

Adjusting his earphone volume, he once again grabs his crotch and resumes staring down the girl's blouse. She must have moved at some point; because he can now see her bra – a lacy something of a bright red color.

_Damn._

12:15 pm
“Omo, I no dey roger anybody today o. Christmas don pass!”

A smattering of laughter greets the remark and Langbe the conductor bops his head. He likes how the wind caresses his recently-bald head; he'd had it shaved because Mercy said that's what she likes.

He likes Mercy; so that was that about the hair.

No be say I kuku like Mercy like dat o; he thinks. E jus be say I dey gbadun her kaka – de tin be like Sergeant Sanni belle – e tick, e round and de gehl sabi roll de tin sef!

He brings himself back to the present. There's no danger of him falling from the bus because he is sitting and not hanging as usual – which is boring if you ask him – but still, he knows he needs to call out bus stops and 'shadow' passengers.

“Onipan!”

Shouts of “Owa O!” “E dey!” jump in response and he nods to let them know they are heard. Segun, his 'pilot' also knows the score and gives Langbe the signal that he's ready to get into the service lane.

“Wo egbe e!” Segun shouts.

“Wole kanle!” Langbe responds.

The Faragon does a sudden right hand jerk straight from the expressway's fast lane and into the service lane, missing a BRT bus' fender by inches. A few of the passengers scream; some of them begin to berate Langbe and his oga for not watching carefully, yet another
set sit quietly, used to the madness that is Lagos drivers.

“E ma binu, make una no vex,” Langbe answers. “Una suppose know say na as e dey hot dem dey serve buns. Omo, no dulling for Lagos jo!”

The tension dissipates as most of the passengers laugh.

They have a liking for Langbe because he is not the typical conductor. He is neat; that is the first thing passengers and policemen notice about him. His clothes; though sometimes worn and even torn are hardly ever dirty.

The second thing they notice is he always speaks politely.

Those two qualities in the same person in Langbe's line of work is a rarity; much like a traffic-free day in Lagos. They stand him out and make him a delight to work with. He also is quite witty; cracking his passengers up with his quips and quirks.

“Madam, no vex o but if I gree for your Jesus shey I go get better job?” he once asked a woman preaching on his bus. The woman was flustered; the question was quite unexpected – but she recovers, “Yes na. He will give you anything you want, anything you ask for.”

“Na im e no give you car, dey make you disturbing people up an dan.” The passengers could not help it; their thunderous laughter embarrassed the woman and made her sit.

“No be say I wan yab you ma,” Langbe said, after the noise has died down. “E jus' be say una dey too lie ontop Jesus' head. De man na magician? Instead make una dey tell people to work hard, una go dey tell dem say make dem pay tithe so una go dey rich. God dey look una for DSTV!”

The bus' windows nearly exploded.
“Onipan!” Langbe calls out, and the passengers stand up. “Oga mi, duroooooo!” he tells Segun who pushes his brake pedal down. The bus stops with a loud screech and a jerk.

“Ojuelegba o! Ojuelegba under bridge! Enter wit ya hundred naira change o! Five hundred, one thousand; no enter o!! I don tell you o; mo ti so fun e!”

A couple people; on hearing the warning concerning change turned away from the mouth of the vehicle. Some others pushed by them and scrambled in; Langbe lost interest in the ones who missed the bus.

“Cable lo,” he tells Segun who acknowledges the signal with a bop of his head and looks to the side mirror, to see if the road is clear so he can get in. In that same moment, Langbe remembers something and ducks his head into the vehicle.

“One thousand naira change?” He looks around; searching for the large woman he owes the change to. His heart sinks as he realizes she probably dropped off at the bus stop before.

Langbe shakes his head, feeling guilty. There's nothing he resents more than holding onto a passenger’s change simply because he understands how hard it is out there. He doesn't want for much; does not need much – other than his daily supply of Orijin, weed, maybe Mercy's behind on occasion. He doesn't have a child to cater for; doesn't have a wife to feed – and he likes it that way. Therefore, he will not steal from a passenger on his bus.

Another difference between him and a lot of his peers.

“Yo owo e jade o!” he yells as he starts to collect the passengers' money. “Make I see your money.”

Promptly, people start to pay their fare. He avoids looking too closely at a passenger's face; instead he chooses to focus on the money being handed him. It's his way of being as harsh as necessary.

A frail, shaky, dirt-lined hand gives him two crumpled, fifty naira notes
and his eyes seek out the owner. It's a woman, a woman he is sure cannot be a year older than thirty yet looks twice as old; skinny baby sucking on a disgustingly-flat left breast. He screws up his face and pushes the money back.

“Ose...ose...” Impatiently he waves her thanks away and stabs his hand towards the fine boy with shades on in the corner. His sixth-sense preps him for trouble; something about the boy doesn't ring right.

“Yes?” he says to the boy who continues staring out of the window. Without looking in Langbe's direction he hands out a one thousand naira note.

Langbe smiles. He is always right about these types.

Wordlessly, he collects the money. “Sorry,” he says to the passengers he has been leaning over and pulls his head out of the bus. He counts his money – and then suddenly ducks back into the bus.

“Take,” he says to the breast-feeding woman, handing her a five hundred naira note. She looks from the note to Langbe, fear, unbelief and hope making an ugly blend of emotion on her face. Grunting, he pushes the money into the clutching hands of the baby whose mouth is still fastened onto the mother's limp nipple – and withdraws his head.

I no even wan tink wetin dat baby dey suck. Shey na bobbi be dat abi na slippers?

He closes his eyes, enjoying the wind blowing around his head. Omo, na me and Mercy dis night o, I swear! I no even sure weda I go use condom...

“Conductor!”

He ducks back into the bus. “Yes, passenger?” he retorts.

“Sunshine dey o and I go collect one thousand naira change.”
Langbe smiles. It is the guy in shades.

“Na so una dey do. You go dress like better pessin but na smoke dey ya head. You no hear me when I talk say hold ya change? And den, who call Sunshine for you?”

“Wetin concern me concern all those things wey you dey talk? Abeg give me my change jo!”

Langbe is quiet – and then he suddenly tells Segun; “Duro bai.”

Segun, not quiet understanding the command nevertheless obeys it. He stops the bus a few meters away from the bus stop. Langbe comes down and slides the bus door completely open. “Oga, come down.”

“Give me my change first.”

Langbe looks at the other passengers, a crazy light dancing in his eyes. “Una dey see dis guy now? Una dey see am? I no understand how pessin go dey waka up an dan dey find problem – “

12:15 pm
“She’s better, my love. She’s still running a temperature but she has started jumping around now.” The woman sighs into the phone. “Maybe she's just tired of school.”

Smiling, she runs her fingers through the hair of the little girl lying in her lap. The child smiles and mumbles, and even though the heat radiating from her skin through the older woman's skirt is intense, her smile is brave and pretty.

“Ate a bit of her food and drank all the juice. She said if she ate anymore she would throw up so I let her be.” Her eyes seek out the food flask and bag resting beside her feet as she listens and nods. “The hospital – you told Doctor Lanre we're coming? Thank you baby.”

She listens some more; leaving her daughter's hair for a moment to fiddle with hers. “Baby, how many times are you going to apologize for the car? I was the one driving when the shaft gave up, and I know you had to get to work early today. And I didn't want you to send Wale for me. I can find my way around.”

Pause.

And then; “I know, okay? I know. And this sun is not exactly helping matters. I should have called a cab but I don't remember the last time I had to do that. I don't have any of the numbers anymore.”

She doesn't allow the person speak for long before she interrupts again. “No; I don't want you to send Wale for me. We will be fine! I had just wrecked my second car when we met, remember? And I was getting around fine! Look baby, you're sweet and I love you but, as was said in one novel I read; 'I'm your baby not a baby'.”
The person on the other end of the phone must have said something funny because her exasperated look turns into a wide grin, and then laughter. She laughs for a while; not too loudly as she is aware of the people pressing into her on either side, but it is a genuinely happy laugh.

“I love you, you know. I love you die. My mumsie's juju is too good! See how you have become my maga!”

Her smile doesn't dim or waver as she listens. “You sure? That's how you men will be saying o, until your company gives you one PA whose skirt will be fighting her pa – “ She stops and listens – and then breaks into helpless laughter.

“Kai! You will not kill me today, you hear?” Her daughter's waving hand catches her eye, and she looks down to see the little girl pointing at the phone in her hand. “Your daughter wants to speak with you,” she says.

The little girl eagerly grabs the phone. “Hi dad,” she says, her voice musical though subdued. She stands and wriggles until she is seated in her mother's lap, resting her head against the woman's ample chest.

“I feel better. My mouth just tastes funny and I'm tired.”

Silence – and then; “Aunty didn't give me any homework. She said if I feel better I should read some passages from our English book, but that I shouldn't worry.”

She misses the d in 'shouldn't' so it comes out as 'shunt'. “She said I should rest.”

Silence. “Daddy, did you see mummy this morning before you left the house?”

Silence. “Isn't she very pretty?”

The little girl chuckles, fiddling with her hair in a gesture very much similar to her mother's. “All the boys in class were looking at her with
their mouths open. I almost didn't recognize her myself!"

Silence. “Tehehehehe daddy you're so funny! Okay, I'll give mommy the phone. I love you daddy,” she says before stretching the phone over her head and past her mother's face.

“Hello,” the older woman says – and smiles. “Between the both of you; you have me pretty much wrapped around your naughty little fingers. I love you baby.”

She kisses at the phone and closes her eyes – luxuriating; for a small moment, in the intense feeling that comes from the knowing of love and being loved. And then, she leans over and kisses her daughter's warm forehead before opening her eyes. “Thank you, my baby. Thank you for saying I'm beautiful.”

The little girl looks up. “You're welcome but you are beautiful, mommy. Didn't daddy say so?”

Mother and daughter hug one another.

“Mummy, you love daddy right?” The little one asks immediately she's out of her mother's arms.

“Yes dear, I do.”

“And he loves you too, right?”

“Yes, he does. Very much.”

“So why do you fight sometimes? Do you get tired of the love at those times or it goes away, like grandma?”

The older woman is surprised. Grandma; the woman her daughter is referring to; her own mother is dead.

She looks around embarrassed, wondering if anyone else heard her daughter, but people are just going about their business.
“Well, doesn't daddy smack you sometimes?”

The little girl thinks for a moment. “Sure he does, whenever I am being naughty.”

