



the PORTFOLIO BAG



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Koti Market has closed for the usual night recess, and the dark cloud seals the heavens. Young men from the market and neighbouring villages are trooping to Mama Monica's Spot. Thomas trudges from home. The darkness is overwhelming, and his feet find the footpath by experience. His thought about the local politics is intermittently interrupted by the sound of mosquitoes that whizz around his ears from time to time and the crickets that chirp. He arrives at the Spot and is lucky to secure two empty seats.

Mama Monica emerges from her hut with a battery-powered lantern and toddles carefully, not wanting to trample on the multitude of customers that have settled down on the cluster of wooden benches and raffia mats. She hangs the lantern on a hook that is nailed on the giant haar tree. Thomas's face gleams. The arrival of the light reminds him of the anticipated messianic leader who shall terminate oppressions that sit upon the politics of his people.

He snorts whenever he perceives danger. Today, he snorts heaving his shoulders. His fingers locate his breast pocket and fondle a muddled cigarette which he lights and sucks long on the filter. Smoke brews through his nostrils like fumes from the exhaust of an old motorbike, his narrowed lips puff a straight line that breaks into space.

The bettors and gamblers at the Spot with many followers like the spectators at the Olympics, are watching the games with the eyes of judges and referees. On a stand by the tree, Mama Monica is selling lghó an entomophagy, packaged in calabash dishes. It makes you want to have a taste of it by the way everyone pecks and nibbles at it, licking fingers. Ogogoro, or brownish palm wine, is handy on sale in glass bottles to wash it down. Thomas makes a sign, and a youth hikes to serve him.

Any correct prediction about who wins the forthcoming councillorship election from the betting and gambling group is celebrated. The winning group gloats over their victory, and their caterwauling is cheered with arrogance that mocks. The losers carry a weight of silence or bitterness, or a state of heaviness that hones insolence which

often bursts into affray. Mama Monica's Spot is therefore transmuted into a festive din that interferes with the conversation Thomas and Tyôver are having.

‘...they have plundered everything.’

Tyôver accepts a shot from his friend and when he swallows it, his shoulders shudder, his head nods, his lips tremble, acknowledging the strength of the liquor.

‘Thomas, how on earth do you want to sit in the seat of the Messiah?’

‘The coast is clear and I am popular,’ he says. ‘The elective positions are zoned, turn by turn and clan by clan. It is our turn to roll out the drums.’

‘How can I be convinced? Your supporters may be referring to something different about your popularity, like the number of bottles and pointed boobs you have conquered.’ Both laugh loudly. ‘Honestly, that is how much I know of you.’ Tyôver looks straight into his eyes. ‘My friend, be careful, the game of politics can be dangerous ... your weakness can be your losing point.’

‘I know, my brother. But please, take my trust.’

There is a loud cheering at the betting group. An owl or a bat flies, flapping its wings above their heads. Thomas's face is tilted towards the direction, but the bird disappears in the branches. A gust of wind pushes away the dark cloud that shields the moon and the cloud is resisting, crawling at a dung-beetle speed.

‘Then what are you waiting for? A serious farmer does not waste time sharpening his farm tools before the rains. I have seen a particular poster everywhere. He is already sharpening his tools.’

‘He is Sura Kyór, the sitting councillor who is simply avaricious, wasting constituency funds. He does not respect the rule of the game.’

‘I told you, then why do you still want to contest?’

‘He cannot change the rule.’

‘If you are so sure, what is restraining you?’

‘Take off funds, Tyôver. Funds -’

‘Be specific.’

‘Nomination fee and campaign funds.’

‘It is a common denominator.’

‘Well, Tyôver, my friend, to be honest with you, financial capacity is enormous. I need a fundraiser, a godfather,’ he says, sympathy quivering in his voice.

There is silence.

Tyôver chews on the discussion and many thoughts are simmering in his head. Thomas is right, godfatherism has become a totem in politics. These gods, hitherto of no repute, have become supreme, untouchable, and ruthless. They have become millionaires overnight and control food and economy, politics and religion. They have captured political representations and maneuvered political offices into business empires, streams of income, and channels of unending wealth, leaving nothing for the masses.

