



JÙJÚ

Festus Obehi Destiny

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It is often said that what happens to a man is a history for the younger generation.

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For my father Festus, who told me tales that birthed this one.

The women exchange horrified glances at each other. After three days of shouting, pushing and praying, the result of their labor sleeps undisturbed on the mat close to the grieving mother. One of the women who took extra attention in rousing the mother awake whenever she tried to drift off to sleep runs outside.

‘Try to keep your eyes open. Your child is dead, but you must live so that you can give birth to stronger children’.

The mother opens her eyes and glares solemnly at the child.

‘She is so still and calm. She must be at peace where she is. Wherever she is’.

With her body half alive, her pain revisits her, touching her everywhere and crippling her. The women form a circle. They are scared that she might descend on anything and harm herself. After all, one easily becomes mad after losing a child. An ambush of tigress, protecting her from herself.

The mother sits up painfully, bites her own tongue till it bleeds. The women do not notice this. When she cringes her face from too much pain, they think she is swallowing her tears.

The mother licks her tears and mix it together with the spittle and blood in her mouth.

‘Collins, for three days, I have known pain because of you. I have cried and died many times in three moons because of you. I curse you today, double of my pain shall visit you. If it is one child you will have, two will cause you pain. Just as the frog cries at night and the fly visits every household during the day, unless my child comes back from the dead, you shall live restless until the day we meet’.

Then she spits, and drifts quickly into nothingness.

Edobor wasn't as old as he looked. Life had imprinted her palms on him and the wrinkles that etched on his head became the new color on his face that followed him everywhere till he slept. It became his shadow in the light. Edobor sat in front of his compound with his face balanced on his palms. His children were running under the blanket of the moon and his wives had assembled a coven behind the compound to spread their gossips. Today, his house was enveloped with cries and the moans of pestles kissing the mortars. The little children danced naked around him, hoping to catch his gaze and seduce his attention so that he might play a little with them or bark at them even. But Edobor sat still, enveloped in his own web of travails, with life's imprint balanced on his forehead. Earlier in the day, Edobor had visited a friend and found out that the man's son was going to Benin to further his studies in the higher college. Edobor, on hearing the news had jumped and drank palm wine happily with the man and his kin, camouflaging his depression under drunkenness to hide his disappointment at the slow progress that his first son was making.

Collins, the first son of Edobor's first wife had grown up far from Edobor's shadow. In his youth, he had been an obsessive truant and now, that he was a man, little had changed. Collins was a man whom the gods had denied the gift of patience. And so he was very impatient with learning and listening to others who cared to throw wise words at him. Many who cared to attend to him in his youth left with huge walls of regret.

Many times, Edobor went to powerful medicine men on behalf of his first son who was so determined to bring shame and disgrace to his name. One of these men that he had went to was named Obebo. The friend who had recommended the medicine man told him that Obebo was the

kind of man that boiled water on wet wood without lighting a fire. Edobor had gone to this man with high hopes of redemption. Obebo's shrine had skulls of humans and different animals placed in front the entrance. Edobor stared ghastly at the shrine before entering. He had gone alone because of the shame in his reason.

'Some of them I have killed. Some of them my father killed himself.' Obebo said when he realized Edobor had been staring at the skulls intensely.

Edobor went on and told him the reason for his visit. After Edobor had unburdened himself, the medicine man asked him to bring an offering of a goat, sheep and white cloth before any pacification could be made to appease the spirit who had tied down Collin's destiny. Edobor went home and returned the next market day with a huge percentage of his harvest. The first son of a man is the extension of the man's own legacy and so Edobor did everything he could to untie his son from his predicament. That was fifteen years ago. Collins was now a grown man and now Edobor sat in his compound, enveloped with noises and cries, deaf to them. What filled his head was the dilemma of the son, who had two women pregnant for him.

That evening, after Edobor had taken his meal, He summoned Collins mother and the man himself. The men sat while the woman stood behind her son, around a dim lantern, blanketed under the dazzling moon. Edobor stared at the fire for a long time, wondering what to say. He was not good with words but he wanted to approach the topic without fueling any burning desires. Too many words had been said in the past days and hearts had broken. Many times, he doubted if he was the father of the son that sat before him. The mother tortoise cannot have thick skin like the coat of an iron while her baby has feather skin like the hen.

Edobor cleared his throat, spat and began,

'Trouble does not sprout from the dust nor from heaven. I shall not restrain my mouth'. And so Edobor spoke in the anguish of his spirit and from the bitterness of his soul.

'I have tried for you. If anyone says I have failed as a father, let him come to my house and see my palm if they are not scarred. I sacrificed for you. I sent you to school, but you always preferred sucking your mother's nipple to learning in the class room. You are a grown man now and you have to take care of yourself. In one month, two women have knocked on my door and swore that your seed is in their womb. Two of whom you have denied. I have asked you many times and you have sworn to the skies and the seas that you know neither of them. Whether they

be truth or lies, that is your own peace. I have arranged for you to go to my brother's place in Agbor to learn a trade. I cannot keep on feeding a grown man under my own roof. You must leave and make a man of yourself.