“Does he stop loving you?”

The little girl thinks again, little fingers losing themselves in her hair. “I don’t think so. He says that he disciplines me because he loves me and he wants me to be good.” She falls silent, thinking – and then perks up. “Is that why you fight? Because you want each other to be good?”

The older woman laughs. “Not really, my darling. People fight because they don't agree sometimes, and sometimes they hurt each other without meaning to. Your father and I fight sometimes because we don't understand each other completely yet, so we still have to adjust. But because I love him and he loves me, we stay together and make it work; learn so that we fight less.” Mother bounces daughter slightly on her thigh. “Do you understand?”

The daughter nods but it's clear her mind has moved on to something else. “Do that again mommy,” she says.

The mother looks disconcerted for a moment – and then moves the leg her daughter is sitting across up and down rapidly. The little one shrieks in excitement and a little fear, grabbing for her mother's neck and hanging on for dear life.

Mother laughs and hugs her daughter.

“Are we going to the hospital, mommy? Will I have to take injections?”

The older woman looks at her daughter, registering the fear on her face. “I'm not sure, my darling. The doctor's job is to make sure you get well as soon as possible.” She strokes the warm forehead gently. “Don't you want to get better?”

“But mummy, it's not my fault that I'm sick. Why do I have to take the injections?”
Mother hugs daughter. “Oh baby, I would take them for you if I could. And you know daddy would too, don't you?” The girl looks in her mother's honest eyes and nods. “The injections won't work if they're not taken by you. Your body is fighting the sickness, baby and it needs all the help it can get.”

The little girl kisses her mother. “Thank you mum.” She stops and looks around. “Can I have yoghurt?”

Together their eyes seek out the yoghurt salesman standing on the fringe of the bus stop. “Yoghurt!” The woman calls, raising her voice slightly. The man is attending to someone else and doesn't hear her.

“Mommy, shouldn't I go to him? He is older than me, is he not?”

The mother looks at her daughter in wonder. “Sometimes, my darling, I feel like I taught you too well.” She reaches into her purse, fiddles for a bit and hands out a five hundred naira note. “Okay, go buy your yoghurt and get one for me,” she says to the smiling girl.

“Okay mummy!” the little girl exalts. “Thank you!”

She clutches the money in her little hand and tenses. Her mother, knowing what is going on in her little mind stops her. “He is just over there, baby. Don't run.”

She acquiesces, little head bobbing as she hops towards the Yoghurt salesman. Her mother smiles, turning away just to tuck her purse behind her and then turning back to continue to watch her little girl.

She watches as her daughter speaks to the man; sees the man open his box and take out two of the same yoghurt; watches the man pack them in a black nylon bag, sees as he hands the bag to the girl, sees the girl make to hand the money over –

And sees the money blow out of the girl's hand.
“Ovie!” The mother shrieks, fear closing her throat with a cold hand and pushing her to her feet as she watches her daughter chase after five hundred naira –

12:15 pm
“Yeepa! Yeepa! Yeeeeeeeee – “

“Sorry ma. Please, calm down ma. They say you saw what happened ma.”

“Yes of course. I saw everything! Is that not my food canteen over there?”

“They told us that too. Madam, can you please calm down and tell us exactly what you saw?”

“See, Indo jus' finished eating in my shop. He left to go collect some money from a bus that just arrived; me I was finishing the egusi I was making. Suddenly I just heard one loud BOOOOOM!”

“BOOOOOM?! Are you sure ma?”

“Mtchewww, see what you're asking me. Are you deaf?”

“Okay okay – sorry. What happened after that?”

“As I heard the sound, everything shook. I fell down, and only God saved me from the egusi because it fell too. Just small remained for it to pour on me.”

“We thank God.”

“She was screaming – I think she was screaming because her mouth was wide open and she was pointing to something outside but I couldn't hear – “

“Who was screaming?”

“See what you're asking. Are you deaf? See, is he deaf?”
“But you didn't say who was screaming. You didn't even say you were not the only one in your shop...”

“I said there was one fine girl eating; the fine girl Indo said I shouldn't collect money from! See o, dis ones don deaf o!”

“Okay ma. Carry on ma.”

“So she was screaming and pointing but I couldn't hear anything she was saying. Someone was ringing a bell inside my ears. I put my fingers inside them to see if I could clear the noise out – but no show. So I held her and signaled her to relax, until I could hear what she was saying –”

“What was she saying?”

“She was shouting that Indo was dead; that someone had blown him up. It was just somehow to me; because she just met Indo that afternoon. In fact, they did not talk to each other but I noticed Indo was liking her because he came to meet me where I was doing my soup and told me not to collect money from her.”

“And they just met?”

“Shebi I said you're deaf? Why are you making me repeat myself?”

“Sorry. So, who did you see? Who do you know carried the bomb?”

“Carried which bomb? Did I tell you I saw anything? Did you not hear me say I was cooking egusi in my kitchen?”

“But ma, you said you saw everything because that is your shop over –”

“I only said that because you look hungry; you look like you haven't eaten in two days. Shey you will come and eat eba? I just finished making egusi.”

“The same egusi that poured away? Thank you very much!”
She puts the phone aside impatiently. The wait is killing her.

The wait is murder and she wonders why her phone hasn't rang; why it isn't ringing yet.

*Maybe they have forgotten about me.*

She chuckles silently; derisively. *They* are more likely to forget the great prophet first. Wringing her hands, she wishes she could hug herself. But they say it makes her look like she is on the defensive. And she hates to look weak.

An insane urge to scratch her shoulder comes on her, unbidden. She ignores it; thinking instead of the issue at hand. She doesn't have any choice. She has to do what they want.

She allows that sink in.

It's a few minutes after twelve; she knows because it is what her phone clock said when she looked just before now. *I should have been here earlier;* she thinks. *I should have left the house earlier and gotten this whole thing over with.*

Her eyes creep around surreptitiously, taking in the different people at the bus stop and what they are doing. *Let me play the identity game; guess who is who, that will probably distract me from my problems.*

Looking to her right she notices the man next to her; a man wearing a suit and holding tightly to a backpack. His head is resting against the
back of the bench and a faint smile is hovering around his mouth.

His eyes are closed. *Maybe he's a student moving to campus; or maybe he's travelling. None of those explain the suit, however.*

Thinking about the suit takes her mind back to her immediate problems; or specifically, one of her immediate problems. Her mother's face flashes before her eyes; an angry face with red-flecked eyes that gleam as though the pits of hell are alive inside them.

*When are you going to get married? Don't you realize you're getting old?*

And even though the conversation is happening in her memory she winces now, still hurt by the words her own mother said to her, hurt by the knowledge that her mother would fight anyhow – including dirty – to win. *Are you jealous of your sister? Is that why you're not coming? After all, she is getting married before you and she is younger than you.*

It used to hurt that none of them; not even the sister in question knows just how much she loves her. It bothers her that in spite of how involved she was in the preparations they would rather believe any mistake she made or misstep she took was a deliberate attempt to sabotage her own kid sister's wedding.

*It hurt. But anyway, it got her here.*

The pain in her eyes can be seen only by looking closely; but the looker would have to get past her smile first. It is a blinding flash of white teeth; a beautiful and guileless reminder of a fond memory.

She thinks about her kid sister and how much trouble she was growing up. A particular memory comes to mind, a birthday party they had gone to; a cousin's or so. Her mother's stern warning not to eat echoed in the back of her head, but her seven-year old sister had no such hindrances. She had eaten so much that when their mother came to pick them she threw up in the car and was sick.
Of course, she is the elder and so had been the one punished despite having not eaten anything. Later, in the corner of her parents room where she was kneeling with her eyes closed, tears sneaking from underneath her lids she wondered; why would you let children go to a party and tell them not to eat? What is the purpose of a party for children?

She remembers her sister coming in to hug her and give her some coke. She smiles now; remembering how the kid had made sad faces while saying sowwy now over and over. Eventually, when it seemed as though the only sound in the world was sowwy now; she’d sipped some coke. Her sister then wiped her eyes with chubby and dirty little fingers...

She is shocked to find her eyes are slightly moist. She looks around, hoping no one sees as she wipes them – and then she notices that the man beside her has disappeared. Relaxing, she spreads herself a bit more on the seat, smiling a little at the little girl to her right playing with her mother's hair.

The child smiles back; waves, and she feels as though someone – something – is tightening her chest from the inside. She clutches her chest with trembling hands, breathing harshly through her mouth and bends over, moaning softly because of the pain. Sadness rolls over her in waves; she cannot help wondering if she would ever have a child of her own. She straightens as the pressure is relieved and fights tears as she watches mother and daughter play with each other; so sweet a picture it is heartbreaking.

She looks at her hands; at their frustrated wrestle with each other – long slim-fingered hands.

Beautiful hands.

“Yaba! Yaba Jibowu Railway!!!!”
There’s very limited movement towards the bus; most of the people are going the same way she is. Her spirits sink and she wonders why she didn't just take a cab. I should have just taken a cab.
She pushes her bag, resting on the floor by her feet as it is. *I hope I have enough to do what needs to be done*; she thinks, and then looks up as trousers appear in her peripheral vision. It’s the man in the suit she thought had left.

“Sorry.” He says to her as she adjusts and she looks up to smile at him. She smiles – and then freezes; struck by the cleanness of his features. *Allah be merciful*; she thinks, *this is a handsome man.*

He takes no notice of her however; he just sits and continues typing on the phone, looking from the card in his hand to the phone screen. *Probably trying to call his madam or something*; she thinks, and takes her mind off him.

Off him; not off men.

She chuckles self-indulgently, thinking about her last boyfriend and why they’d parted. *You’re an old woman*; he’d said to her, pouting like her sister used to in her teenage years. *What man is going to marry a woman he has not had sex with?*

*Definitely not you sha;* she remembers retorting, and he had slammed the door on his way out of her house. *Good riddance;* she thought and still thinks.

Not that she's a virgin; no. It just didn't come of her to sleep with him. She didn't want to and so she hadn't. She couldn't say the same of Bashir; sweet Bashir who had run away to the States, taking her heart with him in his hand luggage.

*All the things we got up to, it's a wonder I didn't get pregnant.*

A small sliver of fear dances up her spine; she clenches her fists as something occurs to her. *Maybe it's that I cannot get pregnant. I mean, would you think...*

She pushes the thought away. *No. It cannot be.*

Another thought rises in her consciousness; she is yet to hear her phone ring. She reaches in her purse – at the same time the woman
who was playing with her child stands up and screams; “Ovie!”