‘How much is the nomination form?’

Tyôver throws a piece of Ighó in his mouth; he slowly crushes it with his molars, enjoying the peppery spice that bites his palate and tongue. His fingers grip a shot, and his mouth gurgles the contents down.

‘The form is fifty thousand naira.’

‘What is the return on investment?’

Thomas smiles, ‘My goal is to give sacrificial service to my people.’ He is appalled by the dead infrastructure in the land: the rotten wood-constructed bridges, the dirt roads inhabited with potholes and puddles, the dilapidated school structures with caved-in roofs, the broken classroom seats that litter in abandonment - all play clips in his mind. He sees through the lenses the cholera-infected water and the poorly established primary health centres. He tells Tyôver all. Tyôver ideology is clear: politics is equal to business; he sees the contracts therein as profitable investments.

‘I can help you. I mean, I can partner with you to get the nomination fee if you are determined. But you have to transport yourself to Lagos with me after the burial.’

Thomas clears the contents of the bottle in a gulp, crouching, almost prostrating, he embraces his friend's feet, a gesture of deference and appreciation sit on his face.

The money on them is not sufficient to book two tickets to Lagos. They have to sell off the half bag of garri, Thomas' wife has provided to feed him in Lagos.

They make the ten-hour journey in fifteen hours and arrive at Idumota Motor Park at midnight, the last Molue bus to Festac town is about to leave. Every seat in the bus is occupied and the aisle is crowded, but Thomas and Tyôver tussle their way in it, their bags trapped across their shoulders, their right hands firmly grappled the handrail. Thomas takes a look out of the window. An endless mass of darkness, flecked with orbs of light, floods the city. Hawkers swarm around the bus displaying small, medium and large loaves of red bread and plantain chips and different varieties of drinks on enamel plates, balanced effortlessly on their heads. Tyôver pays for two loaves of the red bread.

Thomas is thirsty; he yearns for a drink, an alcoholic drink to be precise, and he snorts. The money he has is not enough to pay for his return ticket, and that frightens him, putting him under financial stress.

A horn blares, and the bus roars into motion through the noisy motor park.

'Owoda.' A young man with a shirtless chest tugs Thomas in the stomach. They gaze at each other, cock versus cock; his tongue is devoid of words. The man is the bus conductor; his lips hiss and curl into an ugly shape, and his brow is lined with unfriendly creases. He turns to the other passengers, and they present their fares. The conductor snaps their money, squeezes the notes to form a shapeless size in his palm, before depositing the shape into his pocket that is girded around his waist. He turns to Thomas the second time.

'Your money, or your ears dey deaf?'

Thomas looks at Tyôver for a rescue. The conductor throws his hand at Tyôver.

'Owoda.'

'Give him the fare.'

With a blank look on his face, Thomas dips his hand into his hip pocket.

They alight at Festac City Bus Stop and walk down the semi-lit street illuminated by finger-shaped yellow bulbs that dangle from some buildings. The street is nearly empty. A lady and a man with groggy faces are trying to narrow their eyes on them. One sits in an ATM kiosk, while another sits under an umbrella; ATM machines rest on the counter, luring for attention in grave silence.

Tyôver and Thomas are hungry; their legs barely drag them along the untarred street. Shops on their right display oranges and mangoes and roasted corn and plantain and bread. Their stomachs grumble. An old grinding machine hums noisily in front of one of the shops, a man bends over it controlling the flow of flour, while a woman with a sleeping baby tied to her back stands by in full attention. Grains of corn and rice, beans and millets, groundnut oil and palm oil, sachets of condiments, and many spices are on checkout counters, with a banner reading: *Cold Turkey, Chicken, and Fish is on Sell Here* is tied to a corner of the burglar-proof that safeguards the shop.

Down the street, some ladies with large buttocks, and some with varied curves, in brief pants and hug-tops, stand by with welcoming smiles. Opposite is the Peace Motel and Lodge, decorated in neon lights. Thomas' movement is censored by the sweet Fuji music that is playing. The smell of cigarettes and alcohol drenched the air.