Edobor spoke into the night. Many times, his son grunted and his wife hissed. But he denied both the response to fuel their anger and reverse his decision. Tonight was a moon of peace. Before midnight, he dismissed both mother and son and rested on his mat.

A cow does not know the value of the tail until it is cut off. And it was not until the evening that Edobor sent his first son out of the house that Collins began to notice what he had taken for granted. Sleeping under his father's roof, he had had no responsibility. He had simply gone out to drink with his friends; all of whom had dropped out of school to seek another means; and come home to a meal placed beside his mother's bed. That night, Collins thought about how his father had failed him. It wasn't Collins fault that he had failed school. How could he pass English language when the teachers taught in Esan? How was he to understand math when his step mothers sent him on long errands whenever he sat down to consult his textbooks? It wasn't his fault. Perhaps it was the two women who were heaping their pregnancy on him.

That evening there was little that his mother could do to console him. He ignored her attempt to console him. Edobor heard his loud sobs once or twice. He was sure that Collins was crying aloud to summon pity from the old man. But it only infuriated him more. How could a man in his late twenties cry like a child because he had been cut off from his father's embrace? When the cock crow, Edobor intentionally shut his door tight so that he would not be called on to accompany Collins to the park. When he woke up later in the afternoon, the house was silent save for the clucking hens and the whispering kettles. Collins had gone. For the first time in many moons, Edobor smiled.

Splash, Splat, Splunk,

Dirt, Sweat, Mud,

Curse, Bless, Mourn,

The Market breathe to life and once again, It cries.

The market was rowdy and the noise splintered the ears. Collins moved farther from the market but the noise kept trailing him. It was almost dark and his uncle was nowhere in sight. He held up the direction once more and focused on it as if he could read the letters. The last passerby he had shown had confirmed that he was in the right place. Collins placed his travelling bag on the floor and sat on it. Tears were rushing to his face again, waiting for a brief hint of being summoned before they soaked his face.

‘Collins’

He stood up abruptly and fell down immediately. He recognized this short plump man with sleepy eyes. A carbon copy of his father. The man helped him up and Collins dragged his luggage behind him.

‘Don’t mind me for coming late. I was sleeping’.

The Uncle lived in a tight one room apartment in the suburbs. The room was scruffy and smelled like incense. On seeing this, Collins almost ran out and crawled back to his father’s house. His lips tightened and he resigned himself to a stool close to the bed, since that was the only chair in the room.

‘You will manage on the floor. I will get you some wrappers. Rest for today and tomorrow. As from the day after tomorrow, you will start as an apprentice in my shop. In this house, mind your business with the neighbors, they are very nosy’

Collins had noticed the unfriendly stares they had offered him as he walked through the short dark passage.

‘We don’t have any bathroom or toilet. You do your business behind the house. There is a bush there. Or you can use the toilet in the bank close to the market’.

That evening, Collins helped himself to a delicacy of overheated beans cooked with groundnut oil. He sponged his mouth full and swallowed his disgust quickly with the tasty water. After the food, he spread his clothes on the bare floor and slept on them. Assured by the loud snores of his uncle, he cried into the night. He knew that he could not survive a month in this hell. Sometimes we predict our lives based on events that have happened to us and we believe that events in that manner will continue to happen. If it is good, then good things will follow. But if it is bad, that means we are doomed. And so Collins thought gravely about his life and the events that had transpired days before. He saw a gloomy future for himself if he remained in Agbor. He did not account for a second splintering miracle, shattering his despair and guiding him towards the light. And so he devised a plan. With the huge amount of savings, his mother had given to him, he searched his uncle’s home thoroughly the next morning after the man had left for his shop. He found the man’s savings and broke the wooden box. He thought of bathing first, but the idea of bathing in a bush nauseated him. He wore the clothes he had put on the day before and packed his luggage. His father had rejected him and his mother was too weak to do anything. he couldn’t read the signs on the notice board and so he jumped into the first bus that arrived.

‘Where to?’

‘Lagos’.

He didn’t know this city called Lagos. He hadn’t heard of it before. But he knew that he was going to go there, make a man of himself and return home to taunt his father.

Was it the gleam?

Or perhaps the fog?

But I stared into the lagoon and searched for the depth.

I lost my eyes,

Then my heart followed,

Slowly my legs slipped and I fell in love with this city, surrounded by the shimmering Lagoon.

Lagos was a nightmare. Money disappeared faster than you got them. Everything was so expensive. When Collins first got to Lagos, he had been seduced by the lagoon and the seas that one's eyes got lost in. He promised himself that he was going to build a house close to the sea and take in the view whenever he woke up.

He slept in the park the first day. The second day, he started a hunt for an affordable home. Before dusk, he realized that he was a poor man in this big city. His money was only big enough to afford a studio apartment in a place called Ajegunle or a ghetto in Mushin. He had gone to a property estate company in VGC and asked for the price of their lowest apartment. The prize shook his spirit and left him crippled for a few seconds. When his spirit found him, he was already lost in the labyrinth of how to raise thousands of naira for an apartment with a view to the sea.