12:15 pm
Nine hundred and twenty thousand naira.

He wipes his face of sweat. It is quite hot; he is being boiled inside his jacket. The smile on his face; however shows no indication of physical discomfort.

It makes a lie of his feelings. He rests his head against the wooden back of seat and closes his eyes, steadily patting the travel bag resting on the bench beside him. Physically he is still at the bus stop, but his mind is far gone. In fact, he is somewhere in Bayelsa, thinking about a thick, beautiful woman and her bulging belly. Her smile is something to see; something that evokes a response from him despite the fact that he is not exactly where the smile is.

She fills his thoughts constantly; every day since the first time he'd read a comment she wrote on a mutual friend's status update on Facebook. It was something concerning feminism and his initial reaction was one of resentment. In an act he realized later had been in poor taste, he attacked her right there.

Contrary to what he was expecting, she addressed him politely and clearly stated her arguments while making his seem like a jumbled PowerPoint presentation. She made him eat humble pie and he couldn't avoid apologizing.

Three months later, on their first date, he was still apologizing.

That first date stands out clearly in his mind's eye.
She was sitting at a table, holding a slim phone with earphones plugged in and staring at the TV screen on her right. It was a Timberlake song playing; *Mirrors*; he recalls.

Her black blouse complimented the darkly rich luster of her skin. Her arms seemed to flow from her shoulders, seamlessly blending into elbows and wrists. A simple ring adorned a small finger on her left hand and a small wave of dizziness rushed over him; she was engaged.

He passed a hand over his face to steady himself, and then loosened his collar. That was when she looked up and saw him.

Her smile caught him in its path and trapped him; pretty much like a naked woman in the headlights of a truck. He shook his head again and started to walk towards her, weaving a little on his feet and wondering what the matter was. But there was something reassuring about the smile, something that rubbed his back and shoulders, made him stand straighter and encouraged him to give a smile of his own.

*I'm sorry I'm late...* he started to say – but stopped as she rose and put her arms around him. He is quite taller than she is, so she had to stretch to hold him appropriately. Her smell was something soft – almost not there but not quite. She was alive and warm, all creamy softness and iron strength at once. He let his arms drop to his sides and she eased away but kept her arms around him.

*You're not late; I came early.*

Eventually she stepped away and sat daintily; gathering her leopard-print skirt around her legs. He stepped up and sat facing her, feeling somewhat out of place and wondering why. He looked at her; the earphones were out of her ears and she was watching him, clearly waiting for him to say something.

He swallowed and then; *I'm sorry about what happened the other –*

*Oh God;* she interrupted him. *If you apologize one more time I won't kiss you again.*
His response was just as shocked as he was. *Ehn?!*

That was it; the first of many.

“Yaba! Yaba Jibowu Railway!!!!”

The screaming conductor interrupts his thoughts and he looks up briefly to register where the bus is heading to.

Yaba.

He has no business there. Not today.

He notices the covered woman beside him; notices how tightly she is holding on to her bag – and then dismisses her from his mind. *Her* face comes to mind again and he thinks of the months, the long months since they began their walk together. He thinks about that time and remembers something he read somewhere some time ago;

*Love is an edge diving life in two parts; before and after.*

*Before and after*; there is no better way to describe himself in relation to her. He who, up till her thought himself the unmarrying kind. He who was quick to bad mouth relationships and make fun of married people.

He, the certified asawo man.

Well, he is in love now. He did what he did because of that.

He shivers at the unpleasant tingle that dances down the middle of his back and the intense vibrating in his shoes as he thinks about what he is about to do. It is an unfamiliar feeling, yet one he recognizes. His hands tingle oddly; he looks at them and feels as though he is looking at someone else's hands.

They don't feel like his at all.
He lifts the travel bag from beside him and places it on his thighs.

I should have taken a cab.

He frowns and his attractive face becomes an unpleasant mask. Raising his head from the back of the bench, he looks around him – and at the same time, slowly wraps the strap of the bag around his wrist.

They cannot – they should not know till the end of the month. By then...

He covered his tracks well. There is no way they will find him; his references have morphed over time and even then, they cannot follow. Some strokes of his keyboard, a few dashes of ink on A4 paper and a stapler made sure of that.

It is his due; besides. After working with them for three years during which they refused to promote or even give him a raise, what is he to do? He wanted to resign; he has wanted to resign for the past year but they refuse.

What is he to do?

And then; in God's way of complicating things, she got pregnant.

Reaching, he pulls his phone out of his pocket and dials her number. “You do not have sufficient credit to make this call – ” he takes the phone away from his ear and impatiently pushes the red button. And then, he stands up to go buy credit from a girl he noticed earlier.

She is still sitting underneath her umbrella, but now she is trading words with a boy standing by a fruit-stand on the other side of the road.

“Wetin dey – what is worrying you?” he hears her ask the boy – and then he smiles at the innocence of the gesture of her turning up her nose at him.

“I want to buy credit,” he says loudly, her startled reaction making him smile. She turns towards him and it is his turn to be startled. She is
beautiful; the kind of beauty that belongs on a screen and not underneath an umbrella selling phone credit in unforgiving Lagos afternoon sun.

“Which one and how much do you want?” she says, dimpling prettily as she smiles. He realizes she sees his reaction to her looks; and with a somewhat sinking feeling he gets that she must be used to this; being admired by all kinds of men. The knowledge sours his mood and he grunts; “Etisalat one thousand naira.”

He looks away as she fishes in her purse for the card, only turning when she says “Take.” Quickly he hands her the one thousand naira note awkwardly; he should have left his bag on the seat but couldn’t risk it, and collects the card. He turns away and starts to scratch it – somehow managing to do that in spite of his full hands – and then he turns back towards her, pulling another one thousand naira from his jacket pocket.

“For your hair,” he says, not looking at her face. Instead he keeps his eyes on her fingers, noting their reluctance. He pushes the money towards her and she collects it.

“Thank you,” he hears her say – but he is no longer listening, preoccupied as he is with typing in the credit PIN. He gets back to his seat and notices the Alhaja has spread out a bit. “Sorry,” he says and sits down as she adjusts for him.

The credit is in; he crumples the card and slips it in his jacket pocket while dialing her number again. This time it goes through once.

She doesn’t pick.

He disconnects the call and slips the phone into his pocket. She will call back as soon as she sees his call; he knows. He puts his head back, feeling again the tightness of the tie across his throat.

He smiles once more; easier now his thoughts have progressed onto friendlier ground. Placing the bag beside him he loosens the tie and makes to remove his jacket – and winces in pain as his arm is abruptly
pulled back.

He forgot he tied himself to the bag.

Still smiling, he carefully unravels the straps from around his wrist and removes his jacket. Hot air blows around his chest, but it is a lot better than the self-created oven he had been roasting in. The jacket falls onto his thighs – and the bag goes on top of it. He doesn't wrap the straps around his wrist anymore, but he holds onto it firmly.

Nine hundred and twenty thousand naira. Enough to change everything.

That; and the almost half a million he has in savings. He laughs softly to himself as he recalls how he had methodically moved all his savings from the official account into one only he knows about. It was slow, he had been painstaking and patient but in three months he had done a lot in leaving no trace or trail. The pensioners, whose money he just stole have nothing to lose. The loss is the company's; the pensioners are just the method.

Loud music starts playing from his hip pocket; it is his phone ringing.

Sweat pops out on his face as he feels a momentary surge of panic. They cannot have found out so quickly!

Calm down; he says to himself. How do you know it's not her calling?

He exhales and wipes sweat from him forehead. And then, he carefully retrieves the screaming gadget. It is a number he doesn't recognize.

“Hello?”

12:15 pm
“Here's your change,” he speaks softly, handing the woman a two hundred naira note.

She looks at the money and then eyes him like something that crawled out of a dark, smelly hole. “What kind of money are you giving me?”

He smiles; he's used to this kind of thing. “Sorry ma, it's all the change I have. I would give you another one if I had but I don't.”

In all fairness to him, there's nothing in particular wrong with the naira note.

She almost scratches him with glittering nails as she snatches the money. “That's what all of you say, 'I don't have change' as if you've been playing here since...”

She continues to talk but he has stopped listening; his mind has gone where the minds of people who would rather be somewhere other than they are at the time, doing something other than what they are doing at the time usually go.

His mind wanders.

But instead of random wanderings, his is headed to a familiar comfortable place, a place representing everything that matters. No; it is not some fantasy about Aso Rock and presidents. Neither is it in some music-video inspired mansion with pretty half-naked girls serving drinks and shaking what their mamas gave them.

None of the above.
His mind is inside a small shop; one of those shops that are seen around mechanic workshops or neighborhood bus stops. Those shops that only stock things like soft beverages always served cold; things like malt drinks and biscuits, a Baba Blue every now and then, some occasional chewing gum. And then some other, more ‘advanced’ things like Orijin, Baby Oku, Squadron, Chelsea Gin, Regal, Best Cream Liqueur and so on. This is a shop that is well known to him; his mind's eye follows product after product, neatly arranged on shelf after shelf; and then proceeds to the refrigerator humming away in the corner.

That refrigerator came out of his severance pay, after fifteen years of service in NEPA.

But all those are just distractions. His mind picks up piece after piece of a full life; like it picked product after product in the shop – and then leaves all those things to focus on the centre of his life; the centre of the shop.

His wife.

His mind instructs his lips to assume the curve of a smile; they oblige even though the man himself is not exactly conscious that he is wearing a smile – the smile of a man who likes what he sees. His wife Josephine is in the middle of the shop, sleeves of her huge blue and red bou-bou rolled back to give her hands freedom to move as she attends her customers. She wipes sweat from her jolly face; round and sweaty and all smiles, dancing a little jig in celebration of life.

She turns towards him and her smile grows wider, her steps become more energetic – she's performing for him because she knows he's watching. She turns away, presenting him with a clear view of her massive backside. Bending over, she wriggles it this way and that, making him an offer without saying a word.

He swallows – and that brings him back to the bus stop. The nagging woman has gone; he notices and sighs. Soon they'll be going to Winners and Redeemed and Synagogue finding husband. Who will marry a thing like that?
An annoying smile; annoying because it is honest, simpering and happy – invades his features again as he thinks about his wife. Josephine who still gives him peace after twenty years of marriage. He knows he is lucky; he knows it because everybody he knows tells him. His neighbors say it; even those who just buy things from her shop say it all the time. He knows; and that's why he has never given any other woman more than a passing glance, why he has never raised his hand to her, why he has never been angry for more than a day.

