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HOW TO BE A STUPID GIRL IN LAGOS

BIBIKE

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THERE WERE MANY easy ways to be a stupid girl in Lagos. We were not stupid girls. We were bright with borrowed wisdom. We never paid full fare to drivers of yellow city cabs before we arrived at the final stop. We did not wear any kind of visible jewelry walking around busy streets like Balogun. When we went to Tejuosho market and a stranger shouted, “Hey. Fine girl. Stop, see your money for ground,” we never stopped to look.

When many of the ECOMOG soldiers were returning from peacekeeping in Liberia, flush with UN dollars, we were still protected prepubescent girls, yet we knew to avoid the one we called Uncle Timo, the one who gave all

the little girls Mills & Boon paperbacks wrapped in old newspapers.

MY TWIN SISTER and I were almost stupid girls once, and this is how it begins, with Ariyike and me lost on our way home from school. I am holding on to her out of habit; she is pulling away, walking up to and talking to every stranger we meet, asking over and over, “Uncle, please, where can we get a bus to Fadeyi?”

We are walking home from secondary school. Today is the first time we have been allowed to come home by ourselves. Our younger brothers, Andrew and Peter, attend Holy Child Academy, the primary school that shares a fence with the military cemetery where all the agbalumo trees grow. They don’t need to be picked up. The church bus drops them off every day at half past four.

I am thinking of school and today’s government studies class and *gerrymandering*, how I like the way that word sounds, well calculated and important, like *meandering*, only with purpose. Everything is better with purpose.

I am also thinking of Father, who likes to say our government studies teacher is verbose:

“Mr. Agbo fancies himself a university lecturer, he is always going off tangent, completely missing the point.”

And of Mother, who likes to say: “We pay a lot of money for you girls to go to that school.” Or: “You girls should listen to Mr. Agbo. He is a brilliant man.”

We have walked for almost twenty minutes, and now we make our first stop, to buy roast plantains and groundnuts

from the woman who is selling them under a 7 Up canopy. She is amused when we ask if she has any cold drinks for sale.

“Can you see any fridge here?” she asks. “Will I keep the drinks in my brassiere?” We are waiting for our plantains when Ariyike stops a stranger on a motorcycle. He is a tall man wearing combat shorts and a black T-shirt that says GOT MILK? in bold white print. They take a few steps together, her listening, him pointing. When she is done, she comes back under the canopy. I clench my right fist and put it under her chin.

“Here, take this microphone. Announce to all the world that we are two girls who don’t know the way home,” I say.

The woman selling plantains laughs. She says Ariyike is being stupid, walking up to strange men. She tells us that just last week three girls got kidnapped in Mushin. They were found dismembered in a roadside heap.

Ariyike looks at me like she is about to say something but changes her mind.

“So, what did that motorcycle man say?” I ask.

“He says we should come with him, he’d take us home,” she says.

“Really?” I ask.

“No. He said keep walking straight down, the buses are waiting under the pedestrian bridge,” she says.

Our plantains are soon ready. The woman gives us extra groundnuts.

“Pray for me o,” she says. “I want fine ibeji twins like you two.”

Ariyike assures her that we will pray every day. She is the friendly one. The *friendlier* one. My sister talks to strangers because she likes people, she likes to hear their stories, she likes to make people feel comfortable, welcome. I do not think that I am mean, I just let her be the nice and welcoming one. We work better that way.

I learned when I was a little girl that people always lie. I am not sure everyone means to lie. It is just that they have in their hearts ideas of who they should be, and they are trying to convince themselves that they are who they insist on being. It is tiring. I learn a lot more about people, about who they are and what they care about, by observing in quiet.

There are many buses and hundreds of people waiting at the bus stop. There are many young men hanging at the sides of the buses shouting their destinations—"Maryland," "CMS," "Obalende." There is no bus going to Fadeyi. We stand next to a row of older women with woven baskets and trays in front of them selling all types of things, fruits, vegetables, tiny toys.

I watch a young woman haggle with almost every seller. Finally, she buys smoked fish, okra, tomatoes, habaneros, and red bell peppers. She will go home to her tiny, sufficient apartment with one soot-stained kerosene stove in a corner and make food just enough for herself and eat less than half of it and fall asleep on her bed and be glad to be alone and unbothered.

