

Free wheel

THE speed of the car was a little over a hundred kilometres an hour when suddenly the driver felt that one of the tyres was flat. He put the car in neutral gear,

Fiction Than Nation

Femi
Fatoba

took his foot off the accelerator and allowed the car to come a natural halt. By the time the car came to a full stop the guilty tyre was damaged beyond use. Thank God he had a spare tyre, for it is suicidal to travel on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway without a spare tyre and a very good wheel spanner. But many people do travel on the road without spare tyres anyway. They rely absolutely on God's protection. You see, God must understand that things are very expensive in Nigeria. We are

not sure as to the depth of this driver's belief in God. He had a spare tyre; a good one at that.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon but realising the danger of being too long alone on one spot on that road, he quickly got out of the car, got some twigs on the road to tell on-coming vehicles of the presence of a broken-down car. He also brought out his extra tyre, putting it on the road in such a way as to protect him from on-coming vehicles. He swung into action and proceeded to change the erring tyre. No sooner had he started than one of the vehicles zooming by stopped a few metres away from him. The car reversed towards him to be a bit closer. First, he threw a glance in the direction of the vehicles thinking that it was somebody coming to help. His attention went back to the nuts he was loosening in order to get the flat tyre out. Before he knew it another car had stopped close to the first one. The driver of the car, like the first one, got out and walked towards him. He kept working. Suddenly he noticed that the two men were on other side of his car, each with his wheel spanner trying to remove the two good tyres on the passenger side.

'What do you think you are doing?' Asked the driver with the flat tyre.

'You can jolly well see what I am doing', answered the man loosening the rear tyre.

'Don't mind him', chipped in the one at the front tyre. 'Some people are damn selfish'. Then looking over the car at the driver with the flat tyre he said with a tone of utter disgust, 'You think you are the only one needing a free tyre! Instead of hurrying up to get the one you want before the owner of the car gets here, you stand there challenging others who are doing exactly the same thing that you are doing.'

'Which owner of the car? But this is my car!' Roared the driver with the flat tyre, angry and frustrated at the same time.

'Well, there is nothing to be angry about. I didn't realise that the car belonged to you.' He stretched his back, held his wheel spanner in his left hand and walked away to his car as if he hadn't done anything untoward.

'You mean I just wasted my time for nothing!' Exclaimed the one at the front wheel. 'Bastard'. Before the driver with the flat tyre could look, he was off still cursing.

Clay pots grow not on the farm

Melon vines don't crawl in the market place

Divination was cast for him

Who found what was not lost...

He got the flat tyre changed, went round to the other side of the car, retied all the nuts that had been untied by the

would-be looters. As he was about to start his car and move off, he noticed a tow truck on the other side of the road, the driver perched at the steering wheel waiting, looking at him as a vulture does a dying animal.

The Offending Afterthought

The kite shrieked

It did not stop

The rumbler groaned

It did not stop its terrifying groan...

They numbered fifteen. Fierce-looking and hefty they all were. The neighbourhood knew that they were coming, and they came on the dot of two o'clock in the morning as they promised in their letter. They started their operation from the first house to the short street. The whole neighbourhood was awake and each person living there knew what was coming to him or her. As soon as they arrived, they announced on their loudspeaker and told everybody to leave their door open. Anybody who disobeyed risked being killed after such a person had been robbed. It didn't matter a hoot whether you lived in one of these houses with all wall fences or with razor wire on the fence. When landlords resorted to the architecture of fear, the 'lords of the night,' the very objects of fear devised other means of reaching their goal. So, in the end the height of your fence did not really matter since the 'august visitors' compelled you to let them in anyway. It was mental fear that devised the tall fences and razor wires, but it was physical fear which opened the doors to let in the 'visitors' whenever they eventually came.

The owner of house number six thought he was different. He was not as rich as the other landlords in the neighbourhood. There was no opulence about his house. The tall walls on both sides of the house were built by his neighbours, as protections for their own houses. The fence in the front of the house was made of a few anaemic flowers. In fact, they uglified the house than beautifying it.

As soon as the announcement was made by the 'night-lords' the front door of house number six was flung open, and the occupants sat up waiting. Stories had been heard of people who lost both property and lives because their front doors were not opened fast enough to let in the night marauders. It was always better not to offend them, led by their 'captain' they walked in and they were greeted as warmly as possible under the circumstance. They searched every room in the house. They were rather surprised at the frugality of the furnishing and the general austere nature of everything they saw..

'Come here', commanded the barrel-chested gang-leader. 'We have been in five houses and we had a good harvest from each of those houses. Let us see what you have.

Bring them out; money, jewelry, anything.'

'Sir', the man of the house began trying as possible to control his trembling voice, 'we', pointing to his wife, 'we are poor sir. We have no car, we don't have the kind of jewelry you might be interested in sir, only the cheap kind. If you will follow me into the bedroom sir, to see everything in the wardrobe, I mean sir, those cheap things are not worth your while. We have no money at all sir. We are both retired'.