And so, Collins accepted his loss and settled for the less that he ran away from. He had no degree and he had no training. Shame held him back from crawling back to his father.

‘I will go back and prove to them that it was a mistake sending me away’ he swore.

But it seemed like things were getting worse for no reason. His money was disappearing faster than he had calculated. So, he took a bold step and started to reduce his pleasures. He stopped visiting brothels and eating breakfast. But still it failed to work. His job hunt was a futile exercise. Everyone was asking for experience. Lagos was a growing city and the illiterate and the men without connection were being left behind. Collins noticed this and graduated to the car park to work as a conductor for the bus drivers. He swallowed insults, spittle and body odor to make a little over a thousand naira every day.

5.

Is it me or does the twenty-five hours in a day that God has given us sleep gracefully whenever we are together?

Am I Floating?

Or has your love swept me off my feet that I cannot feel my legs?

Ofure came from the hoard of families that migrated to Lagos for better dreams. Her father had left his father's farm to cling to the collar jobs that Lagos was offering. The ones who came in ships and trains, looking for metamorphosis. He had obtained a school certificate from his school in the village, a sword that was blunt against the higher degrees and competition that he met in Lagos. And so, he had to settle as a dry cleaner in one of the growing malls in Ikeja. That was the story of a man who came home every evening, brooding and gaping at the holes in his windows until sleep took over his thoughts. That was the only time that he seemed to be at peace. He was ashamed and regretted the comfortable agrarian life he had abandoned for leftovers in the city. Life in Lagos was bumpy and he came to appreciate the little that he had. Even the food he ate felt different. The food was not meant for body building, but for survival. What bothered the man more were the women that his wife kept on having. This was her seventh pregnancy and he prayed that this last one would be a boy. The neighbours were already laughing at the dry cleaner who had six female children and a pregnant wife. Sometimes, when he was in the bathroom, he heard them making jokes about his family toppling over one another as they slept. one even went as far as saying that the combined snores of the children would raise a man from the dead. Ofure's father never responded to any of these. But in his thoughts, he suffered greatly. When his wife gave birth for the seventh time, she gave birth to a girl. Perhaps that was the straw that

broke the camel's back or had his depressed thought caught up with his heartbeat. No one knew, all everyone saw was the dry cleaner coming back home in his brooding self, spiral, fall and die. Years after the death of her father, Ofure found herself in Aj Garage, selling pap and akara to the drivers and passengers who were bold enough to wave the gutters and dirty plates and eat. Was it love at first sight or was Ofure just happy to see another Esan man that she could talk to? Ofure knew when this new boy called Collins, joined the group of conductors fighting for buses to cling on to. she loved the way he swayed from bus to bus. She laughed at how he suffered to throw insults in Yoruba before falling back on his mother tongue. For many days, Ofure noticed the new man and pretended to pay attention to the food she was selling. Already, her attention had been stolen. Perhaps that was why the first time he said 'Come, I want to show you my house'. She gave the keys to the shop to her junior sister and followed him. Few months later, after Collins had finished swaying buses, he came to Ofure's shop, sweating and smiling, anxious to demand a taste of her to forget the troubles of the burning day. He saw her wearing a crestfallen face, as opposed to the warm-hearted smile that he was usually greeted with.

'What is it? What troubles you?' Collins finally asked after she didn't respond to his touches.

'I am pregnant.'

Collins thought deeply about this. He was not a wise man and so he considered the fact. She was from his hometown and she was a very good cook. She had Prepared and sneak him meals from time to time. She was also a wise and patient woman, plus she knew his condition and he didn't have to pretend to be anyone else when he was around her. She knew how much he earned and she would be comfortable with her lot. And so, Collins married Ofure in that garage park under the blistering sun burning the necks and heads of buildings and bodies in Ajegunle. He talked to her mother, a woman who was happy about another load lifted from her. The first three daughters had got pregnant and ran away. At least she knew Ofure's husband and the man had promised to pay her bride price in instalment.

In the biting month of August, Ofure, under the Lagos harmattan, packed her bags and moved in with Collins.

6.

If the ring on my finger doesn't make me a slave,

The appetite beneath his stomach will

If my loyalty to myself dares to stare at the burning sun without flinching,

My children's cry will melt my heart

For all I have seen, and all that I have felt,

If marriage doesn't make you a happy person, it makes you a better slave.

Marriage was not what the young couple had envisioned. Both were new at so many things and so alike in Ignorance. Ofure, being a woman, was not given the privilege of an education. Her mother always said that she would end up in a man's home, so there was no need for her to climb ladders if she would end up helping others climb. The Pastor of Fire and Light ministries that Ofure attended, did not let her celebrate her marriage in his church because of the way she had gotten pregnant.

'It is shameful' he had said and pointed at the young couple, permitting spittle to drop in their faces.

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