They turn into a narrow passage that reeks of foul gutters and rotten urine, which terminates at the thresholds of many apartments. Thomas wraps his knuckles on a door. There are movements of feet, objects hitting against each other. The door through the scullery is opened. A woman welcomes Tyôver, and he briefly takes her in his arms. She collects his bag and doubles it up with Thomas,' saying, "Welcome, sir," several times to Thomas. She clutches Thomas' bag and drags the other one to the inner room.

A candle and a sulphurous mosquito coil are burning in souvenir plates on a thick table. All the armchairs in the parlour are occupied. Thomas and Tyôver sit on the wooden chairs, their fingers caressing the large table. Books and broken toys are strewn on the table, and half-burnt candle stubs are moulded in glittering ornaments. She pushes the toys and the books towards the centre of the table, but the candle-burnt stubs resist to be unblocked. She returns and serves them corn-pap with the Idumota red bread.

Tyôver enters the next room, and the door is closed with a click.

Thomas scans around the sitting room and, flicking his fingers, counts five children lying in the armchairs. The leather chairs are cracked and torn at the head and arm-resting positions. At a corner, there is a wooden bench that is leaning against the wall. He carries it with care, not wanting to disturb the sleeping children, and places it by the corner of the dining table. He blows out the candlelight, and, making the sign of the cross, lowers his body; his legs dangle until find support on the carpet, and in a moment, he begins to snore. He saw himself campaigning, madam Vera his long crush standing by.

Tyôver wakes Thomas, and they are in front of a gorgeous bungalow, holding a placard that boldly screams: "*Buy Me.*" It is tied to the gate and covers the upper part of the fleur-de-lis. By the security kiosk, a young man, below twenty, sits on a stool; his mouth is open and his head is limply leaning on the wall.

"Terver, open the gate!"

He wakes up as if a snake is chasing him and wipes his face with his palms. He lifts a bunch of keys over his head and carefully selects one of the keys to unlock the brown padlock. A luxurious car pulls over with tinted glasses, and a rotund man in a fitted white traditional jumper made of baft climbs down from the back.

"Tyôver, how was the funeral?"

"Thank you for the assistance, sir. We have buried him."

"Take heart. He was too young to die of hypertension. Look, hypertension is deadly; always check your BP." Tyôver has heard that a lot since his brother's death.

"Please, come to my office with the papers, and let's round up the deal."

"Ok, sir."

Tyôver turns to Thomas, "That man is rich; he sleeps on cash and wakes up on cash. He owns Trans Realtors Group." Thomas' eyes boggle.

The following day, Tyôver and Thomas head to Trans Realtors Group. They are excited and trek despite the scorching sun; sweat glues their clothes to their skin, and their throats are dry, but it does not matter.

Chukwu is in a brown attire today and sits behind an opulent glass table. On the wall is his portrait and that of the executive governor of Lagos State, and that of the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Chukwu shakes their hands and points at the empty seats.

‘Can I see the papers?’

"How much are you paying for it, sir?"

"Twenty million."

"With the land and the assets? Make it thirty."

"Please, let's look at your title documents."

Tyôver consults the portfolio bag borrowed from Thomas. He carefully examines the documents and spreads the two pieces of paper side by side; brownish columns swathe the edges.

‘This is the first page of the Deed of Assignment, Tyôver. It is incomplete,’ he says, lifting up the single piece. He picks up the other paper and observes it as if his eyes have been transmuted into a telescope. ‘This Survey Plan is not registered ...Tyôver.’

‘Meaning?’

Chukwu sighs, ‘I am sad to be a harbinger of bad news. These are not title documents.’

‘Why?’

‘They are unverified documents,’ he looks at Tyôver and Thomas. ‘I will get back to you on the Survey Plan. My boys will be on the premises tomorrow with GPS tools to conduct coordinates on the site.’

Tyôver lacks words of expression. His heart is pounding like the sound of a pestle against yam in a mortar.

They step out into the sun.

‘Tyôver, do you believe the man?’ Thomas uses his handkerchief to wipe his forehead.

‘Chukwu is shrewd. All businessmen are shrewd, Thomas. Their words are often mixed with spiel to take advantage. I hope he will not disappoint us.’