'You own this house and you want me to believe that you have no money! You must be lying.'

'Would I lie to somebody like you sir? I wouldn't do that sir. I am old enough to know that that could be bad for me and my wife.'

The gang leader looked at the man and his wife shifting his gazing from one to the other and shook his head. The wife broke out in cold sweat. She wanted to talk but her mouth was dry. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. When she finally found her voice, all she could whisper was 'In the name of Jesus'. The look and the threatening cough from one of the men were enough to tell her that she uttered an inappropriate expression. She quickly covered her mouth with the palm of her right hand and swallowed hard.

W

hen landlords resorted to the architecture of fear, the 'lords of the night,' the very objects of fear devised other means of reaching their goal. So, in the end the height of your fence did not really matter since the 'august visitors' compelled you to let them in anyway.

'Look, you people have wasted our time. We've got lots of goodies from every house we've been to on this street but your...' said the leader.

'We are sorry sir. That is the way things are with us, sir. I beg you sir.' The gang leader was rather sympathetic and was about to get up and leave when the house owner added as an afterthought; 'As you know yourself sir, the fingers of the human hand are not equal.'

'Is that so?' Retorted the leader.

'That is the way things are sir', replied the landlord thinking that he had at last found a soft spot in the leader's mind'

'But your neighbours seem to have their fingers equal.'

'Sir, sir, the fingers of the hand can never be equal.'

The kite shrieked

It did not stop

The rumbler groaned

It did not stop its terrifying groan

If a divination was performed for the frightened

When he farted with his mouth.

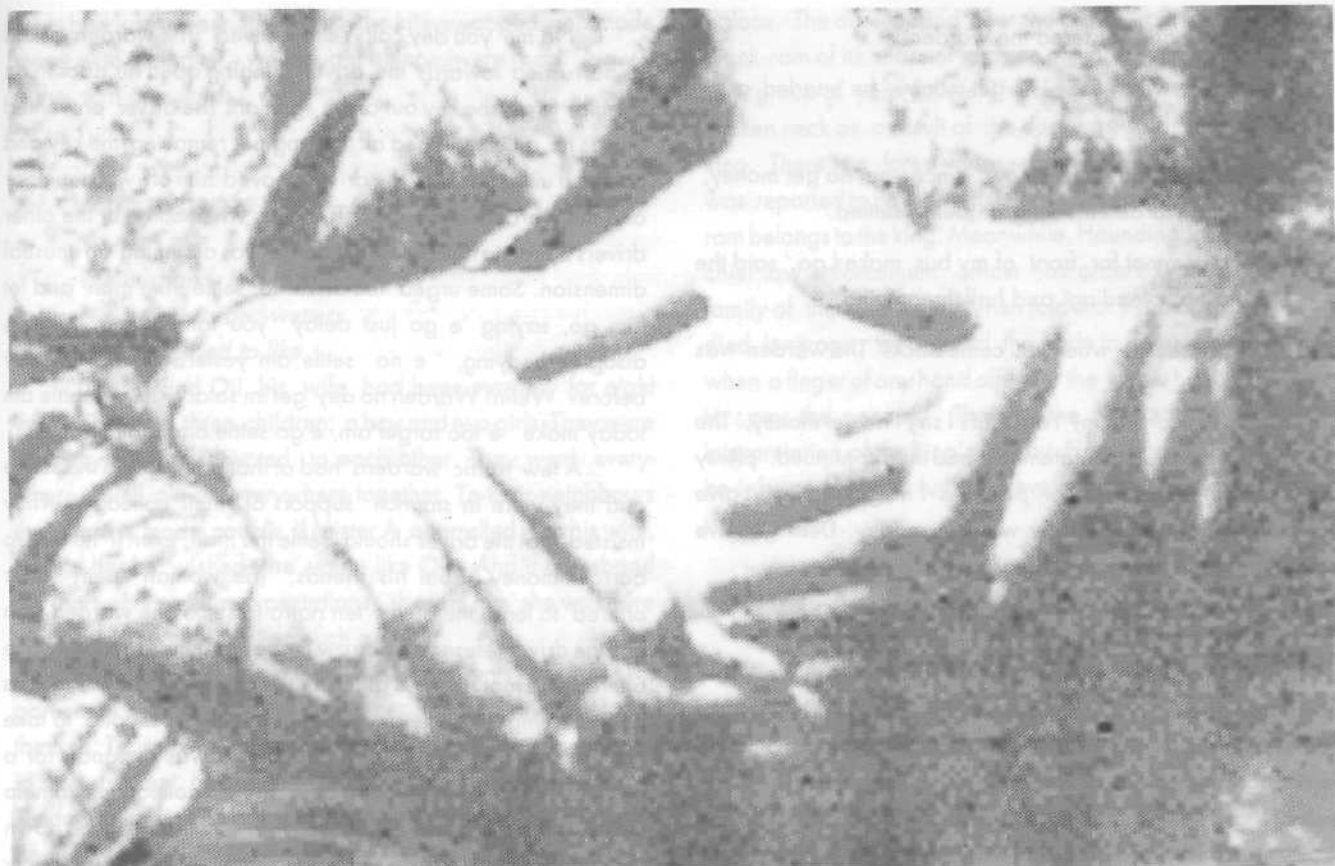
'We shall see about that', said the gang leader as he beckoned to one of his men who walked in with a very sharp cutlass. The act was swift after the man was held down by some of the robbers.