She is a good woman.

Apart from herself, she has also given him the gift of three beautiful girls. He wouldn't lie – not to himself – but after the birth of each of the children, something died inside him; the hope of ever having a male child. But he was grateful after a while; at least some other people didn't have any.

And his daughters! They started to take after their mother, in looks and behavior. Only the first, Vivian behaves like him; firm, practical, realistic – except when it comes to issues concerning him, their father. Only then does she lose her mind.

The other two, Salome and Jeniffer are just like their mother. Kind, soft, polite. They cry at everything; from the chicken caught in the rain to Chibok girls. And they are all beautiful girls.

And Lord, can they cook!

His smile slips a little as his mind's wandering expands to remind him of Vivian's pending resumption for the second semester, of Salome's coming WAEC and JAMB exams, and of Jennifer's resumption into JS 1.

And everything is happening at once.

He will give them all what they want; somehow someway the money they need must be available. He hates to think about what could happen were he to fail; he refuses to consider the possibility that one of his daughters end up like that frustrated harridan embarrassing him moments ago.
His girls are good children, and whatever he has to do to give them the best he can he will do. He returns to his wife's shop and her dancing – only now, she is no longer dancing. She is seated on the cushion he and Pa David made for her, counting money. Pa David is the carpenter next door who refused to finish the couch. After weeks and weeks of harassing the man to no avail, he had gone to Pa David's shop, carried the skeleton of the cushion and finished it within a week. His wife's happiness was all the payment he needed.

"Excuse me sir."

He returns from his journey to find an achingly-beautiful child with big eyes holding a five hundred naira note towards him. "Good afternoon sir," she says, curtsying. "I want two big and cold yoghurts, one for me and one for my mommy."

She steals his heart effortlessly.

Opening his freezing box, he sorts through the various drinks he has inside, searching for two large and freezing yoghurts. He finds just one at first and he places that beside the opening on the freezing box. Then he wags his fingers, getting rid of some of the numbing cold that has settled into them.

And then he starts to search again.

"Found another one," he says to the smiling girl. He puts it beside the second one and reaches in his apron for scissors.

"No don't," she says softly. "We can do that ourselves." She smiles up at him. "Thank you sir."

He smiles back. "You're welcome." He swaps the scissors for a nylon bag out of the same apron pocket, places both yoghurts inside it and hands to the little girl.

"Thank you!" she says, handing him the money. Her attention is captured by the yoghurt she's carrying – and therefore she releases
the money before he can get a hold of it.

The wind blows it out of her hand.

“Stop!” she shrieks – and promptly drops the yoghurt nylon to chases after it. He stretches to catch the money as it blows past him – and freezes as he almost falls off his bike.

From somewhere behind him a woman screams; “Ovie!!!!!!”

12:15 pm
“...leave me o, Ike! Ehen. I don't know what is doing you this afternoon!”

She touches her hair again.

It is wound too tight; the roots sting and burn. She told Sidika her hairdresser it was hurting her; she had barely been able to sit still through the session. But with the looks she has been getting all day it is totally worth it. She reaches for the small bag resting beside her left foot; for the mirror inside it – and then changes her mind.

No. Not yet.

“But this your hair o, e get as e dey do me. You jus' come fine like say I never see you before. Tell me, how you do am?”

It's the fool Ike who sells fruits on the other side of the road. He does that usually; talking about how beautiful she is and how he cannot help himself, but today is quite different. He has been going on and on for the past two hours – in fact, he has been going on since she got here this morning.

She ignores him but likes what he is saying. Turning aside slightly, she hides her smile from him and picks up her phone. The conversation she had with her mother the night before lingers on her mind.

The woman had seen her WAEC result but had not understood. While she was explaining the scores; explaining what six As and two Bs mean to the woman, Uncle Sunday from the next room had showed up.
Uncle Sunday; the official house rat.

Even now in the midday sun, she shudders as she remembers the way his eyes crawled over her – the way they crawl all over her every time he sees her. Ever since that day she was coming from the bathroom late at night when she thought everyone was asleep and had slipped on a patch of wet grass in front of the rooms. She had fallen and lost her grip on the towel.

Standing up, she brushed herself off, preoccupied with the sand covering most of her arms, not realizing she was standing almost directly underneath the security bulb sending its yellowish glow far into the night – and therefore putting herself on display for prowling eyes. She bent over to pick up the towel – and then she saw the fiery end of a cigarette glowing in the space between Uncle Sunday's room and the back of Mama Chioma's shop. Fear froze her in that awkward position; breasts hanging like twin pure water sachets in the hand of a toddler, legs spread, derriere on display for the world to see.

“Hope say you no winjure yasef as you fall so, baby,” he said in his jeering tone. “I no go like see dat ya fresh bodi wound o.”
She could feel the wind caressing her down there; a very embarrassing sensation. Shuddering, she grabbed the towel off the grass, and without so much as a glance in his direction darted towards the room she shared with her parents and two younger siblings.

His wheezing laughter followed her all the way, and she made it into the room she shut the door, locked it before darting to the window and peering towards the corner she'd seen the cigarette, scratching herself.

Wet grass itches.

So he had showed up last night and explained the scores to her mother, patiently talking the woman through the details and so on, emphasizing how impressive her performance was and how; if she could do just as well in JAMB, she was guaranteed admission in any university she wanted.
She hates Uncle Sunday; hates him for the way he looks and talks at her since that unfortunate night, but she is grateful for his conversation with her mother. She is so grateful she didn't mind the wink he sent towards her as he left, carrying two packets of White London instead of the three sticks he wanted to buy; but she did smack his hand when he tried to grope her breast.

Uncle Sunday, the neighborhood rat.

A smile caresses her lips as she thinks about his pointed nose and protruding teeth that look like half coins. He would whistle and catcall in her direction; she would ignore and pay him no mind. But she knew he had seen her breasts; and she knew he knew she knew; which is why his glance would linger whenever they came close to each other, and he would wink.

She hates him.

“See as you fine as you begin smile,” Ike starts again. “See, if you marry me na so so happi you go dey happi every day!”

She cannot resist. “You want to marry me?! You want to marry?” She scoffs, waving her hand and head in opposite directions. “Wetin you get wey you wan marry me? You no see as your belle flat like catfish belle?! Wetin dey worry – “ she pauses and swallows, “What is worrying you?!”

Loud laughter from other stalls follow her mention of catfish; Ike turns an embarrassed face away. Her smile falters as it occurs to her that she may have hurt the young man's pride – but then, he grins in her direction and she knows everything is okay.

“Hnff,” she sniffs and turns her nose up at him.

“I want to buy credit,” says a voice at her side. She turns; startled – and sees a fine suit-wearing man holding a bag tightly.

“Which one and how much do you want?” she asks, smiling a little at his surprised reaction. She has seen too many like that to not know
what he is thinking; she is sure he is not used to seeing card salesgirls as pretty as she.

“Etisalat, one thousand naira,” he says under his breath, looking uncomfortable and holding the bag as if it is trying to get away. She fishes in her purse for the credit, looking through card after card. She finds what she is looking for and brandishes it.

“Take,” she says, handing it to him. He takes it and hands her a new one thousand naira note distractedly. He turns away, scratching the card as she feels the money and wonders how he can do that with the bag in his hand. And then he turns back and hands her another one thousand naira note.

“For your hair,” he says, not looking at her. She collects the money with hesitant fingers, staring at the man who turns away; typing what she thinks is the recharge code into his phone.

“Thank you,” she whispers, one side of her mind thinking she shouldn’t have collected it, the other side thinking he meant no harm. Her eyes follow him as he makes his way to the bench and sits beside a woman playing with her child; and then she jumps up excitedly, waving the one thousand naira note at Ike.

“See you! Na mouth you get! You want to marry a wife but you don't have money! Na dream be dat na!”

Ike grins back cheerily. “No worry na, say I no get money today no mean say I no go get tomorrow na. For now, I fit send some bananas and pineapple come your side, some kain fresh and sweet ones. Then when you don close, I go arrange some other tins for your people dem.”

She smiles fondly at him. “Thank you, my husband.”

The boy giggles and rubs his stomach. Putting away the money she is still holding, she finds her mind turning to him and realizes she will miss him when she goes to school.
“Ike,” she calls impulsively and he answers. “When you finish, shey you will – “

12:15 pm
“Where were you when the explosion happened?”

“I bin dey dat filling station – I bin hear say dem go sell fuel dis evening, na im I show come try my luck."

“You should be able to see everything clearly from there, abi?”

“Yes – I tink so. But na de fuel I wan buy bin dey my mind – “

“So you didn't see anything?”

“I no talk dat one o, I jus' talk say fuel dey my mind. Hmmm, dis people no fear God o, explode bomb beside fuel station. To say fuel scarcity no dey true true, to say de bomb bin blow come dat side, I for jus' die like dat. Who go come take care of my six shuldren?!”

“Yes, that would have been serious. Can you please tell us what you saw?”

“Wetin I see? Ah – I no see much o, but e be like say I see old man wey dey do like say im life don end. E dey cry onto one pishure wey e carry for hand – “

“Old man? You saw an old man?”

“I see am, old man wey dey use working stick sef. E dey look pishure dey cry, because I see am dey wipe im eye. E be like say e come give im pikin moni to buy yoghurt.”

“The old man had a child?”

“Yes na. One small pikin like dat – gehl. She no too tall like dat, but she try. She jus' dey bounce up and dan; e be like say de yoghurt dey sweet am even as she nefa buy am.”
“That must mean the child died in the explosion. Wow, that's just somehow. What else did you see, sir?”

“Why you dey call me sir – you dey fear make I no toast dis ya gehlfrend abi? No worry, she too tin. I no like tin gehls.”

“Thank you sir; thank you. What else did you see?”

“Em – e be like say I see one Muslim girl sef – ehen! I sabi de pessin wey carry de bomb! I sabi am!”

“Sir, please calm down. Who did you see carrying the bomb – and how did you know they were carrying the bomb?”

“Na one fine gehl like dat – one fine Muslim gehl. She carry the tin for hand like say na handbag, but handbag no dey big like dat her own.”

“You're saying her bag was extraordinarily big?”