Thomas did not utter a word.

They shuffle home.

The coloured water in a small bucket in the squalid bathroom is inadequate to flush the toilet and take a bath, and when he squats on his haunches, the cistern emits warm rancidity - the stench of decayed urine and faeces. Thomas covers the broken bathroom door with his towel to protect his privacy.

Today ends into the third night, and he is sitting upright; his body yearns for a change in his sleeping position. His stomach rumbles angrily throughout the night, and daybreak takes forever.

At Trans Realtors Group, the secretary ushers Tyôver and Thomas to the golden table. All the executive seats are occupied by some clients whose eyes are heavy, and their heads are slowly nodding as if they are communing with some unseen beings or listening to a boring oration. Tyôver and Thomas have to wait much longer than on their previous visit. Mr. Chukwu is in his sports attire today and looks younger and more handsome than before when he comes to attend to them. Thomas stares at him and imagines the power of wealth and how it can play some stunning tricks. He sits and holds his palms together like a devout clergy.

Tyôver clears his throat twice.

‘How ...did it go, sir?’

‘Not different from our last discussion. It is a bad investment. The house is on a waterway.’

‘What does that mean, sir?’

‘The government frowns upon it, which is why they marked it red.’

Demolition?’

‘Government demolition.’

‘This project is important to me and my friend -’

'Sorry, bro, it is a bad investment,' he says, unrolling the architectural design of the area on the table. The drawing means nothing to Tyôver. He feels it is laughing in his face, reminding him of his many failures.

Thomas smiles, but his body is frozen, sagged, and forlorn like a chamel tree whose stem is infested with caterpillar insects; the leaves are eaten, and the branches are stripped naked - his only hope of blossoming has been stripped naked.

They are back and sleeping on linoleum in the gorgeous house, at least to taste its comfortability and value, perhaps, to draw sympathy for some luck. The sound of a caterpillar machine, the heavy-duty equipment, and the fierce rays of light that penetrate into the parlour wake Tyôver up. He opens the door, and his only hope in the world begins to tumble in violent satire. He grabs his bristling chest and rushes to the gate in a fury of confusion, like a hen against the terror of a vicious raptor.

The sound of the caterpillar accelerates, and the bucket-teeth hawk over the roof. The first bite is on the asphalt roof above the foyer, and the whole house wobbles in the solitude of tempests. Tyôver runs back from the gate, and the policeman who straps his rifle at the back tries to stop him.

'My brother is in there. My brother is sleeping!'

He is shouting or crying, but the sound of the caterpillar roars above his. The policeman holds him as the teeth of the caterpillar begin to pull down the front roof. The building puts up some resistance, but the weight of the crane is stronger. The pillars holding the foyer and its summit mow and crash to the ground; the broken pieces roll in different directions, and some flit towards their feet. He pulls away from the police officer's arms, and the cloud of dust swallows him.

ASP Adeyemo raises his red flag.

'Stop!'

The caterpillar raises its bucket again, and this time the teeth slide into the front lintel. The building trembles, and thick debris begins to pelt down. Tyôver's right arm is on Thomas's shoulders, and both of them stagger through the dust, coughing and their hands groping. ASP gives them a helping hand, and he is furiously shouting orders at the operator, who is passionate about his job and pays undivided attention

to what he has been assigned to do. The strong teeth of the heavy-duty machine mount the remaining part of the building and thunder it down into a heap of rubble.

Tyôver and Thomas slog back home. Thomas wipes the dining table and uses his portfolio bag as a pillow to stretch out his aching knee; his head hurts and his stomach continues to protest. He wonders if the children who lay on the chairs have eaten. He wakes up to discover that the house is empty as always and limps through the scullery. The room is cold, and the dishes are clean and tidy.

He trawls through his phone and scribbles a number on a piece of paper in front of a phone booth, the call is beeping.

‘Hello, Matthias ...’

Thomas pays the operator and returns with the folded piece of information in his hip pocket. He bids Tyôver goodbye and clambers into a Molue bus to Palmgrove. His godson says he should cross over the overhead bridge. He warns that any attempt to cross the express road will land him in Kirikiri Maximum Prison.