'Now', said the gang leader, 'the fingers of one of your hands are equal. Nature has been corrected for you. When we come back again be very sure that your house is full of valuables. You useless man, making the likes of us go out at this time of the night for nothing, telling us that fingers are not equal. If everybody were like you, how do you expect people like us to make a living? Damn fool!'

He fainted. His wife managed to revive him all by herself. Then she dashed out to knock on some of the neighbours' door for help to get him to a hospital. No one answered her knocks.

News-flash!

Joy knew no bounds today in the home of Mrs. Anna Funmilayo. The sixty-five year old woman became a mother for the first time in her life when she gave birth to a baby boy. Neighbours, friends and relations were reported to have trooped to the woman's house to rejoice with her. When our reporter called at the house to congratulate the family, he spoke to the woman's husband who, seemed dazed about everything going on around him. He was reported to have said that he could not remember when he last slept with his wife. Mrs. Funmilayo was asked if she did not feel odd giving birth so many years after menopause. Her answer was that it was the man in her life who paused. However the pastor of Mrs. Funmilayo's church, who also spoke to our reporter said it was a miracle; and that it happened in his 'church'.



Untitled © Jide Adeniyi-Jones

His church also runs the private maternity where the new baby was born. We congratulate the family and the church.

In an unrelated incident a woman has complained to the police that her baby was stolen at the same maternity where Mrs. Funmilayo was reported to have had her baby. She was reported to have said that she lost consciousness immediately after giving birth to her baby and when she regained consciousness, she was told that the baby had died. However, she could remember being told that it was a boy before she passed out. Asked whether she was shown the body of the baby supposed to have died, she said, 'No.' The incident is being investigated by the police.

The Settlement

It started, as always, like a joke. The traffic warden stood in front of the mini-bus, popularly known as 'danfo', demanding his daily 'toll' from the driver. Usually it is a cat-and-mouse game in which the driver's five or ten naira is always the victim. Ten naira is nothing, nothing at all to a commercial driver if one considers his daily taking as fares are arbitrarily hiked

up under any pretext.

At first, the driver refuses and the traffic warden insists, they argue shoulder-to-bumper, do some verbal jab-and-parry, sometimes abusing, sometimes joking and at other times cursing, with the driver eventually crumpling up a ten naira note and throwing it in the face of the traffic warden. The warden always wins.

But on this occasion, the driver was not going to give. And the traffic warden who was not used to being refused, was not going to budge. He knew that the longer he delayed the driver the sooner his 'toll' would be paid. The 'danfo' driver was anxious to leave but he was not willing to pay. So the warden planted himself in front of the bus daring the driver to knock him down, knowing that no driver would dare hit a traffic warden in uniform with his fist, not to talk of knocking him down with his vehicle. It has never been heard of. After all the traffic warden is a law enforcement officer. And on this occasion he was in uniform.

'Settle me now, make you de go,' the warden repeated for the umpteenth time.

'I say I no get money,' came the reply from the driver.

'Alright park,' ordered the warden.

'Park for what? I say I no get money,' he snarled at the warden.

'Make you stay there now since you no get money,' said the warden insisting on being settled.

'I beg commot for front of my bus make I go,' said the driver half-pleading and half-threatening.

'You go see me when you come back?' The warden was emphatic.

'See you for wetin? You deaf? I say I no get money.' The driver hollered the last statement, and then continued: 'plenty driver dey this Osodi motor park. As I no get money to give you today, go ask somebody wey get money. Dem go give you. Abi na me only dey here?'

'You just dey start work? How come you no get money?' The warden would not budge.

'Wetin be your concern whether I just dey start work? Na your papa give me bus to drive? I be your papa im driver? Make una see me see trouble o.' The last statement was not directed to anybody in particular. Nobody paid them much attention either. That kind of argument was usual between drivers on one hand and traffic wardens on the other. It was more than a daily occurrence. It happened every minute.

