

Her Lagos adventure had started with a hand delivered letter from her father's estranged sister last December. Aunt Isioma said she would be in the village for Christmas and wanted forgiveness for the damaged relationship between both families. She also wrote that Gladys could return to Lagos with her if her mother agreed. Gladys had been as surprised as her mother and brothers at the request, but also very excited. At twenty-six, and after one year steeped away in the far north of the country for national service, she was ready to move to the next step. Her mother disagreed, but went ahead to visit the village for the New Year, while Gladys and her brothers remained in the town for the holidays.

"Gladys," her mother called a few hours after her return to Enugu a week later. "I've had a discussion with Isioma. She was still in Onicha-olona when I got there."

They were together in the bedroom they both shared in their small flat. A fan whirred overhead, shifting threadbare curtains drawn across the louvered windows.

"She told me she is now a widow."

"Oh no! When did her husband die?" This was not contained in the letter her aunt had sent.

"He passed away in September last year. She said he wanted a quiet burial so she didn't bother to let anyone know. I also don't know how those Yorubas do their tradition. Anyway, everyone was agog; it's been almost twenty years since she was last seen in the village. I couldn't help but feel sympathetic for her; I know how lonely widowhood can make one."

Gladys watched her mother clear her throat and fiddle with her neckline. "We spoke privately and she apologized again saying she wants us to put the past years behind us."

"What's your own opinion Mama?"

"I told her I didn't appreciate how she thought she could come back so easily without any explanation for what happened." Gladys bent her head as her mother continued, "Didn't I tell you I sent Isioma several letters when your father was sick and she never replied? It hurt me so badly when she didn't show up for the funeral and I thought I would never forgive her."

Gladys squeezed her mother's hands.

"When I married your father, I was happy he had a sister my age. She was already married and lived in Lagos but I hoped we would become like sisters. That never happened."

Gladys knew it was so painful for her mother because she lost most of her own relatives when her village fell during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war.

"Anyway, I decided to let bygones be and told her I had forgiven her. But I have my reservations; I'm not comfortable with her request for you to come and live with her in Lagos."

"I know this Mama. But I still have to go there for the Zenon Oil test." She'd received the invitation letter a couple of weeks ago, and it had since become the fulcrum of her attempts to get her mother to allow her to move permanently to Lagos.

"Yes, and that's the reason I told Isioma that I would accept her request."

"Oh, thank you Mama..." Her jump of joy was halted by her mother's next words.

"I could say we'll find a temporary place for you in Lagos, but I have to be realistic and think of your future too. If you succeed at the test, there'll be interviews, and I don't want you to have to travel back and forth or worry where to live. You all do very well in your studies, and I thank God for that, but it has not been easy. I still have to see your brothers through school."

"I think I'll pass, that's why I am so excited. Mama, thank you so much."

Her mother looked at her and smiled with pride. "I know you will, even if not with Zenon. The truth is you stand a better chance of getting a job there in Lagos."

Gladys nodded and her mother hugged her close.

"You understand that if not for God and our tight finances, you wouldn't be going to stay at Isioma's place in Lagos?"

"I know Mama, but things are getting better. You said so yourself."

"Yes I did..."

As her mother spoke, the electricity was cut off. They both laughed because this was the second time in as many hours. Gladys opened the windows and turned up the kerosene lamp burning low in

the corner. As she placed it on a table, shadows jumped across the faded walls. She sat back beside her mother on the low bed. It had a double mattress, one of which she threw on the floor when it was time to sleep.

Her mother continued speaking. "It may not be easy living with your aunt though. We don't have much, but this is your home and you have the run of it. It could be a different situation in Lagos. Isioma is a very wealthy woman and we're the poor relatives. It is possible she expects you to work around the place as some sort of house help."

"I understand and won't mind if that is the case. I am not afraid of hard work."

"I know Ada'm. You're my first and only daughter and I did my best to train you well. No matter what happens, please, be a good ambassador for me."

"I will Mama, and trust me, it will all come out right."

"I pray so. Your aunt might be amongst the rich people of this world, but I have taught you that true wealth is friendship with God. For reasons known best to her, Isioma kept away from us for over fifteen years. Do not give her grounds now to complain or call me bad names. Any time you want to come home, remember we're here with open arms."

Tears sprang to her eyes and she hugged her mother tight. "Thank you Mama."

"It will be well Ada'm." Her mother called her the pet name again, smoothing her hair.