Matthias sees his godfather limp on the pedestrian pathway. They shake hands. Matthias leads him to his car, which is parked beside his church, and drops the two bags on the back seats.

They are in Ade Memorial Hospital, and Thomas's vitals are taken. A tetanus shot is administered, and ointment and anodyne are given, and Matthias drives him home. His house, a three-bedroom apartment in a two-storey building, has a spacious parlour; a galaxy of lights hangs from the Plaster of Paris ceiling. The dining table is decorated with candelabra, and Mrs. Matthias serves her husband his favourite meal of pounded yam. Thomas is amused by the huge sizes of both the food and the pieces of meat that spice the soup and wonders if this was the same Lagos where hunger has inflicted him for the past four days. He eats like a soldier in the trench.

The guest room has a clean restroom, and he spends a longer time in the convenience to scour without knowing. He rubs the ointment on his left leg and swallows the drugs; his body yearns to lie down on the fluffy bed sheets.

The knock at the door wakes him up, and Matthias is sitting in front of his godfather.

'I am sorry to disturb you, but I must go to work. Tell me, what brought you to Lagos?'

Thomas tells him about the nomination form.

'That is a lot of money; you should have rung me before rushing to Lagos.'

Matthias drops two pieces of five hundred naira notes on the table near the window.

'This is for you.'

He switches off the light and leaves. Thomas scuttles out of bed; the pain in his leg and knee aches, but it is not as painful as the day of the demolition. He picks up the notes and lifts them above his head; some inexplicable tears escape his eyes, and he allows them the freedom to flow. He stands in a daze until the sound of Fajr prayers from a nearby mosque reminds him that it is still dawn. He nestles back into bed.

Thomas is communing with the gateman when Matthias returns from work. He welcomes his godfather and belches the froth that retches his throat. Matthias's face flinches, and Thomas staggers backward, grasping the wall to steady himself. He wobbles behind his godson. He snorts, and his fingers touch his breast pocket. He longs for a cigarette, but he is undecided or afraid to smoke.

'Destiny is a running toddler; if you do not stretch your arms with care, you will never catch it.'

'You are very correct, Matthias; you speak like a god. A stranger does not pretend to greet an empty kitchen; it is hunger that has made him do so,' he says and releases another burp that has clogged his throat. 'I have suffered thirst for the past five days. Please, forgive me. I have not forgotten that you are a pastor.'

'That is not the point. You have to be in sober reflection when you are pursuing a serious goal. Your body, soul, and spirit must yearn towards it. Politics can be nasty and damaging. Believe it or not; to succeed in politics or in life, you need to have a strong desire and the hand of divinity.'

'You are correct, Matthias.' He drops down on the sofa.

‘Get ready; tomorrow we shall go to the mountain to seek the face of God concerning your matter. No more alcohol for now. No food. I hope I am speaking well.’

‘You speak like a god. Your godfather is still a choirmaster. I have not turned away my face from God.’

‘May it be so.’

The Holy Mountain is situated on Ode Hills in South West Nigeria. It is not a church or owned by any general overseer. Shanties, huts, and sheds are haphazardly built. Some of the thatched roofs and the supporting pillars are infested with termites. But none of that matters. Most of the guests at the Holy Mountain are in a state of solemnity, an acute state of desperation or hopelessness; therefore, ambiance becomes the least of their concerns.

News came that Matthias had left Catholicism and joined the Hallelujah church, where he rose to a pastoral position. The Hallelujah church is nicknamed the hand-clapping church, the hilarious noisemakers, where God is lacking. The news troubled Thomas, and he thought that he had lost a godson, but now events have changed the perspective; his godson is a successful man—a rich man at whose dining table everyone owns a plate of food. In his house, everyone possesses a pair of shoes, trousers and shirts, and there is no need for his household to beg or borrow water from a neighbour. Thomas decides he must listen to his godson and likely serve his God.

‘This place is known for answered prayers; many politicians received their victories here,’ Matthias told Thomas. ‘Don’t look at the physical structures or the faces of the people. Turn your face and behold God.’