'Whether my papa give you bus to drive or 'e no give you bus to drive, just settle me na im be my own.' The warden said, turning round leaning his back on the bus. At this gesture the driver stormed out of his bus in a bid to manhandle the warden. He thought better of it, went back into the bus, fumed for while and then jumped down again appealing to his brother drivers with both palms open.

'Make everybody come see this yellow fever o. I tell am say I no get money but 'e no wan' leave me alone o. I go wound am o. Make una tell am o.' Turning to the warden he asked, 'You wan' die because of five naira.'

Still no one paid much attention to the two men except one of the women petty traders who kept appealing to everybody but nobody in particular to give some water of peace to the two men to drink. Peacemakers never get any attention in such circumstances, especially in a place like Osodi motor park. And the woman was naturally ignored. Occasionally, hand shakings between bus drivers on the one hand and traffic wardens on the other, have been known to go beyond the elbow. But things usually went back to normal within seconds with everybody becoming as friendly as cats could be with mice. It was the turn of the traffic warden to get angry for being addressed as 'Yellow Fever'. That derogatory cognomen is associated with the colour of their uniform; an orange shirt or blouse (in case of women) over a black pair of trousers or shirt.

'Na me you dey call Yellow Fever?' The warden asked as he rushed towards the driver, flinging open his door in an attempt to get the key out of the ignition. The driver prevented him as he quickly turned off the engine, removing the key and putting it in his pocket. The driver shoved him off with the door and the warden almost fell. That was when some of the other drivers began to notice that the game was assuming an unusual dimension. Some urged the driver to 'settle' the man and let him go, saying 'e go just delay you for nothing.' Others disagreed saying, 'e no settle am yesterday and the day before? Wetin! Warden no dey get im salary? If e no settle am today make e too forget am, e go settle am another time.'

A few traffic wardens had at that point got to the scene and they were in staunch support of their colleague. They insisted that the driver should 'settle the man, even if he had to borrow money from his friends.' The woman petty-trader offered to lend the driver ten naira to settle the warden with but the driver refused to borrow money to settle anybody. She offered the money as a gift, still the driver refused it. He was just not going to settle anybody. Soon he proceeded to take off his shirt and the warden thought it was a signal for a physical fight. One of them advised his colleagues to help the confronted warden by forcing the recalcitrant driver down to the police station. As if stung by a bee, the driver suddenly jumped back into the bus, started the engine and put it in the reverse gear creating some space between the bus and the traffic warden who had immediately gone back to plant himself in front of the bus when his attempt to remove the keys failed. Before everybody realised what was happening, the bus lunged forward with a big roar and knocked the traffic warden flat on his back. He fainted. The driver then got out of his bus, pulled out a big iron rod from his seat, stood over the warden, preventing anybody from coming to his aid. Everybody stood as far back as it was safe, expecting the iron rod to come down hard on the warden.

'I tell you say you wan die of five naira. For ordinary common five naira na im you wan kill yourself? Every day na so so settle me, settle me. If no be because I get pickin for house I for settle you proper. Bastard! I be driver for your papa bus? Thief!' He lowered the iron rod, went back into his bus, put it in reverse gear again and maneuvered himself out of the place as his conductor jumped in shouting: 'Yaba, Yaba, Yaba'. The woman petty trader did all she could to help revive the warden. She fetched some cold water to be sprinkled on the warden's face, fanned furiously while some of his colleagues propped him up. It took about five minutes to bring the warden back to life.

The woman returned to her sedentary position where she sold sweets, kola-nuts, cigarettes, biscuits, and other whatnots to wardens, drivers and passengers. She sat back in her chair, wiped her face, sighed heavily and mused over

what had just happened: 'When the kite swooped and made away with the hawk, we thought things were bad. Now it is the turn of vultures.'

St. Valentine's Day Affair

*The husband is a thief
His wife is a bed-wetter;
Like is married to like*

Chucks and Oji his wife had been married for eight years. They had three children; a boy and two girls. They were a happy couple, devoted to each other. They went everywhere...well, almost everywhere together. To their neighbours they were a model couple. If Mister A quarrelled with his wife, he told her he wished she were like Oji. And if a husband fell short of his wife's expectations, she told him she was sure that Chucks would not do such a thing.

The three children knew their parents as the best parents in their small world. The other children at school told them so. Those other children heard it from their own parents in their different homes. All the other children envied them. The few friends who got invited to birthday parties in Chucks and Oji's home felt specially privileged.

Last Valentine's day Chucks got a card from Oji. It was the first thing he saw that morning, strategically positioned on the side table by his side of the bed. The family had a good breakfast after which Chucks told his wife that he was going to a meeting of the 'Old Boys'. Oji also reminded Chucks of the birthday party of a child of one of her friends. She was going with the children, of course. Chucks left home mid-morning. An hour or so later, Oji prepared lunch for the children and told them that she was going to see another friend before they all went to the birthday party. If she did not return early enough the children were told to have their lunch.