Gladys travelled by the cheaper night bus two weeks later and arrived before dawn. She knew Lagos had about fifteen million people - over five times the size of Enugu - but it was an eye-opener seeing it herself. As she wandered out of the Peace Mass Transit bus station, the motor park just ahead was a noisy chaos with hundreds of battered yellow buses parked at random. The toots of vehicle horns, mobile phones, and loud shouts assaulted her ears. It was her first time in the crowded city, and she hoped to meet someone who would advise her on the best route to Victoria Island. Her wealthy aunt was not much help as she never used public transport.

She lugged her wheeled box down the road; there was no sense in dragging the flimsy rollers along the potholed sidewalk. The congestion was evident with people everywhere even though it was not yet fully light. Yoruba language bombarded her, from most of the people who thronged the streets and from the boys yelling through the open doors of moving yellow painted buses. Afro beat music blared from loudspeakers on top of parked vehicles.

She tuned out the noise and listened to the conductors barking out route and destinations to determine which of them was going to the area she wanted. She soon found a smaller *danfo* bus, clambered in and plopped down on the empty space on the middle bench. She wasn't surprised when the conductor said there was no timetable and the vehicle would only move when full. It was the same everywhere she had travelled. Gladys settled in, expecting they wouldn't wait too long to fill up. Passengers thronged the park and this bus was not one of the larger models. That would have meant a longer, sweatier delay on this humid morning.

The park also served as a market and narrow shops with colorful banners lined the edges. The air was thick with body odors, dust, and strange food smells. Gladys absorbed it; amused as she watched some of the other passengers buy various items from the hard discomfort of their seats. Hawkers came up to the bus to offer underpants, watches, popcorn, sausage rolls in worn wraps, and plastic bags of water. Gladys bought the water, not troubled about its purity, and sucked the bag dry. She tossed it out of the window as the bus wheezed and shuddered its way out into the traffic.

A mother with a child on each knee blocked her view of the road ahead. Cramped next to the woman's wide hips was the brawny conductor. Gladys contented herself with looking out through the smudged windows on both sides of the rickety yellow bus. It took them over an hour to hurdle the Lagos lagoon via the Third Mainland Bridge. As the sun started its ascent over the sometimes inching, sometimes stationary bus, Gladys was riveted by the sights and sounds of her new city. She marveled at the contradictory panoramas that met her gaze.

Men, women and children paddled canoes on the murky black water beneath; oblivious to the stench Gladys could smell from the top of the bridge. The large numbers of wooden houses balanced on stilts above the lagoon had rusty tin roofs wreathed in coils of smoke from open cooking fires. A

sawmill further down burnt sawdust and belched up even more clouds of smog. All this mixed with the exhaust plumes from the traffic to create a dense haze that tickled her nostrils. The late January sun outlined the façade of the Lagos Island skyline that towered in the distance. The many high-rise buildings may have been a different color in an earlier life, but all she saw now were structures blackened by decades in the fog.

About an hour after she disembarked from the bus, Gladys stopped to check if she was on the right path. She'd trundled her box along the street engrossed by the spectacular architecture on all sides. Well designed residential houses and the more imposing offices sat way back from the road with painted aluminum roofs and high metal gates. She now stood before the enormous construction site of an almost complete church whose grandeur was not diminished by the swarming laborers or the wooden scaffolding. Stained glass windows depicting scenes from the bible reflected off the marble walls and a massive pillared gateway framed a paved court yard. The laughter and whistles of the laborers when they noticed her gawking reminded her of the otherwise deserted street.

Gladys walked a few more feet, took another peek at her journal and concluded she was truly lost. She held up the journal in confusion. She'd sketched the directions at a mobile phone kiosk during an earlier conversation to inform Aunt Isioma of her arrival. Then, the route looked clear enough, but now she knew the hazy map wouldn't be much help in locating the right way. She looked back at the construction site. A couple of the bare-chested men drew away from the group and moved closer to her. One called out something, probably in Yoruba, which she didn't understand; the other winked with a suggestive leer and a complex hand gesture.

She ignored them and instead walked rapidly to put some distance between them, and then studied her map more closely. She looked up the street again, then down at the map repeatedly, her brows furrowing as she tried to identify a landmark. She could not identify the street she was on the map. Her heart began to race, her underarms broke out in sweat and she felt like crying. The luggage she was pulling felt like a burden. She was afraid they were going to rob her or worse rape her. As the laborers gained on her, she recalled her mother's question before they said goodbye at the Trans-Ekulu Motor Park not too far from their home.