A man holding a big Bible is aggressively preaching in the midst of people who sit in a circle. A woman passes by with stammering lips; her head is without a headscarf, her long hair covers her ears and part of her face, her eyes are blinking like a stroboscope. She strolls beside a man who has prostrated, his face is stooped towards the ground, his head is vigorously nodding, and his palms are tethered into the sand.

Matthias holds Thomas’s hands and lifts his voice in prayer.

Today is a public holiday. Matthias, his wife, and Thomas are at the dining table. Matthias clears his throat after breakfast. He always clears his throat when he wants to say something important.

‘You will be traveling tomorrow to the village. My wife and I have decided to support you for the nomination fee. I believe God has heard your prayers.’

‘Matthias, my godson, you have answered my prayers? What you have done is something that has never been heard of in all the clans of our land.’

‘We are not here for any competition. A kinsman can be a blessing within his means. A man who shares his horn of palm-wine will get a gorge during a New Yam Feast.’

‘You will get double the gorge, my godson. You have demonstrated that you are a distinguished man of God.’

‘I am not giving you cash for the councillorship nomination form. I will transfer the fee to my younger sister’s account. She will give you the cash when you arrive in Makurdi.’ He hands some cash to Thomas. ‘This is for your bus ticket. Use the change from it to buy a piece of wrapper for your wife, as well as soaps and cream. It is not good for a wife to welcome her husband who has visited Lagos while the husband carries empty hands to return her greeting... Just keep us informed when the nomination is done.’

‘Thank you, my godson, may your God continue to bless you.’

Magarine Hotel Makurdi hosted the Ward Congress for the ruling political party during the last gubernatorial election and earned a four-star upgrade. Thomas was at the congress carrying the portfolio bag for his ward leader, the General Secretary. Today, he is lodged in the same suite D24. The cost is alarming beyond his expectations, but he is now an aspirant, his portfolio bag is loaded, and he is the one

favoured to win the election. The room is big, and the toilet is clean to his taste. He has savoured an order of jollof rice, a full lap of chicken, and two bottles of cold beer.

He is standing on the balcony; the tall flower trees in the garden and the festive bunting flutter in red, blue, green, and white in a most serene manner. The coloured bulbs illuminate love.

Madam Vera is seated opposite Mr. Sura Kyór, the sitting councillor. He speaks, and his hands are tossing into the air. He seems to be angry or in a hurry, or something. Picking up his portfolio bag, he gives her a peck on the lips and storms off into the parking lot.

‘Can I be lucky to be welcomed?’

‘Not by someone who is about to retire from a troubled day.’

‘Troubles are constant. Babe, the night is too dark to lose the only beam.’

‘What do you want from me, Thomas?’

A waiter comes in to clear the table.

‘Two bowls of *isewo* and two beers.’

‘The order looks expensive.’

‘Not as expensive as the love that has been elusive.’

The menu is served.

‘Your visit to Lagos was definitely prosperous.’

‘Enough to satisfy my appetite for the next councillorship seat.’

‘And your appetite is large enough to nibble at his side chic too?’

‘He has caged her for himself for too long...’

Thomas places his key on the table.

‘Please, can we continue this conversation in my suite?’

Madam Vera peeps into his deep eyes that carry the many years of deprivation and the lavished storehouse of love are loaded into them with the ability to discover a woman’s heart. She picks up her iPhone and bag and leaves his key untouched. She

walks seductively towards the gate. He snorts, his face writhed in dejection, and he covers the shame in the palms of his hands.

A moment later, soft fingers tap his shoulders and pick up his key. Her face is disconcerted and carries an ominous portent; nevertheless, he follows her with the passion that only the energy of love can push.

They lay naked in bed, exhausted from the fierce lovemaking he has ever received from a woman. She caresses his bare chest, and he receives strength again for her in his most skilful art. The dull morning rays wake him up, and he is contentedly smiling, but Madam Vera is gone.

He looks through the window; a dark cloud covers the sun.

In the wardrobe, his portfolio bag is still in place, hiding, but the cash in it has vanished, and today is the closing date to purchase the councillorship nomination form.