Chucks and Oji's meeting later in the day was caused by the clatter of falling plates as a service boy accidentally banged the shoulder of his tray-bearing arm against the door frame. Simultaneously the doors opened in rooms fourteen and fifteen to see what was happening. Chucks and his valentine peeped out of room fifteen while Oji and her valentine peeped out of room fourteen. The four faces looked at one another and each pair went into their room. Each door was shut with the most quiet click forty-five kilometres from Chucks' and Ojis' home.

NEWS

Two rams, one black and the other brown, were engaged in a butting duel at the market in front of the king's

palace. The duel started after the brown ram tried to rob the black ram of its share of a piece of yam given to the two rams by a group of yam sellers. The brown ram, which suffered a broken neck as a result of the duel was said to belong to the king. There is a forest-wide search for the black ram which was reported to have fled the scene on realising that the brown ram belongs to the king. Meanwhile, Hounding Jackal the king's chief law enforcement officer has ordered the arrest of the family of the black ram. When told that the black ram's father died long ago, he ordered the body to be exhumed. After all when a finger of any hand offends, the whole hand is expected to pay the penalty. That is the new and official legal interpretation of the king's law by Hounding Jackal. You shall be informed of any further developments about the case of the two rams.

The Wasted Generation

*After they had fed well
After they drank their fill
They invited all evils down
They wanted all rats to perish
All animals to perish
All birds to perish
All fish to perish
After they all perished
They asked; 'Is there any priest left?'
I asked; 'Is there any priest left?'
And the elders told me to
Call the luxuriant Morere-of-the-river
Priest of the house of Orunmila*

Pa Alabi dragged himself home, slumped into a chair and sighed heavily. He could just manage to give a reply to his wife's welcome greetings. Not only was he tired, he was dejected. After being away from home for twelve hours to collect his pension, he came home empty-handed. It had been like that for the past five working days. He and other pensioners had been going to the government treasury for the past week but the clerks had been too busy arranging papers to attend to any of them. They were required to be at the secretariat at seven o'clock each morning. He left home on the dot of six. It didn't matter to the clerks where you came from, neither did it matter how you got to the secretariat. What mattered was that you got there at seven so that your name might be checked at eight o'clock. The clerks were never on time and getting there was not a guarantee that you would be attended to. So for the past week nobody got any attention.

For the past year the pensioners had been petitioning the government to make arrangements to pay pensioners at their local treasuries but they had been ignored. All the pensioners

have had to travel to their capital to collect their entitlements. Pa Alabi was lucky to live in the capital. Some came from as far away as hundreds of miles, knowing that if you didn't come, your name would be struck out of the register. You were taken for dead. It wasn't that the dead didn't get paid. They did. The clerks knew how to thumbprint the papers to show that everybody got paid.

Pa Alabi's wife knew all the stories. She and her husband had always taken them in their strides. Sometimes they even laughed at some of them. But on this particular day Pa Alabi's wife knew that the matter was more than the fact of her husband not bringing any money home from the treasury. Could it be because it was a Friday and there was not enough food in the house to see them through the weekend? Could it be because there was no money to buy presents for one of their grandchildren who was two years old? Could it be that he was just simply fed up with having to go through that process every month-end with the gratuitous insult heaped on them by the treasury clerks? Many times Pa Alabi had come from the pension's exercise to catch fever from having to line up in the scorching sun from dawn to dusk for days to end. Each

'Two of us dropped dead; the third, a woman fainted but she was revived.'

'Oh God!' She said clasping her right palm on her mouth.

'It didn't matter to the clerks. They still took their time over minute and unnecessary details, demanded to be bribed and told you that your file was 'missing' if you as much as hesitated to do their bidding. It is the new retirees that I pity. They come from their villages thinking that the process would take a few hours. They have no money to go back home so they have been staying with those of us who have extra rooms in our houses and can afford to feed them. Centralisation, they call it... asking all the pensioners in the country to travel to the capital at the end of each month to collect the pittance they call pension! And the clerk keeps us lined up all day like wet rags to dry out in the sun.'

'Well, I suppose they want all pensioners to know a bit of the country,' said his wife, attempting to introduce some comic relief.

'I suppose so since they moved the capital northwards. I wonder what some of us would do if we all had to depend on our pensions!'

Pa Alabi's wife knew all the stories. She and her husband had always taken them in their strides. Sometimes they even laughed at some of them. But on this particular day Pa Alabi's wife knew that the matter was more than the fact of her husband not bringing any money home from the treasury.

time that happened a large part of the money was spent on curing the fever. On this occasion, Pa Alabi's face wore an inscrutable agony. The pain was palpable. His wife sat opposite him watching every wrinkle on his face, expecting him to say something, knowing that he knew that she expected him to unburden his mind. Words were stuck in his throat. His intermittent and deep sighs began to worry his wife. At last, in order to get her husband to say something she asked: 'Shall I bring you some cold water? The table is already set for dinner but just some water to quench your thirst.' Even that did not work. Pa Alabi merely shook his head. That worried the woman the more. He closed his eyes, threw his head back on the backrest of the chair, but his wife knew that he did not doze off. There was a long silence. At last he opened his eyes and his voice seemed to come from nowhere. 'Two of us died on the queue today.' There was a sharp gasp from the wife

'What did you say?'