The first bus going to Fadeyi is a danfo, a 1988 Volkswagen bus. Its wooden, cushionless seats are filled with people before we get a chance to go in. We are part of the small

crowd of people who fail to make it in. We murmur one to another, we hope more buses come quickly. Two curly-haired girls come to stand next to the group. They hold out cracked plastic bowls and begin singing in Yoruba.

“Brother, God bless you.

Sister, God bless you.

Give me money and I pray for you.

A setup,

A trap,

May God prevent its occurrence.”

The woman who bought her dinner now drops five naira in one bowl, then five naira in the other. I plan to give them money, but they do not come close to us, and no one else gives them money, so they move away, singing to other adults.

There is a group of kids from the public school talking in a corner. The beggar children attempt to avoid them as they go past. One of the kids tugs at the wrapper of the older girl as she walks past him. She does not notice. After walking a couple of steps, her wrapper unravels. It's then I see that she isn't wearing any underwear. She drops her bowl and wraps the cloth back around herself in a quick second. She walks on without looking back. I make Ariyike turn around to look but it is too late for her to see anything. The public school kids laugh and laugh. Stupid children laughing out loud with their torn rubber sandals and dirty shirts and books in black shopping bags and yellowing teeth and rusty fake gold earrings and matted braids. Stupid children.

When we were in primary school at St. Catherine's, there

was another set of identical twins. They were short, bow-legged boys who got into fights with everyone. We hated that because they were also Yoruba twins, we had the same traditional names. Ariyike and I therefore became “Girl Taiwo” and “Girl Kehinde.” The most annoying people were the ones who called me “Girl Kenny.” Kenny is a totally different name, it is not short for Kehinde no matter how hard Yoruba people try. These public school kids make me think of Boy Kehinde and Boy Taiwo. I wonder what they are like now. Still stupid, I bet.

Once we got to secondary school, we insisted on being called by our middle names, and even though Ariyike and Bibike have the exact same meaning and everywhere we go people still ask, “Who is Kehinde, who is Taiwo?” I like our new names.

Ariyike was born first, so she is Taiwo. Our grandmother, Father’s mother, says that Kehinde is the elder twin because Orisa ibeji, the god of twin births, is Kehinde. He was the one who sent his younger one to be born first to confirm by loud crying that the world was fit for him.

Father’s mother believes all these things with her whole heart. Mother says her stories are tales of demons. She says if we listen to her too closely, we invite evil beings into our destinies and we will end up poor and alone.

I think everything is a story unless you live in it. I like the idea of a god who knows what it’s like to be a twin. To have no memory of ever being alone. To be happy you are different from your twin but also to be sad about it. To know almost everything about your twin and sometimes want to

stop knowing so much. To know you were born with everything you will ever need for love but to be afraid that this one person is too important. Or that this person will never be enough. To pray to a god like that, all I would ever have to say is Help me.

There are many more people at the bus stop now. We are all standing so close to one another. Ariyike and I have our backpacks turned to the front of us, protecting them like little babies. We have eaten all our plantains and groundnuts. She tells me she is going to look for drinking water to buy, but just as she is about to leave, a molue bus arrives, its rusty croaking like an old man's cough. I call out her name but there are already seven people between us. I push through and get in the bus, hoping I can save her a seat; the bus is already filled up with many standing people, holding on to the metal poles. I find a seat in the back of the bus and shout for my sister as loud as I can. She finds me and sits on my thighs. The public school kids are sitting close to us, three on a single seat. I have no idea how they plan to sit like that for so long.

Across from me is a lady I did not see at the bus stop. I wonder how long she has been on the bus. She looks like she just got out of university, or maybe she still is in university. She is wearing jeans, and only university girls wear jeans outside the house. Her shoulder-length auburn braids with burnt ends are tucked behind her ears, kajal eyeliner spilling under her eyes, cream foundation drying in uneven patches, and she is talking to a beautiful bearded man with sad brown eyes seated next to her. He is wearing brown corduroy pants

and a black-and-white checkered shirt. He has a black briefcase and a white lab coat. Their voices are raised loud enough to hear each other over the noise of cars honking through traffic, of bus tires grinding to abrupt stops on cold concrete and the voices of others conversing around them.

“Did I tell you my horse got stolen?” she asks.

“No.”

“Yeah, it did. I still ride, though, whenever I visit the village.”

“I have only ridden that one time.” He laughs and shakes his head as though this is something no one else can believe.

