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Last Night In Asaba

Chike Frankie Edozien

I KNEW THAT I shouldn't have picked up the call. I feel the chills that come when Baba is in one of his moods. Those little puddles on my arms—goosebumps, Alhaji calls them—are sprouting up.

I'm sitting in the cramped back seat of a rickety Volkswagen kombi bus that is past the halfway point on the Niger Bridge, heading into Onitsha.

Minutes after dropping the phone, I'm still shaking.

The passengers are gawking at me.

Why did I have to answer? Baba never calls unless something is terribly wrong. I could have stayed on the bus and gotten off at the club and had a fantastic night dancing.

Tomorrow, I would have just said my battery died. Or that I misplaced my phone. This one Friday night that I need to let off steam, I took the call, and now, I have to get off, catch another bus, and head back to Asaba.

No dancing. No flirting. No Star beer.

I answered and what did I get?

"WHERE ARE YOU?"

Baba's voice was so loud that the market woman sitting next to me squirmed. It seemed like everyone onboard heard.

"Get back here now! If I don't see you in five minutes you will see what will happen."

I have been very good this whole year. I have stayed out of his way and out of the

way of all the Aladura Prayer Warriors Baba has over every other day for Bible study.

I always tell the white garment shoeless brothers who are my father's latest obsession, that work is keeping me away from the meetings.

But truly, what work is there really to do when you're a youth corper? The National Youth Service Corps mandate is that we spend the year after university working somewhere in Nigeria where we are not indigenes. Somehow, they posted me to Okpanam.

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my mother's people.**

Of all places.

I've had to move back to Papa's home in Asaba and go to work from there. It could have been worse; they could have sent me to Yola, or someplace in the Northeast where I could have been ravaged by Boko Haram sympathizers.

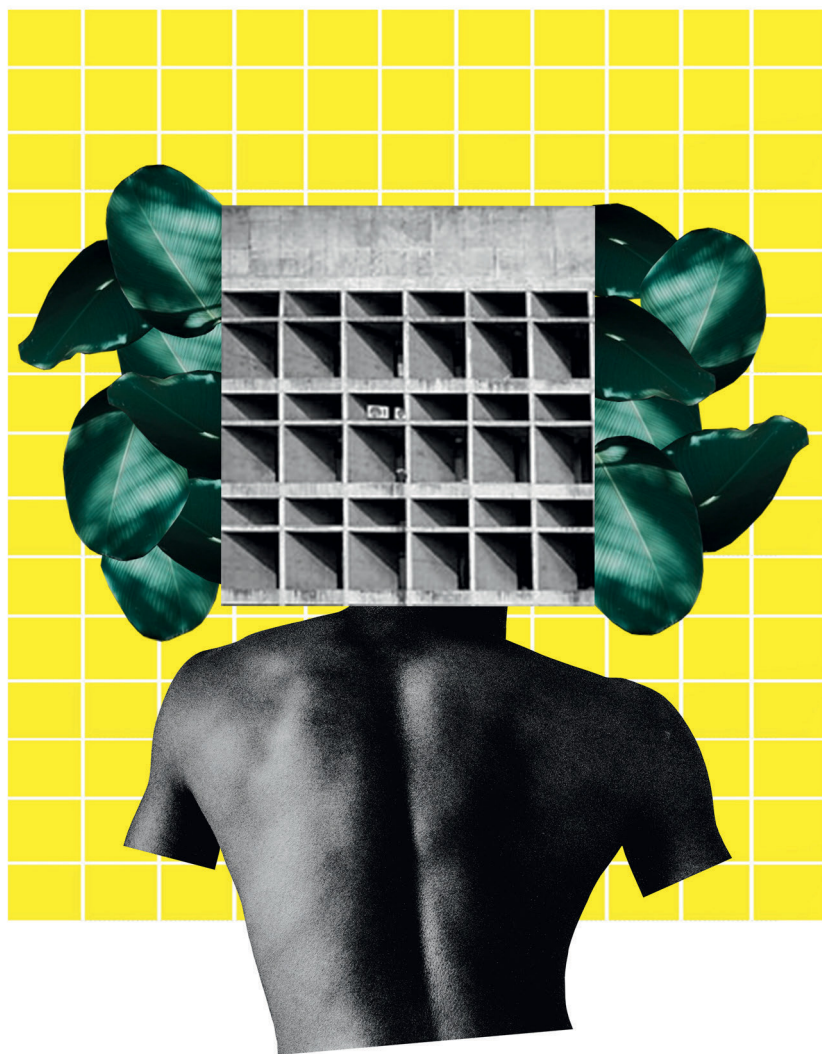
They must have thought we still lived in Lagos. But Baba is retired and the Lagos home is no more. And with retirement, he is around all the time. We all know not to cross Baba when he is in one of his moods.