Let us thank those shoulders

Which prevent our dresses from falling off

Thanks to our good fathers

Who bore us as offsprings

Pa Alabi went to the dinner table but found that the food did not have a good taste in his mouth. It wasn't that food was badly prepared. His hunger was just beyond food. His thoughts went to his colleagues who resigned their jobs when they were ordered on short notice, to move to the new capital without any accommodations made ready for them. There were those seasoned administrators who were arbitrarily retired to make room for rookies from a particular section of the country. Their retirements were announced on the radio... they were not even accorded the dignity of letters. The shock killed a lot of them. They had educated themselves at their own cost and served the nation to the best of their ability to be thrown on the dung-

heap of ethnicity at the retiring age of their lives. Pa Alabi was one of the unusually lucky ones. His father had worked with the railways before it was killed by the trailer owners who, because of their ethnic connections cornered the haulage of everything from food to petroleum. That was when the country was really one. His late father had a house in one of the northern towns. When Pa Alabi was transferred to the new capital, he sold the house and spent the proceeds on building a new one in one of the villages around the capital. In the village, he enjoyed the slow pace of life, the remove from the incessant problems of distant relatives in the old capital where he was born and the anonymity of living in a community of 'strangers'. Suddenly he began to miss home. He looked in the direction of his wife who was worried that he hadn't eaten all day, gave a cold smile which worried her the more and said in an emotionless tone; 'Enough is enough. I think we should be thinking of going back home.'

For the next two days after that, which was a weekend, Pa Alabi had a good rest. Early on Monday morning he and the wife left home and went to the office of an Estate Agent. They put the house up for sale.

*Let money's house be beautified with white chalk
Let the house of beads be adorned with camwood
The prime among heads will never lie at the bottom of the heap
Divination was cast for Eji Obara
When there was doubt about the value of patience
In the home of Olofin*

Sharpest Knives

*When goats are brought to the market
They are tethered
When sheep are brought to the market
They are tethered...*

When three young men invited Kola out of his crowd of feasting friends at the funeral ceremony, he did not know what to expect. Still laughing from the last joke, he followed them a few yards away from his group. The conversation had gone from one topic to another covering such things as politics, food and drinks, education, traditional medicine, and death. It was a death that was being celebrated. In our part of the world nobody mourns a ninety-three year old person when he or she dies. Such a death is always an excuse for merriment. The drinks were flowing and the food came in varieties. Fingers were being licked and lips smacked. Music came in deafening decibels from a live band. Enjoyment was flowing like a river in flood.

Kola was almost sure that the invitation had to do with

university admission. As a university lecturer he was used to admission seekers fishing him out when and where he least expected. He decided to be polite and listen to them first but he was going to tell the trio off royally if their invitation had anything to do with admission to the university. After all he was at the funeral party to enjoy himself.

The one who appeared the oldest of the three was the spokesman. He cleared his throat with a lot of flourish before speaking. 'Sir', He said, 'You see sir, we are hired killers.' Kola silently cursed his stars for coming to the funeral party. His mind raced up and down! Had he travelled all the way from Ibadan to the hinterland of Ekiti to be confronted by hired killers? Why would anybody want to kill him? Was it somebody who did not get admitted into the university? As far as he could remember he had not quarrelled with anybody in the last five years.

He broke out in cold sweat, brought out a handkerchief from the folds of his flowing agbada but he could not wipe his face with it. He gripped it as if it was a weapon of defence and shook visibly. He wanted to turn round and look at his friends hoping that one of them might notice the situation he was in, but he felt a terrible frigidness in his neck. Kola was too frightened to notice the card which the man who spoke was trying to get him to look at.

'Here is our card sir.' The man said.

'Card? You mean you have a card for...' He did not quite finish the question before looking at the card which read:

*Sharpest knives in Town:
We know all the cuts and joints
For efficient animal killing
For your parties and celebrations;
Cows, Sheep, Goats, etc;*

There was also a name and a business address somewhere in Lagos. The spokesman boasted that they had slaughtered camels and horses in their business and, as a joke, added that they were looking forward to the day they would be employed to slaughter an elephant.

Relieved that the men were not hired assassins, Kola fainted. The three men were shocked to see Kola faint, so were two of his friends who were watching from their seats. They got up to help but before they got to the scene the three men fled probably wondering why anybody would faint just by listening to them advertise their profession. Damn book people!