“Remember that day my mother came to your house?” she says after a short pause.

This time his reply is hesitant, quiet. “Yeah,” he says.

“When she came to drag me away? How she was saying, I have warned you about this boy, you can’t be here, you have to leave.”

She is laughing as she says it. And it’s a laugh I know, one most women I know have. Mother has it, too. Laughter you use when nothing is funny, but you are lighthearted and resilient and eager to show it.

“Have you seen anyone else lately? Anita? Banke? Emmanuel?” she asks with leftover laughter in her mouth.

The conversation on his side is no longer loud or discernible. There is no way to be sure why he now mumbles. Maybe it’s been a long day and he is tired and wants to ride the bus in peace. Maybe he has never liked her or maybe she just reminded him of the hurts he has also covered up with laughter, and muscles, and gorgeous facial hair.

“Banke is married, she has like six kids or something,” she says.

“Really,” he exclaims. “Banke. Married! I definitely did not see that coming.”

There is more laughter, more exclaiming, more naming names, more asking what are they up to now.

“So, are you seeing anyone?” she asks, deliberate, flippant.

“No, I am just focusing on leaving this stupid country. Ties just make things difficult,” he says.

If she says anything after this, I do not hear it. The bus conductor announces the next stop and several people shuffle and respond. When the doors open, she grabs the black briefcase and lab coat that I had assumed were his, he has a doctor’s face. She gets out of the bus, shouting, Excuse me, excuse me, at all the people in her way. One of the public school kids now sits where she was sitting. There is quiet and there is noise.

She will walk to her apartment, where she lives with her older sister and her sister’s husband, and wonder if the universe was helped by her vulnerability, if she will get any closer to living in her dreams because she laid bare her desires to a man like that. She will wish for a second encounter with him. One where the best decisions of her years are on display. Like he walks into the hospital where she is a pharmacist or the church where she sings solos on Sundays. Or they meet in the parking lot of a supermarket the weekend after salaries are paid so he can witness all the imported foreign things she can now afford to buy on her own.

I hope she finds someone new.

I wish her love without this shared lament of people who remain in a failing city when others who are not stupid have left. I wish her love that makes her less ashamed, love that is ignorant of the specifics of her failed dreams and unaware of the details of her lost youth. I hope she finds a loving gaze that will not see how her face has fallen and where her arms have swollen or how her family has lost all they took great pride in.

WE GOT HOME a little after five p.m. that day, bubbling with the ignorant excitement of young children who'd completed their first adult task. It did not occur to us to wonder why our schedules had changed or whether this was a permanent kind of change. We did not yet have the kind of familiarity with misfortune that cultivated a sense of foreboding. We could only assume that Father was too busy to come pick us up and Mother was beginning to understand that we were grown enough to navigate Lagos streets on our own.

WE ATE OUR dinner in a hurry and, while we ate, Andrew and Peter watched cartoons and argued with each other in the living room. As soon as we were done with dinner, Father and Mother called us into their room for a talk. I was absolute in my certainty that they were about to announce we were expecting a new sibling.

This was the first time we had been allowed in our parents' room. It was, until this day, an odd place, with regular fluorescent lamps for the daytime and a tiny blue bulb turned on at night. The lights were like secret codes for

access—white light meant it was okay to knock, to ask to be let in; the night-light meant to keep away.

But on this day—the day things were beginning to fall apart, the day we were too stupid to notice—we swelled with the confident pride of new initiates. The room smelled like Cussons baby powder and Mother’s favorite perfume, Elizabeth Arden’s Red Door.

I sat on the rug in the center of the room. It was yellow, brown, blue, and black, stripe-patterned and soft. It made me think of Joseph and his coat of many colors. My sister lay on the brown leather armchair opposite their bed, folding herself in it like a bush baby, one foot swinging down the side of the chair.

Mother and Father sat next to each other on the king-size bed.

It was Mother who spoke first:

“You are big girls now, so behave yourselves. Something really bad has happened to this family and—”

“We will be all right, though. This is nothing for you both to worry about,” Father interrupted.

“I am not telling them to worry,” Mother said. “We agreed to tell them, so we can handle this as a family.”

“A few weeks ago, your mother got into some trouble at work and she was let go,” Father said. “None of it is her fault. We will get through this, I promise you girls.”