I still remember when I was finishing High School. That term, of the three hundred people in S. S. 2, at Ogbomosho Grammar School, I was number two when the results were compiled. Even in the deadly boring Health Science, I was on top. But during that first mathematics midterm, I had been sick. So, missing the test got me a zero score. No mercy for being at the Sick Bay that day with stomach cramps. There was no way to get an "A" in that one. So it was all "As" except for the "F."

On the cramped bus ride back to Lagos that day, I kept smiling. If not for the stomach issues, I might have ended up in first position, but second was fine too. I was happy walking into the house for my holiday with my report card. Even with that missing test, I had still been placed second. But Baba was already in a bad mood when I arrived in Lagos. I didn't know what the problem was. But there he was, frowning, with visitors.

One of them was kneeling. I'm not sure what they were there for, but I recognized some of them as Ilesha people. Baba's last wife is from Ilesha and these were her kin. She had been gone for some time, since I'd left for the boarding school two years before. It seemed like I was always an inconvenience to her. And Baba did everything to make her happy. Even sending me to board in Ogbomosho was her idea. Sending her to England, too, was her idea.

Baba's friends called her "young and beautiful." She wasn't bad to me, but I couldn't say she was warm. Maybe she wished I would go and live with my mother's people. But ever since Mum died when I was



**Kadara
Enyeasi,
*Form 01, Box
of Curiosities*,
2013.** Image
courtesy of the
artist.

young, Baba has rarely let me see them. I hardly know them. And Baba used to smile a lot when we were alone. When the “young and beautiful” new wife moved in, he smiled even more. When she left, Baba’s mood changed. Maybe her people had come with news. But from the way he was frowning, it was not good news.

He greeted me with a grunt. But when he saw my report card, he found his voice and rained abuses on me in front of everyone.

He's always talking to me about improving my work, and last term I was Number 11. It would have been better if he had pulled out his belt and whipped me. An "F" in mathematics, and I was now a waste of space. Never mind that I had "As" in eight subjects. I was a disappointment.

And he had to dress me down in front of all these strangers before waving me off.

I got no pocket money or any presents that holiday. I was, after all, a "mediocre" student, not worth all the effort that went into my education. Baba could be downright cruel sometimes. And now, having just arrived, instead of dancing the night away in Onitsha with my new girlfriends, I have to take the bus back to go and see what he has in store for me tonight. Maybe I should wander around the motor park a little bit before boarding the next kombi. But that would be just delaying the inevitable; I'll have to face him, eventually.

• • •

So, here I am, in the front seat of another wretched, old mini-bus. The driver isn't going to leave until it is full and that's fine by me. Before we cross into Asaba, I can prepare myself for what is to come. I'm still shaking, but is it because I've been found out? Perhaps Obi ran his mouth

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to report me. Obi really doesn't know my father. Baba takes from all his adoring fans, but gives precious little. Squealing on me won't really make Baba give him the attention he is craving. He'll be lucky if he's rewarded with even a smile for betraying me.

Obi, the son of Baba's latest paramour, now fancies himself Baba's son too, calling him "Daadee" every chance he gets.

He has no idea of the burden that goes with being his son.

Years ago, when Baba moved the Asaba woman into his sprawling house, it seemed like a good idea. The house had been an investment property, but now that he has retired, he's there all the time. No one in Asaba knew the difference between our family and any other Yoruba family that had settled in the East, but having a local woman eased the transition. After all, who would complain about the prime village land he bought, since he was to be married to a daughter of the town?