*When goats are brought to the market
They are tethered
When sheep are brought to the market
They are tethered
when a butcher comes to the market
He never wears a rope round his neck.*



Lynn Chukwura

a holder of two degrees in Comparative Literature and a Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Wisconsin, Lynn Chukwura has made Nigeria her country and Lagos her home since 1973. She has three children: Mezuo, Nkem and Nancy Nwuneli.

For 24 years, until the beginning of 1998, she taught literature in the department of English, University of Lagos. She worked part-time as West



Donna Juanita

entering the year of her quarantieme sat among the egg-smeared crockery and considered life in perspective of what early marriage and toddlers sprung to teens had taught: Nature cyclical and endlessly repetitive, marked by rhythmic demands of appetite, housekeeping, marital embrace, in their narrow range of variations, borders of domestic security defended by diligent renewal of diets and the beauty parlour-reaching after an abstract ideal imposed by journalistic neoplatonists as feminine ladder of aspiration - self-acceptance difficult to distinguish from stagnation.

If she were to renounce effort, the one-way slope would assert itself, the skull beneath the made-up face. To halt, reflect, weigh the elusiveness of safety and all the maintenance work required - she found it daunting.

But hidden message of the dustcloth is defeat foreordained. Dust conquers all. Juanita considered what a great good girl she had been. Who would reward her and with what recognition?

GOOD WIFE AND MOTHER AWARD and eulogies she would have to die to hear.

the old wives' tale

in sanctioned version comes prince charming the euphemism for potent hacks through bramble-forests of safeguards camouflaging sleeping princess's rich castle

Lynn Chukwura

from casual passers-by.
thorns penetrated, lone footstep
moves unerringly to kiss.
castle erupts alive, commencing
feast of happily ever after.

sanitised telling hushes aftermaths
where prince moves on; where princess,
grateful or not for awakening,
keeps drawbridge lowered hospitably
to wayfarers of her own choosing.

in times to come, speak rather of
princess stirred awake by restless
dreams,
longing to throw open gate jammed
by resistance of overgrowth, discovers
within the implements for her need,
swathes way to the outside herself,
laying path of her own journey's
beginning.

dismissed

want to run away home to mother
dead these twelve years.
how could she keep gone when I hunger
so;
who will spread table before my enemies
again my wine has spilled away?

I sacrificed mother
to win back father.
he approved my lavishing help with her
dying.
nursemaid to death I grew womanly;

African
Coordinator of
Ashoka
Innovators for
the Public, an
NGO network
of creative
individuals
dedicated to
public service
in many field
over a period of
eight years.

In August 1998
the University
of Lagos Press
is publishing a
volume of her
poetry,
entitled
Archotyping.
'Donna
Juanita, 'the
old wives'
tale
'dismissed
and 'prima
donna' are
taken from this
volume.

Her poems
have appeared
in the
anthologies
*und auf den
strassen eine
Pest: Junge
nigerianische
Lyrik*, (Bonn,
Germany), and
New Rain V
(New York),
and in *Okike*,
ANA Review,
and the
defunct *Metro*
magazine,
among others,

faith was reborn
family embraced me.
no more prodigal, I poured out my
fullness
burying bad childhood in mother's grave.
but after she was disposed of
on the third day
zombie-raising father
exhumed it.
mother hadn't a word to say.

prima donna

you the heroine of your own drama
ought to recognise there are other
theatres
and performances than your own.
I have a lead part in a different story
though showing off-Broadway,
experimental, apparently formless,
equally
eschewing glamour and formulas tried-
and-true.
confounding public opinion's
established taste
requires sangfroid daring, worth more
than glitter of your self-shaped acclaim.
experience playing one role
does not qualify you as insightful
on the painstaking rehearsals of another.
get off my stage.

not the blues

nearly four a.m.
as rain insinuates its patter
into the mind-focused room where I
work.
having brought in the potatoes and
onions
I am stayed momentarily by a mirror-

someone with whom I am mildly
acquainted
is smiling to herself.

conversation with my daughter

as if penetrating my recent weeks' delving
six-year innocence asks
how do people lose God?
for once attentive, I lay aside
my book's retreat, do my best
to answer. other questions follow,
then cleaving pick strikes ore:
what are people to do
who *don't*
have peaceful and loving hearts?
I marvel at words quarried
from child-unfrequented depths,
opening veins of my experience,
my struggle-
knows she what she asks?
for whom is clarification sought?
humbly I proffer sifted particles
of wisdom, trembling before
such unwarranted trust,
caution her about parents'
own groping lacks...
I know, soft voice absolves;
thank you for
answering my questions.