Mother was with the Ministry of Petroleum for ten years. In the last two years, she worked as one of the three personal assistants to the minister of petroleum. Her boss, the Honorable Minister Dakuku, had been fired by the

military president, and a new minister of petroleum was appointed in his place. It was this new minister who, rather unexpectedly, considering that civil servants existed, under the national laws and in the valid assumptions of many, in a labor-protected space where the worst thing that could happen was a transfer to a remote village, fired all those staff he considered close associates of the former minister.

The ex-minister's falling-out with the military president was over approval given to an American company for oil drilling in the Niger Delta. It was not until the agreements were signed and money was paid that the president became aware that the Americans were in fact an Israeli company incorporated in the United States. The military president was a great friend of Yasser Arafat, apparently, and an avid defender of his politics. He wanted nothing to do with the American company once these facts were revealed.

Father explained these facts to us in short, straight-to-the-point sentences.

“The ex-minister is in hiding. Some say he is in America.”

“Many people were also let go. It was not only your mother.”

As much as he tried, he did not help me understand how anything that happened was our mother's fault. Until that day I'd thought her job as an assistant was limited to serving the minister and his guests tea and smelling nice as she did this. Even though I was confused, I was not surprised. In Lagos bad things happened all the time.

My sister's dangling foot tapped the leg of the armchair over and over, a little loud, but no one told her to stop doing

that. Father reached over and patted me on the center of my head, ta, ta, ta, harmonizing with the tidi, tidi, tidi my sister was making with her foot against the wooden chair leg. He patted me on the head several times, until it started to hurt. I started trying to think of something to say, something reassuring, sensing that Father had planned a more confident rendering of this tale, but he now sat quiet and absentminded, forgetting the words he planned to say or why he was convinced they would help.

I MAKE A pillow fort for Andrew and Peter under our dining table. I have modified a simple nighttime ritual. Every night, I sit on a stool in the boys' room. I tell my younger brothers stories before bed.

Today, Mother and Father are locked in their room yelling at each other again. So we sit in our dining room fort, talking and laughing. The dining room is right next to our parents' bedroom, there is only a thin wall between us, we are close enough to know when the first punch lands, close enough to scream if it continues. Peter sits next to me, his elbows are on the floor, his round face is nestled in the curve of both palms. His hair smells like Blue Band margarine. Sometimes after eating, he wipes his hands on the living room curtains, other times he wipes them on his hair when he thinks no one is looking. His face is oily, shining like a lamp in a dark room.

"Can you tell us a story?" he asks me. "You do not have to make it up. It can be one of Father's or Mother's stories, but nothing with a tortoise or a monkey in it."

“Should it have a song?” I ask.

“Yes,” my brothers answer at the same time.

“But only if you really want to,” Andrew adds quickly. He is the older brother, he does not want to appear too interested in childish stories.

“Way back before the rebellion, when animals and people could talk to and understand one another, a woman buys two hens on her way home from the market. They cost only half a penny each and so she buys them even though she really does not need any more hens. The woman soon gets tired of carrying her basket on her head and holding hens in both hands, so she throws one of them away, right into the forest, and thinks nothing of it. And a few months later when she is walking down the same road after a market day, she sees her hen walking along the path. Only this time, the hen has several chicks walking in a straight line behind her.”

“How did she know it was hers?” Peter asks.

“Because, back then when you bought poultry, you cut a tiny piece off the edge of your wrapper and tied it around the legs of your hen. The rope was still there,” I reply.

“People still do that today,” Andrew says.

“The woman is excited,” I say. “She chases after the hen, but the hen refuses to be caught. It scratches her a couple of times and then runs to the palace of the king.

“The hen gets to talk to the king, but decides to sing instead. She tells her story, the hen does, with singing. How the woman bought her for half a penny and threw her in the forest and how the lord of the forest fed her with corn husks and water from a well. The hen says she is now a mother of

many children: her first son is called the Warrior Prevails, the second is called Finger of the Truth—”

“How many children did she have?” Andrew asks.

“What did the king decide?” Peter asks.

“The song says they were six or three,” I reply. “I don’t really know, *meta* and *mefa* sound the same, especially in a song.”

We are singing the story’s song, “Iya Elediye eyen ye kuye,” whispering the words now because Mother is crying in the bedroom. Loud crying and hiccupping. And Father is shouting at her to stop.