Now, Baba is speaking Igbo every day like he, too, is a descendant of Nnebisi, the town's founder. He uses indigenous phrasing, and if he

didn't tell you his name, you might mistake him for one of the town's sons. You would not know that our family descends from a long line of famous Yoruba people all the way from Madam Erunwoye Tinubu. Baba's current madam—I actually thought she was his employee when I first met her—moved in with her son Obi.

It had been years since my “young and beautiful” stepmother left us. It turned out that when she was abroad, she had a child for someone her own age. That man, too, was from Ilesha. Since then Baba, has been fewer smiles and more work. And when this new woman moved in, first as a worker, I was surprised how quickly she graduated to his bedroom. Then she moved in her son.

And every day since, Obi has fawned over Baba like an eight-week-old puppy. The marriage still hasn't happened.

Obi, who wouldn't or couldn't go to the university, makes a very good living as a mechanic. But his real job seems being Baba's eager errand boy. He no longer has to pay rent for the room in Ogbogonogo, near Ogbe Hausa, where he lived across from all the northern transplants. He can live in the small bungalow next to the big house in the government reserved area with its neatly tendered lawns that Baba has settled nicely into.

Still, Obi is clueless about how Baba values education above all else. Two days ago, I spotted Obi at the Jetty Bar of the fancy Grand Hotel. He was with some men, maybe clients, as I walked by on my way to meet Alhaji. Obi often drinks at the roadside chop bars. I'm not sure why he was inside the hotel that night, but no matter.

Alhaji and I walked down to the riverbank to chat, and in the darkness, under a mango tree, Alhaji gave me that nice, slow French kiss. The one where he pulls me close and slowly sticks his tongue into my mouth. And then, of course, my knees always grow weak, and all I can think of is his scent: that mixture of Benson & Hedges cigarettes and the bitter kola nut he's always chewing. I lose myself. I think of nothing, but feel desire and the need for Alhaji's touch as he rubs his fingers along my back.

Alhaji is always a daredevil, and I've warned him that someone will see us one day. Well, it looks like Obi spotted us even in the dark, and ran to tell Baba. He probably couldn't wait to give him all the details.

“They were kissing, sir! In front of everyone-oh,” I imagine Obi recounting.

Alhaji and I have been carrying on since before I entered the Youth Service Corps. He is an Ilorin man, seven years older than I am. We met in Lagos. Maybe it was the gold tooth that did it, I'm not sure. I was by the pool bar at the Radisson Blu hotel in Victoria Island looking out

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**Kadara
Enyeasi,**
*Form 02, Box
of Curiosities,*
2013. Image
courtesy of the
artist.

onto the Lagoon. We had just finished having that Sunday brunch buffet with jollof rice and all the trimmings. The cow leg that day was fantastic. My buddy Kola felt like splurging, and he'd brought me along for the ride. He's a real "aje butter" and very spoiled by his doctor parents.

Somehow, Alhaji's group and ours merged, and there was laughter and talk and even more cocktails for Kola and I that they paid for. They were celebrating a business deal and pulled us in. After a few drinks, I

was smiling at the gold tooth, and Alhaji was smiling back. And then, he took my phone from beside me and dialed his own phone.

"Save my number," he mouthed, and then whispered, "We must do this again. No. We *will* do this again, soon."

I nodded eagerly.

He had my number, which he would use regularly. He would drive over to see me in the dormitory at the University of Lagos, and on weekends pick me up for dinners, concerts, or art openings. We went to places I only read about, like that Ember Creek waterfront restaurant everyone is always raving about. The food was good, and it was less expensive than at the Radisson Blu.

His friends even have a large speed-boat; they called it "Misty," so sometimes we would head out to Tarkwa Bay. People complain of Lagos and its traffic and its crowds, but they don't know Alhaji's Lagos. Nothing like I even knew was here in Nigeria. Just a few miles out, the sea becomes cobalt blue, sometimes even a foamy green, like those in the pictures from travel magazines. The cityscape makes me proud. From the water Lagos looks like one of the big American cities with towers touching the skies.