wisdom's expression

before me, empty sheet
expectancy
how to shape my day's choosings
into significant works.
she I would incarnate

in Nigeria.
 Four other
 thematically-
 arranged
 volumes of
 her poetry are
 ready for
 publication.
 She writes
 short stories
 and is working
 on a
 biography, *The
 Church is Not a
 Building*. She
 has nearly
 completed her
 first novel,
 which
 tentatively is
 called *Journal
 of a Man*.

gives moments of awareness,
 quickened vision of what might always
 be
 but isn't...
 human nature, perversity's name,
 forgets
 or closets them as extraordinary
 adornments
 but impractical.

crucial times made to see,
 I've shucked off outgrown, shabby
 garments,
 refashioned my word-robe
 in obedience to her beckoning.
 some revisions have given birth
 to what still lives.

more often
 her interjections burst disruptively
 into the flow of my self-centred
 discourse;
 styles too disparate to reconcile.

how to sustain a unified development
 between epiphanies?
 even as I attempt being
 her porte-parole
 details of usage trip me up.
 fixing attention on an elevated theme
 I grow careless with linkages,
 fail to discern the grammar of eternity
 in each moment's choices.

for today's unwritten page
 I invoke her help with
 the articles and conjunctions
 on which my story's effectiveness
 depends

thesis

without words, no concepts,
 just river's meander and chirping from
 the trees.

we grow into the language we wear
 like styles of our locale, personalised
 only with minor variations,
 then like a woman in spiked heels and
 silk
 cannot jog through the brush
 (or, in opposite dress
 can do little else).
 the very bone structure of our feet is
 moulded
 to shapes we believe natural law.
 religion expounds innate destructiveness
 of lopes through the wilderness;
 hobbled experience proves it true.

antithesis

it was Pilate
 who applied *what is truth?*
 as disinfectant.
 concepts, a second set of hands,
 thrust beyond feel and self-stroking,
 can be salvation of another's vulnerable
 quite objective flesh.
 words such as apartheid
 have crucified.
 ask the six million Jews
 about relativity.

affirmation of the irreducible

revealed and veiled by lowered eyes
 punctuated by firmness, sensitivity
 humour
 and qualities less definable
 all imprinting themselves
 in the same patterned creases:
 exposed hieroglyphics
 of untranslatable you.

the more one knows

the more one knows
otherness-
precious like all mysteries
for revealing dimensions beyond knowing.

one is reassured
(despite moments of cowardice)
that even the familiar cannot be fenced in
by our utilitarian reach
...reassured
that our categorical understanding
sieves out a few lumps of graspables
while much more eludes us.
...reassured
that reality cannot be whittled to human size.

a matter of joy it is
that we cannot possess,
even in our understanding
the ones we most love.
unless retreating to soulless things
what we love needs be greater
than our hard-clenching selves
to draw us beyond what we think we are,
nourished by hunger
for what we can never devour.

mutability

blessed are those who can balance
who enjoy the phased and flowing
who can dance to any music.

learn to relinquish the *I must have*.

when you must grasp after happiness,
recognise it in only one guise,
you know little of what you seek,
surrounded by presents
like spoilt child on christmas morning
moping for the one not given.

know the now.

endurance is a hardening
for weakness to become,
yet the rigid breaks.
bones must calcify
but not heart.
moving and upright
body needs
are paradoxical:
apertures that rhythmically open and close;
bones that uphold flesh's
ninety-per-cent water fluidity;
muscles that flex/unflex
mediation between contraries.
death alone stabilises rigor and rest.

meanwhile is reality.

the soft shall learn hardness
the hard shall be ground down
even the most reluctant
shall be baptised with change.

computer housekeeping

memory overburdened
start-up was taking too long
and when I shifted from task to task
the interval of delay kept justifying another
cigarette,
the disk drive, though condensed, being burdened
with an inordinate number of programs
and the programs with far too many files.
my way had been to save everything
to make backup copies rather than to delete.

at some unmarked point in the past
I changed from novice to collector
cramming onto my hard drive
not only the essential programs for my life
but also every software novelty
legitimately obtained
copied
and share-ware which I treated as freeware

despite all the annoying notices that they were not in public domain.

once you know the procedure

just a matter of running the program disks,

enter, and it merges with the system;

new activities, new functions ready at a click.

you don't first notice the slowed reaction of the older functions

as system resources are drained.

today marks another transition for me as user.

after a cold look at my fileman

I moved down the cluttered list

deleting

program after program

retaining only what was essential to my work,

steadily monitoring my systems resources

and the improvement of functions as I progressed.

however

it's not so simple.

to install a new program is relatively easy

after the first time.

removing a program seems to the dilettante

a matter of selecting *delete* from the menu

and then clicking.

to the eye it disappears,

the directory showing no sign of the space it once took.

but the original programs do not revert automatically

to their old efficiency.

you learn how the mere fact of having once given a place

to other programs, even if only to experiment with them,

has altered the set-up.

hidden files have distributed themselves in other directories,

and persevere despite their program's termination.

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