"Can you find the address on your own? Perhaps you should wait to be picked up..."

Gladys had shrugged. "That will take too long. I'll call Aunt Isioma to get the directions and I'll be fine. I'm a big girl, Mama. I can get there without any problem."

She shook her head as she stared at the map again but was jerked out of her self-mockery when the gate of the house ahead of her opened with a loud clang. A black Mercedes S class model with tinted windows purred out. She stared at it in appreciation as it turned towards her, distracted from her quandary for the moment. She took a step back, startled, when the car stopped beside her. Her mouth almost gaped when the back passenger window rolled down. She couldn't help but note the looks of the man who stared back at her. He was very attractive, probably in his mid-thirties, with a certain stamp of authority all over him. His hair was bushier than she usually saw on men his age, but it was full and well-combed. The line between his deep set golden-brown eyes looked ingrained over the strong nose and pink lips accentuated by his dark skin.

"May I help you?"

"No... I'm OK." She stammered in uncertainty. His thick brows were raised and he must have known she was staring at him; he probably got that look from a lot of women.

"That doesn't seem to be case from where I'm sitting." His deep voice was mellow but his stare sharpened with suspicion as they went to her large box.

"Erm... I think I've lost my way," she burst out without much thought. She could have kicked herself. That sounded so lame and suspicious. Why couldn't she have thought of something that would make her not seem like a dim-witted character?

His eyebrows climbed his high forehead again. "Is that so?"

"Yes." She caught the sympathetic eye of the driver through the front window. She pulled the tatters of her almost non-existent dignity and began again. "My aunt lives at..." She looked down at her journal, stumbled over the address and continued. "This is my first visit and I may have taken a wrong turn as I walked..."

He scrutinized her for a few seconds and gestured towards the car. She didn't understand at first and stared at him till he repeated the motion.

"What? You want me to..."

"Get in." He bent away and swung open the back passenger door on the far side.

"Why? Where do you want to take me?" Well no one could blame her for asking. She'd heard so many scary things about Lagos, including about rich men who kidnapped ladies for rituals.

"Where else but to the address you gave me?" His snap dragged her out of her scattered thoughts. His driver chuckled but gave her an encouraging nod with another smile.

Gladys was a little hesitant; there was no hint of softening on his face. She glanced up at the two laborers who were still standing a few feet away. What a dilemma.

"Well you can just get me to the end of the road and point out the right direction..." He cut her off.

"I said we'll drive you there. Get in." His terse voice ended the conversation. It was clear he had no time for chit-chat.

Another car honked behind his and the driver pulled over to make way, popping open the car trunk in the process. Gladys decided to trust him and stowed her luggage away. Rather him and the kind driver than those men who were still looking at her like bait to fish. She scrambled into the car with a mutter of reluctant thanks and the hope that it wasn't too far out of his way. She caught his gaze for a moment before she took in the total person. He was tall, and the suit he wore was impeccable. His cologne was light but musky still; it perfumed the interior of the car. It crept into her nostrils and raised images of both of them together, dressed for a night out.

Gladys forced her gaze away and glanced around. The large sports car was spacious and lavishly appointed. She admired the shiny fixtures and automatic controls between the front bucket seats. The whole interior was fitted with smooth tan leather. She could imagine her car-loving brother's envy when she told him about it later. A few minutes later, they drew up before another mansion.

"This is your aunt's address." He stared straight ahead.

"Thank you." Gladys stepped out and hefted her box from the boot. She expected them to drive away without delay, but they were still there as she rang the bell at the gate.

"I'm here for Mrs. Dehinde-Ojo..." She tried to look confident as she gave the gateman who unlocked the gate her name and her details.

"Ah! Madam dey expects you. Come inside." He grasped the luggage as he ushered her into the compound. When she looked back, the car and its occupants had vanished.

"Oh Gladys, thank God you arrived safely."

She was inside the big house, wrapped in Aunt Isioma's arms.

Perplexed by the effusive welcome, Gladys hugged her back in a tentative manner. The underlying awkwardness was so real that she wondered if her aunt could not feel it.

Aunt Isioma was tall and light skinned like her. Her cotton nightgown skimmed her slim figure. Only her face showed she was a similar age with Gladys's mother. She didn't look too different from the pictures in the old black and white family albums back home. As they spoke, Gladys followed her through a wide hallway and into the living room.

"Sorry, it would have taken too long for Ade to get here on time to collect the car and then come pick you at the bus station. And there's the traffic too."