And on the boat, he and his friends, some European expatriates, the two Lebanese brothers born in Lagos but raised in Jos, and one other Naija Big Man, would drink from white goblets filled with iced Moët & Chandon.

I didn't know you could drink champagne with ice blocks, but I would sip and watch them laugh like they didn't have a care in the world. How could they? Lagos was their oyster, and the rest of us just scraped by in it. On occasion, they would find a spot and do some scuba diving, but mostly it was surfing they craved.

Once we got to Tarkwa Bay beach, his friends would go surfing on their boards, enjoying the waves. I'm not a strong swimmer, so I would never even try. I didn't know surfing was a thing in Nigeria until I met Alhaji.

On the weekends at the Tarkwa Bay beach, you can see the foreigners surfing with a few Nigerians. One man even gives lessons. He fancies that Nigeria will compete in the Olympics for surfing one day. Alhaji doesn't care that I don't surf; going to the beach is an opportunity to take me someplace secluded and continue "relaxing." He'll go on the boards for a while and come back to our secluded corner on beach to talk. I'm a good listener. Once we are "relaxed" on the sand, and just away from the others, he'll lean in for kisses.

Kisses, kisses, and more kisses.

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Alhaji loves to have sex, but sometimes more than that, he seems to love kissing, the French way, he says. He always kisses me on the boat, but it startles me whenever he kisses me outside, where anyone can see. But even though I don't want to be seen, I like it.

He loves to lecture me on things because he's been overseas and I have not. But he did run back, after one week, the last time he was in the UK. It was simply too cold, he said. He prefers to go to Dubai or Istanbul, and each time he returns, there is usually a gift in the form of a gold chain or bracelet for me. He likes gold. I wear them happily.

He likes that I'm kind of quiet and that I get lost in my own world most of the time. He thinks I'm timid; he just has no idea how much I've suffered in this life. It is easier for me to do more listening than talking.

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He likes my skinny body and never fails to tell me this as a way of explaining his need to kiss me. The kissing that never fails to catch me by surprise. He says my figure is lithe. Whatever that means.

After the shock of being posted to a small town near Asaba for the service year wore off, I was worried about holding on to him. If I have to move to the East, how will our relationship, already clandestine, survive?

When I lived in Isale-Eko, in Baba's family compound, he would park a street away to pick me up. But living in Asaba under Baba's roof with Obi and Madam didn't bring the end of our secret moments.

It turns out that Alhaji is building several fast food franchises nearby in Asaba, Onitsha, and Iselu-Uku. He's been flying into Asaba almost every week and takes up a nice bungalow at the Grand Hotel three or four days during the week so we can see each other in the evenings, as soon as I return from my service post.

He could have been very bored here without me, he says, and once I'm done with my service year, he wants me to move back to Lagos.

I smile when he says this.

Is it so easy to be in Lagos without a job? I would have to rent a room someplace, or stay with our cousins in Isale-Eko. But I will cross that bridge later.

One day, after collecting all my university papers, I dropped by Alhaji's office, and found Udo there, the "Cutie-pie" from Ikoyi whose father runs a mobile phone company.

Udo is a half-caste, and gets a lot of attention based on looks alone. I suppose "Cutie-pie" is smart too, but who knows? Cutie went to school at Oxford, and has mentioned something about going back for graduate school. That day, he had just landed from London, and brought Alhaji a big hamper from Harrods. It was filled with cheese, jam, biscuits



**Kadara
Enyeasi,
Form 03, Box
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and assorted goodies I cannot name. Even the basket was an elaborate construction.

“You know say I no dey chop all this oyibo food now,” Alhaji teased, before escorting Udo to the waiting car and driver. There was electricity between them. I could feel it. Cutie-pie looked at Alhaji with wide, hungry eyes, just like I do when Alhaji has been gone for too long and I miss his touch.