“The king said the woman could take the first chick with her, and the hen was free to go back to the forest with the rest of her children.”

“And that is how it ends?” says Andrew. “You should have just told us the one about the tortoise and the hyena.”

Peter laughs because Andrew said *hyena*, he is laughing and laughing, and then Andrew and I also start laughing. Peter’s giggle is laughter at its best, light and loud, floating around then resting on you, making you woozy and hopeful. Andrew already has a man’s laugh.

Something breaks in our parents’ room. We stop laughing to listen. Everything is quiet, Mother is no longer crying, and Father is saying nothing. Then Father comes out of the room. We watch his feet walk past the dining table, along the hallway, and down the stairs. We listen to the sounds he makes in the kitchen. A clank of metal, a swish, water splashing on a face. We watch him walk back to the room. There is a tumbler filled with cold water in his hand.

When he opens the door to their room, we hear Mother whisper, "Thank you, dear."

It is hot here in our fort. Peter is sitting close to me with his knees folded to his chin. He is sweating, his forehead covered in shiny droplets of sweat.

"Tell us about that time you saw them burn a robber in Fashoro," Andrew says to me. "Or about that time armed robbers came to the beer parlor and shot a man's ear off."

"I was going to buy pepper in Fashoro when I saw a boy running with a small generator on his head. Suddenly, one woman started running after him shouting, *Ole ole ole*, another woman came out of her shop and joined the other woman shouting. Then I saw the tailor who made your Easter suits come out of his shop. He started running after the boy. It was now that the stupid boy decided to drop the generator and run as fast as he could. The tailor was almost losing him, so he bent down and picked a giant stone and threw it at the boy. It landed right in the middle of his back. The boy fell down flat. Plenty of people now surrounded him. Iya Togo even came and said, Is this not Gbenga, the one who stole my pot of beans while it was still on the fire?"

"Was it Brother Gbenga?" Peter asks.

"No jare, did we not still see Brother Gbenga yesterday?" Andrew replies.

I am listening for sounds from our parents' room, but I hear nothing now.

"Then many other people came and started accusing the boy of stealing from them," I say. "He was crying, saying he was not the one, but your tailor kept slapping him. Then

somebody brought a tire and put it on the boy's neck. He was screaming and begging. Someone else opened the tank of the generator and poured out the petrol. They poured it on his face and on the tire and then they set it on fire. He got up and started running but that just made the fire worse, then he fell on the floor and someone took a big brick and smashed it on his head."

"Did he die for real?" Peter asks me. He is yawning, so at first I think he asks did he die for *free*.

"Of course he did. He died, and several vultures came to eat his eyes," Andrew says.

"Don't listen to him, Peter. Nothing like that happened," I reply.

"What do you think happened to him?" Peter asks again.

"He went to heaven," I tell him. Someone must tell him about these things. "He went to a special heaven where only dead children go. And God gave him a room full of jean jackets that never get dirty and candy that gets sweeter while in your mouth—"

"And video games?"

"Yes, Peter, and video games, and TVs as wide as the walls of this house."

WHEN ANDREW AND Peter finally go to their room, I go to our room.

Ariyike is awake and listening to the sounds from our parents' room. I sit next to her on her bed and tell her this same story even though she has heard it all before. I tell her everything from the beginning—how the first time I saw

the boy, I smiled at him. I told him I liked his FUBU shirt. He winked at me and walked away. And the end—that I saw the thief’s mother run to where his dead body was still burning, take off her cloth wrapper, wrap it around his body to try to carry his body home, and fail. All she did was separate burnt clothing from skin, skin from bones. She stood there crying, “My daughter. My daughter. I warned you not to dress like a boy. Now see what you have done to yourself.”

I told Ariyike that all the women who stood there earlier, accusing him of stealing food, laundry drying on the line, generators and coolers, came to the mother, pulling her away from the body, crying with her. That one of them gave her another wrapper to wear but she rejected it. Instead she stood there in her little green slip, crying and screaming, saying that they had stripped her naked in the streets and she would now be naked for the rest of her life.

I told Ariyike all the things I saw and heard, and she was as quiet as a mouse until I was done.

“He was just a stupid girl, Bibi, just a stupid girl,” she said.

Then she put her arms around me and cried with me, and this was how I knew that she felt all the things that I felt, and we did not sleep at all that night because we were the same sad the same angry the same afraid.