“I no know dis English wey you talk so, but I go dey talk go. The bag big, e big pass my head. She come siddon beside one man like dat, e be like say dat wan sef sabi wetin dey.”

“Why you – why would you say that?”

As she siddon e stand up, waka go front small come come back give de gehl sometin. E no tey after dat wan de sometin blow.”

“So you're sure it's this Muslim girl that carried the bomb?”

“Yes na. No be dem Muslim dey blow every every?”
Ewa agonyi, bread ati pure water...na im sure pass. I swear.

He tips the pure water sachet back to drain the water – and then stops, removing his bandana and pouring the rest into it. He watches as the faded red cloth becomes the color of blood and sets the now-empty sachet on the table beside the plate whose contents he just consumed.

Rubbing his cool hand on his sweaty head, his eyes pierces the fierce noon sunlight with precise intent; searching for something even he does not know.

Omo, dis fuel scarcity na oshe soda. I swear. Everytin jus' dey dry. Notin dey happen – as in notin!

From his perch he watches the bus stop; watches people come and stay, pacing restlessly and jostling for space within the stand. His eyes narrow as he peers down the road – and frowns as he sees nothing coming, at least nothing that looks like a bus.

Dis fuel scarcity spoil tins for boys o. I swear. Which kain...

"Indo, wey my money?"

The woman addressing him is wearing a smile; she knows he does not have any money with which to pay her but she has to ask anyway. Her demeanor – just like her size – speaks a lot of the warmth in her heart. It's not as though her food is great; in fact as far as the bus stop goes, her food is the least in taste. But she has the most customers of all three women who cook around.

No. It has to do with size. Size of her heart; that is.
Indo looks at her. “Easy, Iya Sade. Your moni dey come soon. Jus' make I go hassle dose pipo dem.” He rises from his seat and covers his head with the wet bandana. “You no say I no dey owe moni.”

Iya Sade wiggles her nose in an up and down motion. “Ehen! Beeni! Na today?” But her smile remained bright. “I don hear you. Where you dey rush go?”

He smiles. “Your moni no go waka come meet mi for hia na. I gast go pushue am.” He wipes his head and arms with the bandana before tying it around his head. “Dis sun no go kill pessin sha,” he finishes.

He does not hear Iya Sade's response – and frankly he is not listening. His mind is back to where home is; back to the hot tarmac and the concerns that come with it.

_I still dey see food chop sha, I tank God. Bet wetin wan follow -_

Whatever he intends to think next does not make it to thought, because at that moment a girl walks into Iya Sade's shop; a girl the likes of which he sees everyday at the bus stop – but never this close. His mouth falls open; he blinks as though he cannot believe what he is seeing.

Her perfume – something soft and womanly – precedes her as she steps up and smiles in his eyes. “Good afternoon,” she says, her voice husky and warm.

He does not answer; not because he does not want to, but because he cannot. She lowers her head and walks past, smile on her ruby-red mouth still in place. He turns after her following with his eyes, not noticing the derisive snort Iya Sade threw in his direction after noticing his attention.

“Good afternoon ma,” she says as she curtsies to Iya Sade.

“Welcome, my daughter. You want to eat?”

“Yes ma. Do you have fufu?”
He still cannot take his eyes off her; amazed by the fact that she is eating in a roadside buka like the one Iya Sade operates. But Iya Sade only smiles and waves the beautiful woman to a bench as though it is everyday girls like that walk into her shop.

She takes her seat and looks up at him, still smiling. He averts his eyes hurriedly, not wanting to be caught looking. She smiles in that secret way women have and looks away, not wanting to embarrass him.

But her smile remains.

He also cannot stop staring; she is a beautiful woman – beautiful enough to put calm in the nerves of someone who is usually too much in a hurry to appreciate such. His frenetic glance shuttles between her face and her breasts – and eventually settles on her face. He studies her features; he who learned to reduce women to one of two things: their breasts and ass size, finds himself looking at a woman's naturally arched eyebrows, the soft lines beside her eyes, her somewhat flat nose and full lips that seem to be throwing around invitations to a kiss-fest.

And he; not knowing exactly what a kiss is.

As he watches, he sees her eyes leap in delight as Iya Sade carries a food-laden tray towards her. His eyes follow the tray as it is set down – and then, he spies her close her eyes and inhale slowly, a peaceful smile settling on her features and putting her in calm repose. She opens her eyes and looks straight at him; holding the smile as Iya Sade disappears into the kitchen behind the dirt-gray curtain at the back of the room.

“Please, come and join me,” she invites him.

He averts his face again – but she still hears his mumbled “Tankew.”

She washes her hand thoroughly in the bowl provided before falling to the food; he sees that even though he isn't looking at her directly. He isn't a romantic fool; he knows there's no point in feeling anything for the hungry lady but he cannot help himself.
A man must dream.

“Yaba! Yaba Jibowu Railway!!!!”

He looks over his shoulder and spies a bus stopping. Making a half-turn, he starts to dash out towards the bus stop – and then he stops and turns around. Avoiding the eating girl's face, he makes his way towards the curtain Iya Sade disappeared behind minutes earlier.

She is there, stirring a fresh pot of soup. Her face comes away from what she's cooking to look towards who breached her sanctuary. Emotion; from delight to discomfort and then curiosity chase each other across her face like running mice. They all leave eventually; leaving just curiosity.

“Indo, wetin you dey find for here?”

“Iya Sade, abeg no collect moni from dat babe hand – “

She frowns as though suddenly opening a pot and encountering the odor of rot. “You say wetin?”

“Cam dan, I no get time. I go pay you today – make I jus' go collect from one bus wey jus' land – “

Iya Sade's frown becomes heavier. “You sabi am before?“

He shakes his head. “Iya Sade, leave doti for lawma, leave license for lastma. I jus' gbadun as de girl be, I wan encourage am. No even tell am say – “

He turns abruptly and runs out of the room, slowing down only once to smile at the beautiful girl who was halfway through her meal. He notices she has loosened her belt; he slows down further in appreciation of her realness.

She looks up and notices him.

“Wouldn't you come and sit with me?” she asks, teeth gleaming
through pink lips in a smile.

He thinks about that; dares to entertain the thought that a girl like that might want to have something to do with him. He doesn't see pretense in her; only a genuine desire to know and be known.

“Em...” he stumbles on the limitations his limited knowledge of English places on his tongue. “I jus' wan to collect sometin outside. I dey – I go come back.”

He ducks out without waiting for a response.

The bus has disappeared by the time he runs up panting; he grinds his teeth in frustration. *Ehen; na de wahala wey woman dem dey cause be dat! Once you see wan, you go forget evry evry!*

He stands around, slouching just beyond the shade of the bus stop's overhang, hands clenched in fists as he tries not to be angry. Her face intrudes his thoughts – and he remembers what he said to her moments ago:

*I go come back.*

What if she's still waiting?

He struggles; has a small argument with his feet. *Wetin dey do you? You suppose know say notin for me wit dat kain gehl. You no see her bodi ni? Dat kain gehl na banker wife!*

Why you come tell am to wait?

*I jus' –* he stumbles again because he does not have an answer. *Wetin dat wan come mean?*

She fit dey dia dey wait you now.

He knows there's nothing there for him; knows there's no way on this streets that she would feel anything for him; a dirty tout who doesn't even know his own name.
But the heart wants what it wants. And; like it or not, he still has one.

He stirs dirt with his foot and grudgingly starts walking towards Iya Sade's buka. Just then, the screech of tires alerts him to the arrival of a bus. He turns and recognizes the bald-headed conductor standing away from the bus and glaring at a passenger.

_Correct! Make I collect moni from Langbe come go settle with Iya Sade..._

**12:15 pm**
I hope he can see my bra too.

Idiot.

She turns to the phone in her hand and replies a fresh comment on her most recent selfie on Instagram – just as the phone vibrates and the WhatsApp icon appears. Swiftly she taps on it, smiling before it opens because she knows who it is.

Hey baby; the message reads.

Hold on.

Good afternoon, latest client service employee in town.

By now her smile is spanning the length of her mouth. Quickly she types a response;

You know I love you, shay?

His reply is in two stages.

First; an emoji:

Second;

I love you too.

And I'm so proud of you.

She cannot stop smiling.
I got the job. I GOT THE JOB!!

I'm so excited I can barely sit still.

She closes her eyes and focuses on his face. He is the man of her dreams; this boyfriend of hers. She remembers –

Her phone vibrates.

Opening her eyes she takes in his messages;

*Don't you know they are lucky to have you?*

*Well, you should. And they should too.*

Her laughter is a free, beautiful thing. He always has the words to make her day; any day, special. Shading the phone screen, she adjusts the camera and takes a picture of herself grinning, one hand holding her hair out of her face. She squints at the phone screen; looking at the picture critically as though it is meant for Linda Ikeji’s blog and not her boyfriend.

Satisfied, she sends it to him with a kissy emoji.

His response isn't long in coming;

*That's my woman. You look good.*

*Hope the interview wasn't too stressful?*

She thinks about that; the interview.
It had been a bit rough at first; rougher than she'd expected though not in the way she'd expected. The woman who ushered her into the conference room wasn't friendly; make up making her look like an assistant at the local mortuary. From her severe ponytail, stingy frown, too-thin bloodless lips, starched headmistress gown – everything screamed frustration, most likely the sexual kind.

She returned the woman's disapproving stare at her bust with a simpering smile. Nothing was going to put her in a bad mood.

The room she was showed into was the ubiquitous office conference room; table in the centre surrounded by chairs, turned off TV high in one corner, softly humming AC in the opposite corner. She sat in the swivel chair 'Ms. Mortuary' pointed out to her, folded her hands on the table and waited, trying to control her cold-inspired trembling.

The door opened so quietly – a door different from the one she was led in through – she almost missed it. Two people came in, a woman in front and a man who closed the door before walking in. For a moment she wondered if she'd made a mistake; wondered if she'd walked into a modeling agency instead of an advertising one.

The couple taking their seats in front of her looked that good.

The woman spoke first, welcoming her and making her comfortable. Her shaking was noticed and without so much as a word the woman picked up the AC remote and turned it off.

“Sorry about that,” she smiled.

Most of the conversation passed her on a surface level; her whole attention was on the speaking woman's lips and pearl-white teeth. Nothing about her seemed out of place and she couldn't help wondering if she would be able to get the job – or any other job for that matter – in a place like this.