“I didn’t mind making my way here. It’s just that it took the bus a while to get over the bridge which was full of cars coming this way; the rush hour I guess.”

“You got here OK? You didn’t miss your way?”

“I did but it was fine in the end. I have to say the people here are more helpful than I was told. Lagos is not so bad.”

Her aunt smiled and indicated she should sit. Gladys sank in and relaxed against the soft cushion behind her. Her muscles relished the soft contours after the uncomfortable bus benches. She looked slowly around. The fabric sofa she sat on was close to the hallway and in earthy tones that matched the abstract watercolor to her right.

Large photographs of two good looking women dominated the nearest wall; those would be her aunt’s daughters, both whom were older than Gladys. They were now permanently living in America which was where they’d been born. The elder one was married, and her younger sister lived with her while she completed her postgraduate education.

Gladys looked up to the very high ceiling of the huge cream-colored room. It was made more so by the decorative white plaster which also highlighted the stairs leading to an upper level. There were two furniture collections in the expansive space. An oversized chocolate leather settee with identical armchairs faced the television flanking a heavy looking center table made of dark wood. A soft lavender scent filled her nostrils from the fresh flowers on the table. Magazines were arranged inside a cane basket on the lower rung.

“How was your trip? Have you let your family know you’ve arrived?”

“Yes, I left a message for them when we arrived at the bus station. The journey was smooth and the other passenger said it lasted the usual time.”

That was ten hours across rough and sometimes desolate roads. “The bus company lived up to their name; there were movies on board and an armed security officer. Thank God, the latter was not needed.” That did not mean she caught more than a few winks of sleep; she’d been among the few who actually watched the movies.

“That’s good to know. One often hears of overnight coaches that are ambushed and passengers robbed of their valuables at gunpoint. I don’t do much road travel myself these days and can’t remember the last time I boarded a night bus.”

Gladys thought that sounded condescending, but let it go and only nodded. In the next moment, her lips stretched in an unexpected yawn.

Her aunt stood up right away. “Sorry my dear, I shouldn’t keep you. You’ve just come off a very long journey and must be very tired. Come, I’ll show you to the guest room.”

Gladys took in more of the house as she followed her aunt to the steps. There was a large dining room off to her left behind an alcove with molded detailing and two sentry potted palms. These complemented the other plants dotted around and the center pieces on the tables. When they got to the upper level, her aunt called out to a girl in one of the bedrooms making the bed.

“Bunmi, come over here. Leave the beds for a minute.”

“Yes madam,” the girl replied as she joined them.

“Go and prepare some toast and tea for my niece. Please be fast, OK?”

They entered through into an airy, well furnished blue and white room which already held Gladys’s bags. The heavy curtains were drawn and bright light poured onto the twin beds. Aunt Isioma crossed to the far one to tuck in and smooth a stray sheet. Her gaze swept over her niece for a quick minute. Gladys pretended to be absorbed in the small table pressed to the wall nearest the door. It was cluttered with small ceramic knick-knacks.

“This will be your room for as long as you wish to remain with me.” Her aunt turned around the room. “I hope you like it.”

“Aunt Isioma, this is great. Thank you very much.”

The room was the size of the whole of the parlor area in their flat in Enugu. Gladys couldn’t believe it was all hers. There was a built-in wardrobe paired with a dark wood dresser and the table

near the door. The other objects were a mixture of lighter wood and stainless steel and appeared to be new additions. The cotton sheets on the bed looked very fresh.

“Well, I want you to be comfortable here, so feel free to tell me whatever you need.”

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy my time here Aunt Isioma.”

“All right, Bunmi will bring the food when it is ready. You can freshen up in the adjoining bathroom.’ She pointed to a door on the other side of the bed. “It’s over there.”

“Thank you very much.” Gladys was bursting with happiness and couldn’t wait for her aunt to leave the room. A wide smile began to bloom on her face.

“You don’t have to thank me, my dear. Just eat, sleep and relax. I’ll see you later.”

Her aunt left the room and Gladys finally let rip a whoop of joy. She sang and danced on the spot as she took in the room again. She quieted as she rounded the room, touching everything - bedspreads, curtains, wardrobe, dresser, mirror, chairs. The wonderful house was made even better by Aunt Isioma’s positive attitude. This was different from what she and her mother assumed but also put her on her guard. And then there was that attractive man that drove her here. She knelt down and said a quick prayer of thanks.