Yet, I shouldn't have been too worried; even with the English accent, the foreign travel, the fancy degree, the beautiful skin, nice car, and driver, and general very desirable-ness, I still had the upper hand. Cutie-pie is a somewhat high profile Ikoyi star, and is sometimes featured in the celebrity publication, "City People," partying at some new hot spot. And no matter their rumbles in the hay, Alhaji professed to love me, for me. I could not prove it, but Alhaji was chopping Cutie on the side. And Cutie wants to be the main squeeze. But Alhaji doesn't like to be overshadowed.

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even spit on me and
call me the "devil."**

Living in Asaba and seeing Alhaji here away from the frenzied energy of Lagos was good for our relationship.

Of course, Kola couldn't resist texting me when he ran into Alhaji having drinks with Cutie-pie at the Hard Rock Cafe Lagos, near Elugbusi Beach, the other weekend. They took a stroll on the beach, Kola dutifully reported.

"Don't let anyone steal your Alhaji-oh,"

he warned.

I told Kola I was sure they were just friends. Jealousy isn't my thing, and every week, Alhaji kisses me softly, and then tells me he wishes we could run off and be married somewhere. And afterwards, we go and fuck for hours in the hotel before I go home. This kissing is probably what Obi saw and has gone to tell Baba, and now I have to face the music.

The bus has crossed the Niger Bridge, and quickly drops all the passengers down in front of Grand Hotel. There are more people scrambling to get on board and head back to Onitsha.

I'm just going to walk down to Anwai Road, from Nnebisi Road, the main thoroughfare here. I keep my head down, staring at the red earth and not making eye contact with the pedestrians around me. I slowly make my way home. I know what is to come.

If only I could turn back time and remind Baba about how happy we were, before he fell for wife number two. If I could find a way to remind him of a time when I was his priority.

Tonight, he might also give me a thorough beating, with Obi and Madam throwing insults my way. They might even spit on me and call me the "devil." He will surely throw me out. Obi will finally have my large bedroom.

I have a few friends here in Asaba, so maybe I will have to move in with some of the other corpors for the next two months. That job that Baba has lined up for me as a junior teacher in Asagba Primary & Secondary Day School, I can now kiss it goodbye. I can hear them telling

me that I will burn in hell fire. I wonder how many lashes Baba will give me tonight. I know he thinks I'm an "underachiever" and a "disgrace" for not getting a First Class degree from UNILAG, but I don't see him forgiving this. This could be the breaking point for him.

My legs are now getting heavy. I'm passing Ukwuagbono Bus Stop, and home is within eyeshot. Even at my snail's pace, I'm still getting closer. Maybe I could just lie. Should I tell him Obi doesn't know what he saw? Tell him the girls in Onitsha that I go dancing with are fighting over me and that I like Chinwe, but Adaora is not agreeing. But I've never been a good liar, and Baba knows that. He might even give me more slaps for not being man enough to admit what I am. Where will I go tonight?

In Lagos, there are assorted relatives. In Asaba, Baba is wrapped up with his madam, and it's just us. After tonight, it will just be them. Hopefully, he won't throw me in jail. Asaba police officers recently recounted with glee to the newspapers how they had busted a lesbian club and took all those girls to prison. It was a "witches coven" and "drug den," they claimed.

I hope Madam doesn't suggest he call the police, but he will surely deal with me tonight.

At least, Asaba is not like Ondo. Over there, in Yorubaland, a man was beaten to death because a mob found out his was dating a local politician. The guy is still on the run and hasn't been seen at the office since, people say.

I will be twenty five, homeless, and jobless once Youth Corps is over. Will Alhaji give me a room in his boys' quarters? Probably not. He is still hanging around with Cutie-pie who is still bringing over hampers from Harrods. Alhaji is enjoying the cheese and biscuits and may not even want an unemployed, homeless, me.

I have reached Papa's compound, and I'm walking into his saffron-colored bungalow. I'm sweating, and yet it is a cool evening. Madam and Obi are smirking outside.

"Good evening, ma," I say to her, but she just points to Papa's room in response.

With a straight back, I walk slowly and deliberately inside. I'm steeling myself for whatever is to come. Today will not be the end, but a new beginning.

As Baba always says, "With God, everything is possible."

I'm ready. 🌐