_The worst is over; they've invited you for an interview_, her boyfriend had said over the phone that morning. _It's clear you have something they want. Relax and be honest with them. Relax._
She could hear him speaking to her now; calming her. That; and the warmer room bolstered her confidence. She'd inhaled and listened to the couple in front of her as they spoke, one after the other like a well-synchronized news casting team.

And then, it was her turn to speak.

“Yaba! Yaba Jibowu Railway!!!!”

She hears the conductor screaming – she realizes some people are chasing the bus; she's just not completely aware. She's still in dreamland.

Her phone vibrates and wakes her up.

As her surroundings become louder and live, a steady buzzing is circling her head; the smell of rotten pepper intrudes on her rudely. She shifts in her seat; realizing the smell is coming from someone next to her; someone who wasn't sitting there before. Disgust weighs on her face like heavily applied makeup; she holds her breath but can only manage for a few seconds. Angrily she slaps about her head as much as is possible to with one hand; trying to hit whatever is making the buzzing sound.

After waving pointlessly for some more seconds, she bends her frustrated gaze to her left – towards the fat market woman and the basket of putrefying pepper in front of her. Hoping the woman would notice that she is being stared at, she does not blink, projecting all the hostility in her body through her eyes. But the woman is oblivious, lost in her world as she is.

Her phone vibrates again; she has forgotten about her boyfriend.

Am I still seeing you today?

Hey babe.
Are you there?

Hastily, fingernails clacking on the plastic surface of her phone, she types a reply:

*Sorry bae. I'm coming to your house now.*

There is an interval of silence – and then;

*You're coming now?! Oh no o! The neighbor's housegirl is still here o, we just did the first round!*

*Can't you wait till later?*

She laughs softly, trying to imagine him tangled with some phantom neighbor's house girl. It isn't a convincing image.

Her smile brightens; the woman and mosquitoes are forgotten. That is her boyfriend's one magical ability; to make her forget any and everything else once they start to talk.

*Shuo. If you have enough energy for some other girl it means I haven't been doing my job right.*

His reply comes in almost immediately; *I wouldn't even dare touch another girl. You're all I want and need.*

*It has been a while sha. It haff tey small.*

She giggles, feeling naughty and mischievous at once.

*What have tey small?*

She didn't have to wait long.

*Get over here and I'll show you.*
A small and intense tingling makes itself known to her from her nether regions. Closing her eyes, she takes a mental cold shower, encouraging herself to calm down. *It's only a matter of time; I'll soon be with him...*

She opens her eyes and types; *Don't worry bae. I'll be with you soon.*

*I'm coming.*

*I'm waiting. I'm cooking sef.*

She's curious. *What are you cooking?*

*When you get here you'll find out.*

If there's one thing she dislikes about him it's this – this irrational and immature need of his to put suspense into everything. It's something that frustrates and annoys her – much like her inability to silence the creature still buzzing about her head.

She doesn't do anything for the space of nine heartbeats; clutching her phone in fluttering hands. She doesn't want to fight him; she has missed him, missed talking with him, holding and being held – Whatever irritations she has can wait.

She types; *whatever it is, I know it'll be good because you cooked it.* He doesn't respond for a bit. And then;

*Aww.*

*Okay, now I'm shy. Dear me, I hope I don't disappoint you.*

*Hurry over, my darling.*

*I love you.*

She covers her face, feeling like a model on the runway for the first time. Between the fingers spread over her face, she looks to see if there's anyone paying her any attention – apart from the pervert looking over her shoulder. On sudden impulse she types a message;
I love you too honey.

And then;

There's some guy here staring down my blouse at my breasts. He replies almost immediately: Oh yeah?

What's he like?

She glances over her shoulder, pretending as though she is looking for something; like the yoghurt salesman a few meters away but in reality taking stock of her 'admirer'. After some scrutiny her lips curve in disdain. Fingers flying all over her phone screen she types;

He is a child!

His response comes in seconds.

LOL.

And then;

He should take a good look cos it'll be a while before he sees any like yours again o.

She laughs and replies; You're crazy.

You're crazy and I love you so much.

12:15 pm
I hope the children are okay.

He bends forward to look at his toes; they are tapping frantically. His eyebrows come together as he regards them; he isn't aware of telling them to tap or anything. They shouldn't be tapping.

But they continue to, regardless of his opinion.

Sighing softly, he leans back against his seat and closes his eyes to shut out the heat. He is losing water like it is going out of style; he can feel it running down his back and into his trousers in rivulets. He hopes someone won't think he peed himself when he stands up; he can tell the bench beneath him is soaked.

He looks at the time again, he needs to leave this bus stop within the next four minutes else he'll be late for the program; a program that really shouldn't start without him even though he'd just called Sister Anna and told her; “start without me”.

Sister Anna.

He thinks about her attractiveness and wonders how she found the strength to be a nun. I doubt I could manage it; he thinks. I'm a man and still I struggle. It's God's grace; I'm sure.

How did I ever do it?

He had been a student at a theological school; curiosity had pushed him there. Curiosity; and a desire to offend and defy his traditional father. His mother had always wanted him to do whatever he thought was best; his father was the one who insisted that all his children follow in his footsteps. No way; he had told his father.
I don't want to do.

So what do you want to do; his father had jeered at him. Follow the white man's religion and allow him corrupt your mind – just as he has with his education?

You're one to talk; he had yelled back at the man, ignoring his mother pulling on his arm. You who have several wives and mistreat all of them. Is it your gods that taught you to do that?

The man had kept quiet after that, and he had gone on to study his theology and so on. And when the time had come for him to choose a parish to practice, he chose the Catholic Diocese in the city.

It wasn't easy from the start; he had to learn everything from the beginning. Also, the stories of priests molesting altar boys scared him – but he was please to find it wasn't that way in the parish he was in. In fact, the parish priest encouraged the boys all the time; If anyone touches you inappropriately, including me, inform the Bishop when he comes visiting.

The Bishop comes in twice a month, and so far there hasn't been any report of inappropriate behavior.

He looks at his shoes again; the best he can afford on his salary. It's not too bad; what he earns – he realized a while ago he really didn't need much, but when he thinks of his childhood dreams of owning a yacht, a mansion and Bourdillon Waterside property, he laughs and shakes his head.

Those things don't matter anymore.

The children whose program he is headed to come to mind – the sweet, innocent children with their curious eyes and eager hearts. He thinks about children like those in the last three orphanages he and his team have been to; the screams and shouts of joy whenever the children see their bus appear, and the silence and sad looks that accompany them on their way out.
We make them happy, even if it's for a little while. That; and things like that is what matters.

And how about Michelle?

His mood sours instantly. He doesn't think about her; doesn't like to. The last time he had, he had ended up almost drinking. As it was, he had spent the night looking at the bottle of Squadron he purchased from the mallam three streets from the parish; the mallam whose shop smelled of sweet, minty incense.

The man had looked at him strangely. *Ai nefa see u bephore?* He asked.

Shaking his head, he averted his gaze and pointed to what he wanted. Deftly, the alhaji grabbed the bottle, put it in a nylon bag and stretched it across the stacks of biscuits and noodles and sweets and chewing gum. Collecting it, he handed a one thousand naira note over and turned to hurry away.

*You no wan change?* The alhaji had asked.

He waved it away – and then had a rethink.

*How much be incense?*

*Two hundred per pwacket;* was the response.

*Give me one packet.*

The night was spent burning incense and staring at the bottle while hoping the monsignor did not have it in him to come on one of those his random visits.

The night passed uneventfully.

The following morning, he had snuck the bottle out and given it to one of the touts at the neighborhood bus stop. The tout had looked from the bottle to the man and back again – and then suddenly started to bow. *Oshe baba mi! Ose! Wa a pe laiye!*)
Embarrassed, he'd hurried away quickly.

No; he does not like to think about Michelle at all. The girl who had looked at him when he told her about his desire to become a priest; looked at him as though he was something out of the chicken poop. Something that stank.

“Are you crazy?” she'd asked, removing her glasses thereby making the frown between her eyes more obvious. “You want to go the parish – become a man of the cloth?” She threw her arms open in a gesture that reminded him of Olamide's gun man pose.

“What happens to me?”

The question caught him unawares; like a punch to the solar plexus. “What happens to you?” he repeated stupidly. “Who are you?”

She'd slapped him.

He held his cheek and stared after her; shocked. Shocked because that was the same girl who had said to him the night he tried to kiss her; “What are you doing? Are you not my brother again?”

He had felt so ashamed about trying to do something like that he never tried to touch her again. But that didn't help the burning pain that came into his chest anytime he saw her with one of her many admirers in the neighborhood. It is why he unfriended her on Facebook, stopped following her on Twitter and everywhere else.

She was having too much fun without him.

Now, he idly compares Michelle's quiet beauty to Sister Anna's forcefully subdued one. Michelle's came up short; Anna's was such that you couldn't silence it with a hood and muffler. She never wore any make up, but she didn't need it.

Her eyes and mouth do all sorts of things to a man...

What am I thinking? Lord, have mercy.
Crossing himself, he smiles at the warm air suddenly blowing from beside him. He turns in that direction and finds that a bus has stopped. He gathers his feet under him and makes ready to approach the bus – just as he hears the conductor yell; “Una dey see dis guy now? Una dey see am? When – “

He backs up – hesitant. Just then, he hears a woman scream; “Ovie!!”

Turning to his right, he sees a woman stand to her feet – at the same time he sees a pepper basket suddenly mushroom into a ball of fire.

_That cannot be normal_ – he has time to think.

Before everything goes black.

12:15 pm
I don tire. God, show me small mercy o.

The woman shifts her bulk on the bench, wincing at the renewed ache in her knees and thighs; yet thankful for the relief of sitting down after so long. She adjusts the basket of tomatoes beside her right foot; disturbing feasting flies and ignoring the angry cloud as it rises momentarily from its haven. And then they land again; continuing their feast and ignoring their benefactor just as she is ignoring them.

I no understand why Seun do as e do today.

Seun; her pepper supplier. He is the only one she is comfortable buying pepper from, and she has been buying from him for a bit over a year now.

But after what he did today, she doubts she will continue the relationship.

It was busy in his shop when she arrived there that morning; a lot of strange faces going in and coming out. The air was dusty and the usually-muddy road had hardened into crust, so she had stood by patiently waiting, not wanting to interrupt whatever it was they were doing. She was standing a few paces away from his shop – in front of the onion seller Iya Bankuli whose doors were yet to open.

She stood there waiting for Seun, weaving in and out of thoughts. After a while, just as she started to entertain thoughts of going elsewhere to buy she saw him, white kaftan wrapped tightly against himself, long strides rapidly bringing him towards his shop from the
other side.

“Seun! Seun!!” she called to him. He looked in her direction – and waved.

Relief made a light load of her chest; she quickly stepped towards his shop, following his rapidly-moving form as it disappeared into the shop's interior.

It wasn't illuminated; but there was just enough sunlight for her to see a group of between five to six men huddled around a blanket in which there were several long black and slender cylinders – about the length of an arm – with wires hanging from one end of them. One of the men, tall and light skinned had one of the cylinders in his hand; waving it around while reciting something that sounded like Psalms.

“Seun?” she said, not seeing him. “Where you dey?”

Suddenly the whole shop was filled with the sound of rushing feet; the men gathered around the cylinders stood up and the cylinders disappeared from sight. A hand roughly grabbed her arm; a guttural voice grated in her ear; “Wetin you dey do for hia?”

“I wan –” she stuttered, staggering as the hand roughly propelled her outside. “Oga! Softly na, wetin happen?! Seun na my customer –” Then they were outside the shop and she looked up to see the face attached to the arm; a face that looked like the sky just before a thunderstorm.

It was Seun's.

“Why you no call me say you dey come?” He demanded roughly, jerking her arm as though to emphasize his point. “Because I call you last week wen I dey come, abi – yeeeee!” She yelled as he squeezed her arm. “Wetin dey worry you, Seun?! You don dey craze?!”
He glared at her – and then dropped her arm unceremoniously. “Stay here, I dey come now,” he grunted and stalked back the way they had come.

Rubbing her arm she looked around, self-consciousness putting a slump in her shoulders; a slump that wasn't there before. The arm stung a bit but it wasn't too bad. She wondered what had gotten into him; she wondered what all the people going in and out of his shop were doing there. Most of all she wondered what the cylinders they were looking at were. Obviously, she wasn't supposed to have seen it.

“Take. Dey go,” Seun grunted from behind her and; with a loud crash a basket of tomatoes dropped almost beside her left foot.

“Seun, wetin dey – “ she was about to start berating him when she caught a glimpse of the tomatoes. It was some of the finest, freshest she had ever seen. Bending over, she started to pick one after the other, dropping them almost as fast as she was picking them. He watched impassively for a while; arms folded across his chest.

And then he suddenly grunted, “Money.”

She straightened and untied a knot in her wrapper, ignoring him. Swiftly, she extracted a roll of one thousand naira notes there and tucked the roll underneath her armpit. And then, she re-tied her wrapper before taking the roll from her armpit and opening it, separating it into yet two smaller rolls; one with a rubber band and one without. The one without she handed to the glaring man.

He snatched it out of her hand and tucked it into one of the many folds of his kaftan without looking at it. And then he turned away wordlessly.

“You no go count am?” she asked his rapidly receding back. No response; not to her anyway. She saw him nod at one of the men standing by, and together they walked away.

“I dey come again next week o!” she yelled and yet again, got no response.
Turning away from him, she waved at one of the wheel barrow pushers.

She has a lot on her mind.

Oh Jesus; she thinks. *Wen bus go reach here na? Na wen I wan reach house now?* She looks around briefly before leaning her head on the wooden support of the bus stop shed. *I hope say Chuka go dey alright sha.*

Her son; her first child and pride. Tears fill her eyes as she thinks about how much he looks like his father; her late husband. *Chike! Chike!! Shey you dey look down from heaven – as gentle soul like you no suppose dey anoda place. Shey you dey look down dey see your pikin? Help me take care of am o.*

She smiles as she remembers the day Chuka brought home his admission letter. She was at her stall at the market when she'd heard a familiar voice screaming *Nne! Nne!! Nne!!!*

She'd jumped in fright; only one person called her that. Fluttering her hands that way women have when they are in trouble and hopping from foot to foot, she waited as her son ran up to her. Her fear went away as she looked on his face and recognized the look on it. It wasn't one of pain, or hurt or sorrow.

It was a happy, joyful look. She'd berated him for frightening her before asking what the fuss was about.

When he told her what the envelope he was carrying contained, she'd hugged him and jumped several times; shaking the street with her bulk and nearly upsetting her stand with her clumsiness. Her screams attracted several of her fellow market women, and one after the other they came to congratulate Chuka on his success after two tries.

*That Iya Chidinma sef;* she muses at the memory of one of her market woman friends hugging her son; *wey wan use those her pure water*
breasts kill my pikin. Ehen.

Now he is in the university, she is determined for him not to leave. She thinks about her daughter, Evelyn. She thinks about her daughter and of the curves that have begun to adorn her youthful body. She thinks of those curves and she thinks about her husband; the one she married barely a year ago at the pestering and insisting of her in-laws. You no go need somebody helep you take care of dis pikin dem? She'd had no intention of marrying again; Chike had been the one God created for her and He had seen it fit in His unquestionable wisdom to take him away. She remembers the last night they'd spent together; playing and teasing each other.

Chike; I no wan make you go dis waka. My mind no release you o.

Ehen, you don start. If na by only you I no go dey go anywhere sef.

Wetin you dey find up and dan? I tell you say I tire to dey spend money for you ni?

How dem wan take hear am say na im wife dey do everything for am? E no suppose be so o. Make I go dis wan. General don assure me say once we bring the containers back im go do me well. He looked at her sad face in the flickering candle and kissed her softly. E no reach like dat o, Emem. I no dey go anywhere.

He looked around. The shudren don dey sleep shebi?

Even in the gloom of their room he could see her face light up. If dem don sleep nko, Baba shudren?

His deep chuckles set a trembling in her limbs. He touched her; touched her the way she liked, the way that made her arms and legs weak and set a kind of roaring in her ears...

That was the last time.
She wipes her eyes now, trying not to cry but not quite making it. It hurt; living without her Chike and hating this husband of hers; this 'replacement' whose touch is nothing like she's used to. His hand is rough, hot and heavy and it does not make her feel like Chike's did. Instead, she bears his grunting and pig-like squealing with stoic indifference, and, as soon as he starts to snore she pushes away from him and goes to the bathroom where she spends hours scrubbing herself.

He makes her feel dirty.

_I no dey even mind. Once I baff, everytin dey betta._

What she wouldn't abide however; is his staring at and touching Evelyn at every opportunity.

_Wetin im eye dey find for my daughter bodi? My own no do am? Na so last week e begin dey ask me if I don dey buy am bra. Wetin consaign am wit dat na?_

“Yaba! Yaba Jibowu Railway!!!!”

She hisses, turning away slightly from the people rushing after the bus. That's not where she's going. Like a goat to an unprotected tuber of yam, her mind returns to her daughter.

_Evelyn. That girl sef. She too fine, jus' like her papa._

_She for wait small before she begin grow bobby sha o._

There is something not quite right with her new husband; she has known since she met him that day at the filling station. He had come with his bus to buy fuel, but had allowed her fill her keg and then helped her drop it off at her stall. It had been a while since anybody – any man did anything for her, and so feeling overcame caution.

He'd returned that evening, bearing fruits and sliced bread, standing tall and clean in a white babariga. He was all smiles and gentleness; she wondered at the anger she felt as the other women flocked around him, asking him all sorts of questions.
Maybe that was why she'd agreed to marry him.

The only person who had warned her was Iya Chidinma; a warning she'd ignored thinking it was inspired by jealousy. *This man; you sure say you wan marry am?*

She had been offended. *Wetin happen?*

*Nothing o! Nothing! E jus' be say...* Iya Chidinma had paused and looked at her friend. *Make e sha take care of you.*

She wishes she had made Iya Chidinma say what was on her mind that evening, so long ago. Now, it's almost too late to do anything about it. *Thank God say I no gree get belle for am; na dat one for pain me pass.*

She sighs deeply.

*Wetin I wan come do na, with Evelyn wey im don put eye for im bodi now?*

The trouble began when all sorts of sordid stories of him and young girls started to reach her ears. At first she was skeptical, demanding evidence and since none had come to her she ignored it. But his eyes, when he looks at her daughter, and the 'somehow' comments he makes bother her.

*If he touch my pikin, I swear I go kill am.*

*Bet o, fest, shey I go wait till e touch am fest? If I wait, wetin wan spoil go don spoil na.*

Pause.

*No. I no go wait.*

*I go kill am now. I go arrange am dis night...*
Wetin dey make dat sound?

Wait o. E be like say na from my basket...Wetin –

Her mind stops working and races back to that morning – to the sight she'd stumbled upon in Seun's shop.

And then, she realized why the tomatoes had seemed more than usual. Why the basket had seemed heavier than usual. Everything suddenly made sense in one crystal clear, tragic picture.

Seun, thunder fire your papa –

12:15 pm
The room looks nothing like the films show; he thinks as he looks around, fear surrendering under the weight of his curiosity. His roving glance lingers on the images of the Nigerian president and Lagos State governor hanging on the wall behind the high-back chair and continues onto the shiny wood panel against the wall to his left.

The shiny wood panel – and the various trophies lined up on it.

He feels a sharp pain in his left arm and looks at it, not realizing that he shuddered in the air-conditioning cold room and bumped the arm, which is why it is stinging. He rubs lightly on the bandage covering the stitched-up wound, grunting his pain and trying not think about Chinyere.

Chinyere...

The door behind him opens, he jumps and tries to compose himself – and bumps the sore arm again. He opens his mouth to yell – and then swallows the stabbing heat that comes with hurt. Through the multi-colored haze of pain in front of his eyes, he hears footsteps approach – and then he stiffens as a hand falls on his shoulder.

“Ike, is it? Are you okay?”

He tries to answer but heat is still firmly lodged in his throat. His eyes begin to water; he sees the vague outline of a woman walk from beside his chair to sit behind the desk. Blinking away tears, he focuses on her face – surprise warring with pain in his expression.

She's quite attractive, smile making her look harmless in spite of the uniform she is wearing and the stigma attached to it. Hers is a bright
blue blouse; clean and well ironed. His eyes follow the ropes from her left shoulder to left pocket pushed out by a thrusting left breast. Ike looks away, embarrassed.

“I am Police Commissioner Joy Arasi. How are you feeling?”

He has himself underhand by now – so it's easier for him to answer. “I'm okay,” he says through a raw throat.

She indicates the bandage. “Hope nothing was broken,” she says, her smile a lot less brighter but still present. Observing his silence, she cocks her head left and continues to look at him. “I hope my ladies weren't rough with you at all,” she says, posing it more like a statement than a question.

_Her ladies._

They had come to the house in mufti; just two of them. They didn't ask for him, they had asked for his father and explained – actually, he has no idea what they discussed with his father. All he knows is the man had come to the backyard where he was regaling the neighbors with stories of the explosion and what he had seen.

“Ike,” his father had said after calling him into the corridor. “Some women dey hia for you. Dem say dem need ya helep onto the bomb matter.” Ike flinched as the man suddenly leaned into his face. “You no do anytin wey you no suppose, abi?”

Ike frowned. “No o, papa. Why you dey ask me dat kain kweshun?”

The older man leaned back and folded his arms over his rotund belly pushing against the once-white vest. Ike's eyes zoomed in on a particular oil stain around the vest's navel.

“Go follow dem talk. Dem say you no dey for trouble but I suppose ask you.” The man, suddenly affectionate patted his son on the head.
“I don tell dem make dem takia of you. Na you be my only son.”

Surprised, Ike looked at the man silently as they walked towards the front of the house where two women were waiting beside a black Mercedes. His father, still watching is appeased by the sight of the taller woman stretching her hand forward to meet Ike's in a handshake. And then, the light-skinned, smaller one opened the back door for him and he got into the car, laying back in the air-conditioned interior.

His father waved as they drove away.

“No ma, your ladies were nice. I knew they were police the moment my father came to get me, but I wasn't scared.”

The woman nods approvingly, slight smile stretching the left corner of her full lips. “You have no reason to be scared, Ike. You haven't done anything wrong.”

She looks around her table – and then suddenly removes the black beret covering her hair and places it on the table. Her braided hair falls to her shoulders and once again Ike is struck by how beautiful she is. She lifts her arms and ruffles her hair.

“See Ike, this explosion really has us confused. We have no idea where to start looking – we don't even know what we're supposed to be looking for.” She sighs softly and drops her arms on the table top. “I'm sorry to bother you but I really need your help.” She looks directly at him, fatigue and sadness mixing in her eyes. “Will you help me?”

He is caught up in emotions so strong he cannot answer – not with words anyway. He nods.

Her smile is bright. “Thank you. Are you hungry?”

He shakes his head in the negative. Raising her eyebrow, she asks; “Are you sure? I want to eat – but if you don't eat, then I cannot.”
"I'm not hungry ma," he says.

"How about some cold zobo? Would you like that?"

He doesn't want to keep saying no, and something about the woman's honest face and smile puts him at ease. "Yes ma."

She lifts the receiver on her table. "Saliu, help me bring my cooler from the car, please." Dropping the receiver, she smiles at him. "Zobo will be here in a few minutes," she says.

He nods, suddenly feeling drowsy. A subdued knocking at the door rouses him, and as she says "Come in," the door opens to admit a smartly-dressed policeman carrying a blue food flask. He drops it on the table, stiffens in a brace and salutes sharply.

"Thank you, Saliu. Dismissed."

Ike imagines he can hear the man's bones snap as he turns around and marches towards the door. It opens and closes quietly, and the woman rises. He watches as she walks towards the right corner of her office – and the small fridge nestled there. She opens the fridge and pulls out two bottles and cups, straightens and closes the door with her left heel. And then, she walks back towards the table and places a bottle in front of him.

"Relax, Ike you hear? We're friends. Do you want a cup?"

Ike swallows a retort; something about the police not being your friend and instead closes his hand around the plastic bottle that was formerly a container for Coke.

It is cold to the touch.

He twists around, a low moan escaping him as he moves his left arm too quickly. As the woman watches, hand hovering over her own bottle, he twists the cap open and starts to lift the bottle to his mouth.

"Em –" he catches himself early enough. "I want a cup ma."
She smiles approvingly. “Who knows who was drinking from the bottles before?” she asks no one in particular. Pushing a cup to his side of the table, she resumes her position behind her desk and opens hers. Pouring a healthy helping into her cup, she takes a long swallow and belches softly.

“Sorry,” she says to Ike, mildly embarrassed.

He cannot help himself; laughter bursts out of his chest and into the room. She looks shocked for a moment, and then joins him in laughing.

“Don't tell anybody that,” she whispers to him.

He nods eagerly, eyes shining. It occurs to him that he is falling in love with the woman already – and something about betraying his dear departed who isn't even dead up to seventy-two hours sours his mood.

Something must have showed on his face. “They said one of the victims was your girlfriend,” she says softly.

Ike nods numbly. “Chinyere,” he whispers.

“I'm so sorry,” she says – and Ike fancies he can hear tears in her voice. But her eyes, when he looks at her remain clear. “Can you tell me –”

“It was the priest that did it,” he says calmly.

She cannot hide her surprise.

And then, reaching for a newspaper on her desk she shows him a picture – a picture of the bus stop that sad morning. “This priest?” she asks, pointing to the man sitting in the right-hand corner.

Ike nods dumbly.
She gently puts down the paper and sits back in her chair. “Ike,” she says softly, “I know how upsetting this must be for you, but please I need you to be as clear as possible – “

“It was him,” he says firmly.

“All the other witnesses say it was the girl in the hijab – “

“Aunty – “ Ike leans forward and grabs the newspaper off the table, ignoring the sharp pain in his arm. “Aunty, look at this woman,” he says, stabbing the picture with a finger. “Does she look like someone who wants to die?”

She gently takes the paper from him and pats his arm. “It's okay, Ike. You're right. Relax, okay? Relax and tell me what you remember.”

He sighs. “I couldn't see everybody from where I was, but I could see the last four or five people.” He reaches for the newspaper again, and focuses on the picture. “Yes, I could see up to him,” he says, pointing at a man with a backpack on his knee.

“How do you know it wasn't him?” she asks.

“Because he and the girl were together. They were smiling at each other; in fact I think he was toasting her and she wasn't resisting.” He frowns suddenly. “Yes, I remember him well. He was the one trying to impress my babe with money. He gave her one thousand naira for her hair.”

She looks at the picture thoughtfully. “That doesn't sound like someone who wants to kill himself at all,” she says almost to herself.

“I think the woman next to him was with that small girl,” Ike continues. “I couldn't see them clearly – but the girl was playing all over the place. And this pepper woman – does she look like somebody who will carry a bomb?”

She cannot disagree. “But why are you so sure it is the priest?”
“Because every other person was talking with other people. See the guy standing? That's his girlfriend; she's showing him something on her phone. Is it the yoghurt man – Clarence – or the old man that will carry a bomb?”

He inhales and continues to speak. “But you see that priest? He wasn't talking to anybody. He just sat there, angry with the world and everybody else. Priests will usually be preaching and sharing tracts, abi? This one just sat quietly, watching that case like a mother hen. It was him.”

She looks at Ike; takes in his passionate expression and flaring nostrils – and draws the newspaper to herself once more. “I don't want to argue with you Ike, but tell me; do you watch films?”

He looks surprised – and nods. “Yes aunty,” he says.

She smiles at that. “Have you seen explosions in movies before?”

He nods.

“So tell me, if the priest was the one carrying the bomb and he was sitting that close to you, how come you didn't die and the old man did?”

Ike opens his mouth – and closes it. He looks at the picture on the newspaper the police commissioner is holding out towards him – and looks at her. “I do...I don't know,” he admits. “But if it wasn't him, who was it then?”

Both of them sit back in their chairs, confusion their common ground.
aftermath

The reporter's lipstick was just a shade too thick but nobody noticed – or they were not interested.

Or it didn't matter.

What did what was she was about telling the watching nation.

She swept her coiffure from her forehead and over her shoulder before adjusting her blouse around the chest area, careful not to brush against the microphone secreted somewhere there.

“Banke, you're on in five…”

Nodding, she quickly set aside the compact and looked towards the camera, her face assuming the composed mask she uses everyday at the same time.

Nine pm.

She inhaled; closing her eyes and opening them a second before the red recording light came on the camera. Pausing, she gathered her thoughts in a coherent pattern while the headline flashes across the screen:

BREAKING NEWS
Bomb blast survivor reunited with family.

And then, she starts to speak.

“Earlier today, a few minutes after Sunshine bus stop was destroyed in a bomb blast, a little girl was found wandering around clutching a five hundred naira note. The girl; whose name as we found out earlier today is Ovie Asemotta, a six-year old student. She was sick so her mother came to pick her from school to take her to the doctor's.”
She stopped and cleared her throat. She said, “Excuse me.”

When she raised her head to look at the camera again, there were tears in her eyes and small cracks appeared in her voice; “Her mother, Mrs. Yvonne Asemotta is one of the victims of the explosion reported earlier today; the explosion that destroyed Sunshine bus stop. We send our condolences to the families of the bereaved.

“Join us as we observe a minute of silence for the departed souls.” Everything stilled in the studio; even the cameras seemed to hold their breaths, standing like mannequins.

And across the nation over fifty million people in their living rooms stopped everything they were doing to pay their respects to people they did not know.

“May their souls rest in peace. Thank you, we will be back in a few minutes with the regular news bulletin.”

Behind the camera, a hand signals; five, four, three, two, one. “Cut!”

Banke exhaled as the crew came forward. “That was really good, Banke. You almost had us shedding tears ourselves.”

“Well done, you Oscar-winning newscaster you!” That was the overweight DOP. “You know, for a moment I actually thought you meant it.”

Banke’s eyes stabbed daggers into his bulging stomach. “What makes you think I didn’t?”

Their eyes followed her as she walked out of the studio.

“What is wrong with her?” the DOP asked his colleagues. “Is she on her period or something?”

They looked at him and then at each other – and as one, walked out of the studio, leaving their boss with a stunned expression.
“Was it something I said?” he asked no one in particular.
dedication

in memory of Dr Edward Dede who died in the UN house explosion on the 26th of August 2012; the first of what has almost become normal; the hundreds and hundreds of people who have lost their lives in suicide bomb attacks, bomb blasts or related events – and the hurting; the grieving sons, daughters, siblings, fathers, wives, mothers, friends, lovers, colleagues, neighbors they leave behind.

they say to live in the hearts of those we love is to live forever.

we will never forget you.

i; will never forget you.

seun odukoya
December 30th 2015
2:17 am